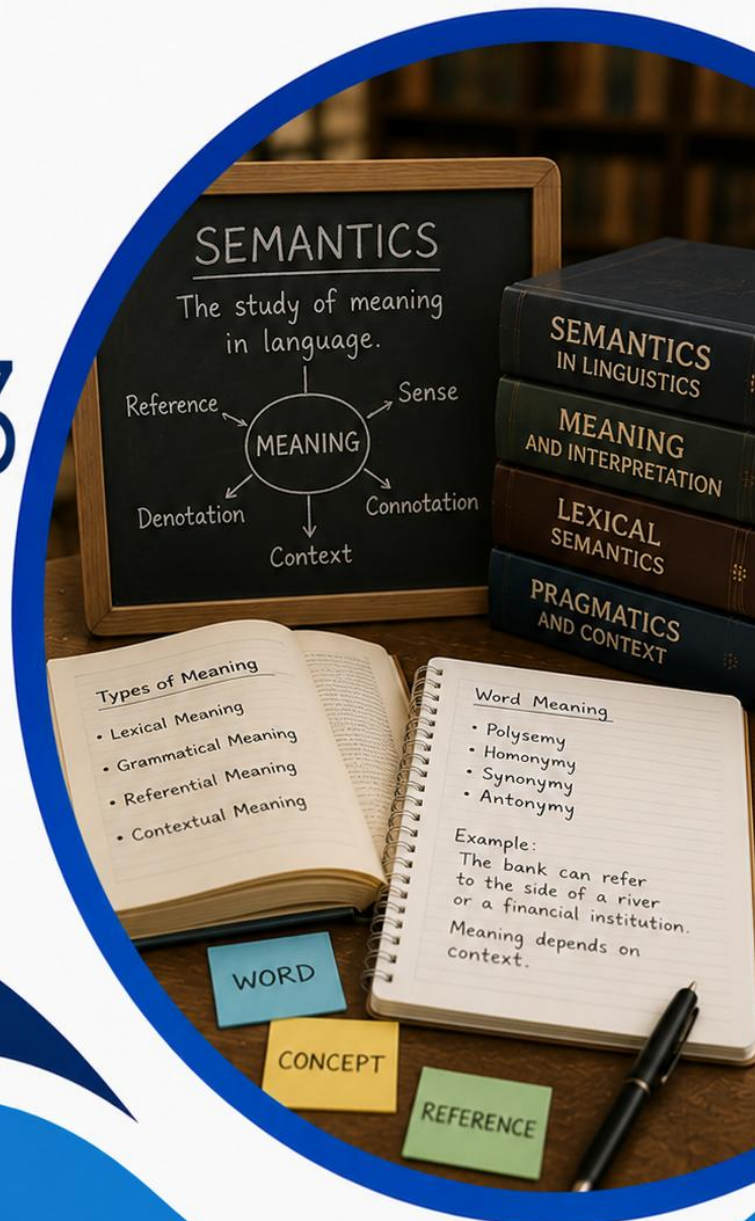




La-Net

ARA 303

SEMANTICS



Course video is available on our app

lanetonline.com

Course code: ARA 303

Course title: Semantics

Course credit load: 2 Units

List of Series:

- **Series 1: Concept and Development of Semantics**
- Series 2: Contributions of Arabic Linguists
- Series 3: Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic
- Series 4: Signifier–Signified Relationship and Language vs. Speech
- Series 5: Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series 1: Concept and Development of Semantics

Series Outline

This Series will be organised into three main Parts, each with relevant sub-Parts:

- **Part 1 (1.1): What is Semantics?**
 - 1.1.1 Definition and scope of semantics
 - 1.1.2 Semantics within the study of language
 - 1.1.3 Key concepts: meaning, sense, and reference
- **Part 2 (1.2): Historical Development of Semantics**
 - 1.2.1 Early philosophical and linguistic inquiries into meaning
 - 1.2.2 The emergence of semantics as a formal discipline
 - 1.2.3 Major schools and theoretical shifts in the twentieth century

Part 3 (1.3): Semantics and Related Disciplines

1.3.1 Semantics and syntax

1.3.2 Semantics and pragmatics

1.3.3 Semantics and lexicology

Introduction

Language is, at its core, a system for conveying meaning. Speakers choose words, arrange them into sentences, and produce utterances and all of this activity is ultimately aimed at communicating something to someone. Yet meaning itself is a remarkably complex and elusive phenomenon. What does a word actually mean? How does a sentence convey more than the sum of its parts? How do the same words come to mean different things in different contexts, or across different languages and cultures? These are the questions that semantics the scientific study of meaning in language exists to investigate.

In the Arabic linguistic tradition, attention to meaning has deep and distinguished roots. Arab grammarians and lexicographers engaged with questions of meaning long before the term semantics was coined in European scholarship, and their insights continue to enrich the field today. Understanding the origin and development of semantics, as well as its place within the broader study of language, is therefore essential for any student of Arabic linguistics.

The aim of this Series is to introduce you to the concept and development of semantics as a discipline. We shall commence by examining what semantics is its definition, scope, and central concepts of meaning, sense, and reference. Next, we will trace the historical development of the discipline, from early philosophical inquiries into meaning through to the emergence of modern semantics and its major theoretical schools. Finally, we will situate semantics among related linguistic disciplines syntax, pragmatics, and lexicology clarifying the boundaries and overlaps that shape how meaning is studied today.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 1.1** define semantics and explain its scope within the study of language,
- **SLO 1.2** distinguish between the key concepts of meaning, sense, and reference,
- **SLO 1.3** trace the historical development of semantics from early philosophical inquiry to the formal discipline,
- **SLO 1.4** identify major schools and theoretical shifts that shaped twentieth-century semantics, and
- **SLO 1.5** analyse the relationship between semantics and related disciplines, including syntax, pragmatics, and lexicology.

1.1 What Is Semantics?

1.1.1 Definition and scope of semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of **meaning** in language. The word derives from the Greek *sēmantikos*, meaning 'significant' or 'relating to signs', which itself comes from *sēma*, meaning 'sign'. In Arabic linguistic scholarship, the equivalent field is often referred to as **‘ilm al-dalāla** (علم الدلالة), the science of signification or indication. Semantics operates at multiple levels: it examines the meanings of individual **words** (lexical semantics), the meanings of **sentences** (sentential semantics), and the ways in which meaning is built up compositionally from smaller units. The scope of semantics is broad it encompasses questions about how words acquire meanings, how meanings change over time, how language relates to the world it describes, and how speakers communicate far more than the literal content of their words.

Fill-in-the-blank: Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of _____. In Arabic scholarship it is known as _____ al-dalāla.

1.1.2 Semantics within the study of language

Linguistics is typically divided into several core sub-disciplines, each focusing on a different level of linguistic structure. **Phonology** deals with sound systems; **morphology** with word structure; **syntax** with sentence structure; and **semantics** with meaning. Semantics is sometimes contrasted with **pragmatics**, which concerns how meaning is shaped by context and use though the boundary between the two is a matter of ongoing debate. Within this framework, semantics occupies a central position: it is the interface between the formal structures of language (sounds, words, sentences) and the world of concepts and real-world referents that language is used to describe. Without semantics, a grammar would be a system capable of generating well-formed strings of symbols that meant nothing at all. Semantics, in short, is what gives language its communicative power.

Fill-in-the-blank: Semantics is the interface between the formal _____ of language and the world of _____ and real-world referents that language describes.

1.1.3 Key concepts: meaning, sense, and reference

Three foundational concepts underlie the study of semantics. **Meaning** is the broadest term, covering all the information conveyed by a linguistic expression. Scholars often distinguish, however, between **sense** and **reference**. **Sense** (sometimes called *intension*) refers to the internal, conceptual content of a word or expression – what it means independently of any particular situation. **Reference** (sometimes called *extension*) is the relationship between a linguistic expression and the actual entities in the world that it picks out. The classic illustration comes from the philosopher Gottlob Frege: the expressions *the morning star* and *the evening star* have different **senses** – different conceptual content – yet they have the same **reference**, since both expressions pick out the planet Venus. Understanding this distinction helps explain how two different words or expressions can point to the same object, and how the same word can be used to point to different objects in different contexts.

Fill-in-the-blank: _____ refers to the conceptual content of an expression, while _____ is the relationship between an expression and the real-world entity it picks out.

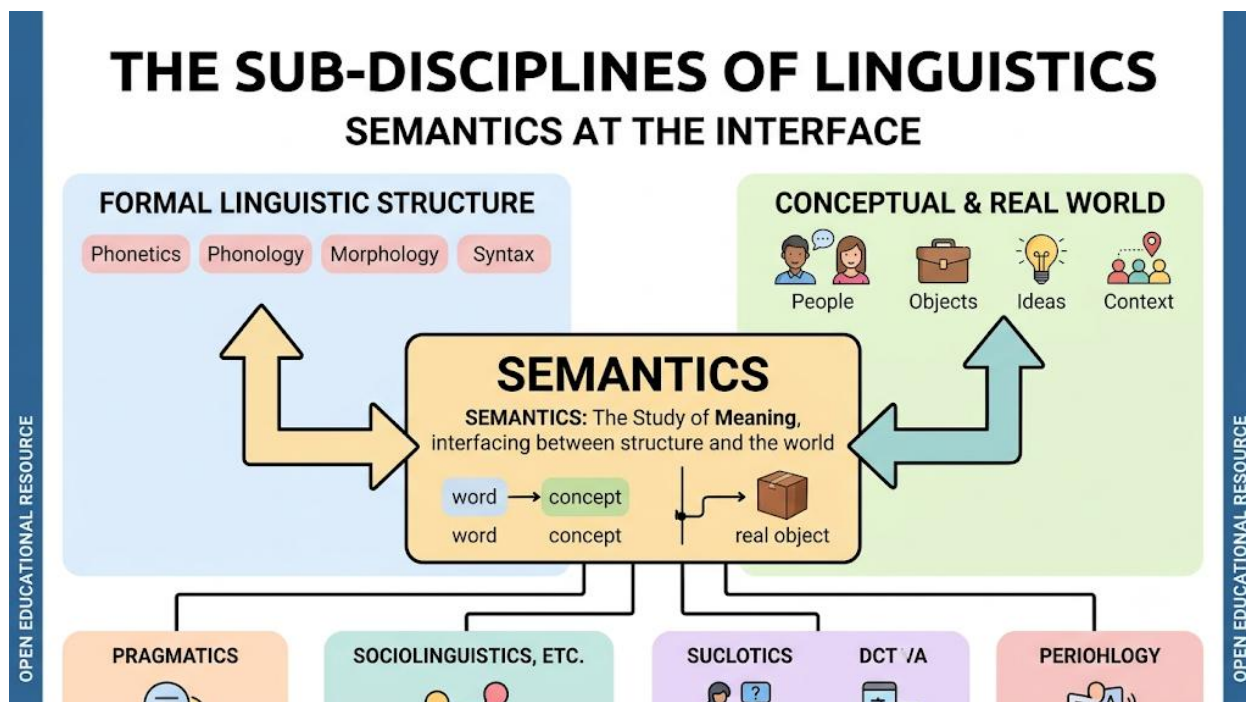


Figure 1.1 The sub-disciplines of linguistics and the place of semantics.

Description: A diagram showing the major sub-disciplines of linguistics phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics with semantics positioned as the interface between formal structure and the external world.

Pilot questions 1.1

1. Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of _____.
2. What is the Arabic term for semantics as a discipline?
3. Which of the following is not a core sub-discipline of linguistics: phonology, semantics, rhetoric?
4. True or False: The sense of an expression and its reference are always identical.
5. Fill in the blank: The expressions 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' have different _____ but the same _____.

1.2 Historical Development Of Semantics

1.2.1 Early philosophical and linguistic inquiries into meaning

Reflection on the nature of meaning is ancient. Among the Greeks, Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* posed the fundamental question of whether the relationship between words and things is **natural** (words resemble or are inherently connected to what they name) or **conventional** (words are arbitrary signs whose meanings are fixed by social agreement). Aristotle developed this inquiry further, treating language as a system of conventional symbols and distinguishing between spoken words as 'symbols of mental experiences'. In the Arabic tradition, parallel debates took place among early grammarians and theologians. Scholars of the Basra and Kufa schools disputed whether language originated through divine **tawqīf** (توقيف divine institution) or human **iṣṭilāḥ** (اصطلاح convention and agreement). These debates, though conducted in different cultural and intellectual contexts, addressed the very same questions about the nature of the sign that would eventually ground modern semantics.

Fill-in-the-blank: Early Greek and Arabic scholars both debated whether the relationship between words and their meanings is _____ or based on human _____.

1.2.2 The emergence of semantics as a formal discipline

The term **semantics** in its modern linguistic sense was introduced by the French linguist **Michel Bréal** in his 1897 work *Essai de sémantique* (Essay on Semantics), which is widely credited as the founding text of the discipline in European scholarship. Bréal was concerned primarily with how word meanings change over time a field now called **historical semantics** or **diachronic semantics**. In the same period, the Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** laid the groundwork for modern structural linguistics in his *Course in General Linguistics* (published posthumously in 1916), introducing the concept of the **linguistic sign** as a union of **signifier** (the sound-image) and **signified** (the concept). Saussure's model would prove enormously influential for later semantic theory, including in Arabic linguistics scholarship.

Fill-in-the-blank: The term semantics was introduced as a formal discipline by _____ Bréal in 1897. Saussure described the linguistic sign as a union of _____ and signified.

1.2.3 Major schools and theoretical shifts in the twentieth century

The twentieth century saw semantics develop rapidly, with competing theoretical approaches.

Structural semantics, associated with scholars such as Jost Trier and Bernard Pottier, analysed vocabulary in terms of **semantic fields** groups of words whose meanings are interrelated and defined relative to one another. **Generative semantics**, emerging from the tradition of Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar, attempted to derive sentence meaning from deep syntactic structures. **Formal semantics**, drawing on logic and philosophy of language (particularly the work of Richard Montague), treated meaning in terms of **truth conditions** the conditions under which a sentence is true in a model of the world. Meanwhile, **cognitive semantics** (associated with George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker) argued that meaning is grounded in human experience and conceptual structure rather than in abstract logical form. Each of these approaches has contributed distinct tools and insights, and contemporary semantics draws selectively on all of them.

Fill-in-the-blank: Structural semantics analysed vocabulary using _____ fields, while formal semantics treated meaning in terms of _____ conditions.

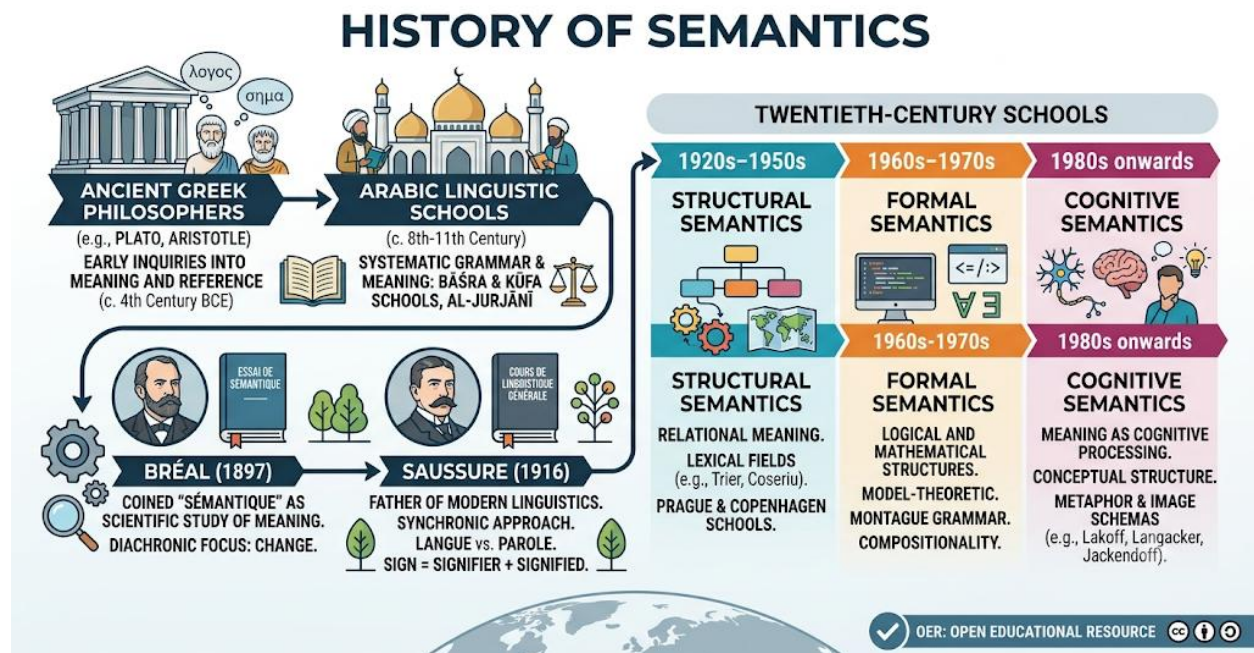


Figure 1.2 Timeline of key developments in the history of semantics.

Description: A timeline showing major figures and developments from ancient Greek and Arabic inquiries through Bréal and Saussure to twentieth-century schools.

Pilot questions 1.2

1. Who is credited with introducing the term 'semantics' as a formal linguistic discipline?
2. What does the Arabic term *tawqīf* mean in debates about the origin of language?
3. True or False: Saussure described the linguistic sign as a union of signifier and signified.
4. Which semantic school analyses vocabulary in terms of interrelated semantic fields?
5. Fill in the blank: Formal semantics treats meaning in terms of _____ conditions.

1.3 Semantics And Related Disciplines

1.3.1 Semantics and syntax

Syntax and semantics are closely related but distinct levels of linguistic analysis. **Syntax** concerns the rules governing how words are combined into well-formed sentences the formal structural dimension of language. **Semantics** concerns what those sentences mean. The relationship between the two is complex: syntactic structure plays a major role in determining sentence meaning (changing word order can change meaning), yet the same syntactic structure can yield sentences with very different semantic properties, and sentences with different syntactic structures can be paraphrases of one another. The debate over how syntax and semantics interact whether semantic representations are derived from syntactic structures or are computed in parallel has been one of the most productive and contested questions in modern linguistics.

Fill-in-the-blank: Syntax concerns the _____ structure of sentences, while semantics concerns their _____. Changing word _____ can alter meaning.

1.3.2 Semantics and pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how context shapes the interpretation of utterances. While semantics is primarily concerned with the **literal** or **conventional** meaning of expressions, pragmatics addresses the gap between what is literally said and what is actually communicated. When a speaker says '*Can you pass the salt?*', the literal meaning is a question about physical ability but the pragmatic interpretation is a polite request. The philosopher H. P. Grice introduced the concept of **conversational implicature** to capture this gap: speakers follow **cooperative principles** and **maxims** of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, and hearers use these principles to infer meanings that go beyond the literal content. Understanding where semantics ends and pragmatics begins and how the two interact is a central question for any student of meaning.

Fill-in-the-blank: Pragmatics studies how _____ shapes interpretation. Grice's concept of conversational _____ captures the gap between what is said and what is communicated.

1.3.3 Semantics and lexicology

Lexicology is the study of the vocabulary of a language its words, their forms, their meanings, and their relationships to one another. Semantics and lexicology overlap significantly: both are concerned with word meaning. However, lexicology is broader in scope, encompassing questions of etymology, word formation, and the organisation of vocabulary, while semantics focuses more specifically on meaning relations and compositional meaning. In Arabic linguistic scholarship, lexicology (**‘ilm al-mufradāt** علم المفردات) has a particularly rich tradition, with vast dictionaries and lexical works produced by classical scholars such as al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī and Ibn Manẓūr. Understanding the relationship between semantics and lexicology helps students of Arabic linguistics appreciate how classical lexicographic work both anticipates and complements modern semantic analysis.

Fill-in-the-blank: Lexicology is the study of a language's _____, including their meanings and relationships. In Arabic scholarship this field is known as ‘ilm al-_____.

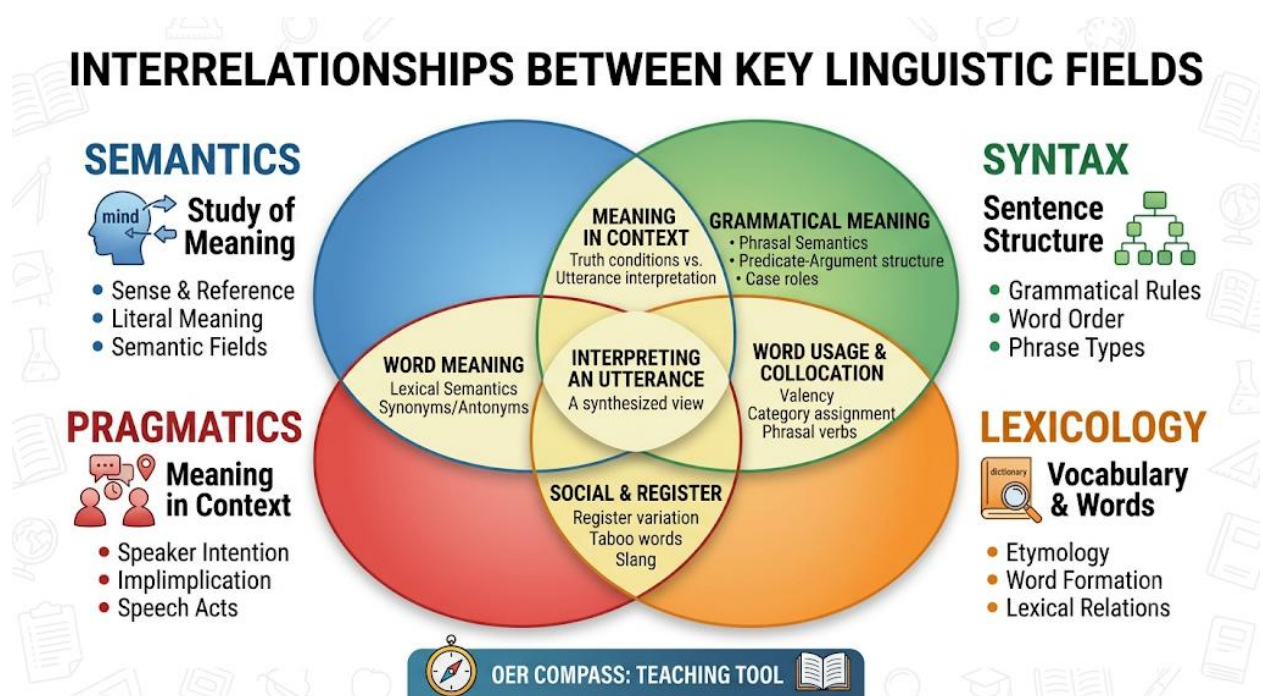


Figure 1.3 Semantics and its neighbouring disciplines. Description: A diagram showing the relationships between semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and lexicology, with overlapping areas indicating shared concerns.

Pilot questions 1.3

1. How does syntax differ from semantics?
2. True or False: A sentence can have the same syntactic structure as another sentence while differing in meaning.
3. What is pragmatics, and how does it differ from semantics?
4. Name one conversational maxim associated with Grice's cooperative principle.
5. Fill in the blank: In Arabic linguistic scholarship, lexicology is known as 'ilm al-_____.

Series Summary

This Series has introduced you to the concept and development of semantics as a linguistic discipline. We began by defining semantics the scientific study of meaning in language and locating it within the broader framework of linguistic sub-disciplines, with particular attention to its Arabic equivalent, 'ilm al-dalāla. We then examined the foundational conceptual distinction between sense (the internal, conceptual content of an expression) and reference (the relationship between an expression and the real-world entity it picks out). Moving historically, we traced the development of reflection on meaning from ancient Greek philosophy and early Arabic grammatical debates about tawqīf and iṣṭilāḥ, through the founding of semantics as a formal discipline by Bréal and the structural linguistics of Saussure, to the major twentieth-century schools structural, generative, formal, and cognitive semantics. Finally, we examined the relationship between semantics and three related disciplines: syntax (concerned with formal sentence structure), pragmatics (concerned with meaning in context), and lexicology (concerned with vocabulary and word meaning).

By engaging with this Series, you should now be able to define semantics and explain its scope, distinguish between meaning, sense, and reference, trace the historical development of the discipline from ancient inquiry to modern theory, identify the contributions of major semantic schools, and explain how semantics relates to syntax, pragmatics, and lexicology. These conceptual foundations will be essential as you move into the remaining series of this course,

which examine the specific contributions of Arabic linguists, the types and features of semantics in Arabic, and the complexities of meaning relations in the Arabic language.

Glossary of Terms

- **Cognitive semantics:** An approach to meaning that grounds linguistic meaning in human experience and conceptual structure rather than abstract logical form.
- **Conversational implicature:** A meaning conveyed by an utterance beyond its literal content, inferred by hearers using cooperative principles.
- **Diachronic semantics:** The study of how word meanings change over time; also called historical semantics.
- **Extension:** The set of real-world entities that a linguistic expression picks out; also called reference.
- **Formal semantics:** An approach to meaning that treats sentence meaning in terms of truth conditions, drawing on logic and philosophy of language.
- **Iṣṭilāḥ (اصطلاح):** Convention or social agreement; one position in Arabic debates about the origin of language, holding that word meanings are established by human consensus.
- **Intension:** The internal, conceptual content of a linguistic expression; also called sense.
- **Lexicology:** The study of the vocabulary of a language, including the forms, meanings, and interrelationships of words.
- **Linguistic sign:** In Saussurean linguistics, the union of a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (concept).
- **Pragmatics:** The study of how context shapes the interpretation of utterances, addressing the gap between literal meaning and communicated meaning.
- **Reference:** The relationship between a linguistic expression and the actual entity or entities in the world it picks out.
- **Semantic field:** A group of words whose meanings are interrelated and defined relative to one another.

- **Semantics:** The branch of linguistics concerned with the scientific study of meaning in language.
- **Sense:** The internal, conceptual content of an expression what it means independently of any particular real-world context.
- **Structural semantics:** An approach that analyses vocabulary in terms of semantic fields and the systematic relations between word meanings.
- **Syntax:** The branch of linguistics concerned with the rules governing how words are combined into well-formed sentences.
- **Tawqīf (توقيف):** Divine institution; one position in Arabic debates about the origin of language, holding that word meanings were assigned by God.
- **Truth conditions:** The conditions under which a sentence is true; the basis of meaning in formal semantic approaches.
- **‘Ilm al-dalāla (علم الدلالة):** The Arabic term for the science of signification; equivalent to semantics in European linguistic scholarship.
- **‘Ilm al-mufradāt (علم المفردات):** The Arabic term for lexicology; the study of individual words, their meanings, and their relationships.

Concept Check Questions 1

Objective questions

1. Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of _____. (Linked to SLO 1.1)
2. Which of the following is not a core sub-discipline of linguistics: phonology, semantics, rhetoric? (Linked to SLO 1.1)
3. True or False: Sense and reference always refer to the same aspect of meaning. (Linked to SLO 1.2)
4. The term semantics as a formal linguistic discipline was introduced by _____ in 1897. (Linked to SLO 1.3)
5. Fill in the blank: Formal semantics treats meaning in terms of _____ conditions. (Linked to SLO 1.4)

Short-answer questions

6. Explain the difference between sense and reference, using an example. (Linked to SLO 1.2)
7. Describe the Arabic debate between *tawqīf* and *iṣṭilāḥ* and explain its relevance to semantics. (Linked to SLO 1.3)
8. What did Saussure mean by the linguistic sign? Name its two components. (Linked to SLO 1.3)
9. Explain how pragmatics differs from semantics, using Grice's concept of implicature. (Linked to SLO 1.5)
10. What is a semantic field? Give one example from Arabic or English vocabulary. (Linked to SLO 1.4)

Long-answer questions

11. Trace the development of semantics as a discipline from ancient philosophical inquiry to the major theoretical schools of the twentieth century, with reference to both Western and Arabic linguistic traditions. (Linked to SLO 1.3 and SLO 1.4)

- **Basic response:** Learners should identify early Greek philosophical inquiry (Plato's Cratylus), the Arabic debate between tawqīf and iṣṭilāḥ, Bréal's founding of semantics (1897), Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign, and at least two twentieth-century schools (e.g. structural and formal semantics).
- **Value-added response:** Outstanding learners may discuss the significance of the natural vs. conventional debate for later semantic theory, compare the Greek and Arabic traditions as parallel inquiries, evaluate the contributions of structural vs. cognitive vs. formal approaches, and reflect on how Arabic linguistics scholarship engages with these frameworks.

12. Analyse the relationship between semantics and two of the following related disciplines: syntax, pragmatics, or lexicology. In your answer, clarify what each discipline studies, explain where it overlaps with semantics, and identify a question that falls at their interface. (Linked to SLO 1.5)

- **Basic response:** Learners should correctly define the two chosen disciplines, identify one point of overlap with semantics for each, and state one interface question for example, how word order affects meaning (semantics–syntax) or how context affects interpretation (semantics–pragmatics).
- **Value-added response:** Outstanding learners may discuss the historical debates between generative semantics and syntax, or critically evaluate Grice's framework for the semantics–pragmatics boundary, or reflect on how Arabic lexicographic traditions enrich modern semantic analysis of Arabic vocabulary.

Answers to Concept Check Questions 1

1. Meaning
2. Rhetoric
3. False
4. Michel Bréal
5. Truth
6. Sense is the internal, conceptual content of an expression; reference is the real-world entity the expression picks out. Example: 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' have different senses but the same reference (Venus).
7. Tawqīf holds that word meanings were divinely instituted; iṣṭilāḥ holds they arise through human convention. The debate mirrors the Greek natural vs. conventional debate and raises fundamental questions about the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign a central concern of semantics.
8. Saussure defined the linguistic sign as a two-sided mental entity uniting the signifier (a sound-image) and the signified (a concept). The relationship between them is arbitrary and conventional.
9. Semantics deals with literal, conventional meaning; pragmatics deals with what is communicated in context. Grice's conversational implicature captures how speakers communicate more than they say e.g. 'Can you pass the salt?' is literally a question but pragmatically a request.
10. A semantic field is a group of words whose meanings are interrelated. Example: in Arabic, terms for kinship (أب father, أم mother, أخ brother) form a semantic field whose members are defined relative to each other.
11. Basic: Plato's Cratylus, Arabic tawqīf/iṣṭilāḥ debate, Bréal (1897), Saussure (1916), at least two twentieth-century schools. Value-added: compare Greek and Arabic traditions, evaluate competing schools, reflect on Arabic linguistics' engagement with semantic theory.

12. Basic: correct definitions of two disciplines, one overlap point each, one interface question.
Value-added: critical evaluation of debates at the chosen interfaces, with reference to Arabic linguistic tradition where relevant.

Answers to Pilot Questions 1

Pilot questions 1.1

1. Meaning (in language)
2. 'Ilm al-dalāla (علم الدلالة)
3. Rhetoric
4. False sense and reference are distinct: two expressions can share a reference but differ in sense
5. Senses (sense); reference

Pilot questions 1.2

1. Michel Bréal
2. Divine institution the view that word meanings were assigned by God
3. True
4. Structural semantics
5. Truth

Pilot questions 1.3

1. Syntax concerns formal sentence structure (rules of combination); semantics concerns the meaning of sentences
2. True

3. Pragmatics studies meaning in context how interpretation is shaped by situation, speaker intention, and shared knowledge whereas semantics focuses on the conventional, context-independent meaning of expressions
4. Any one of: maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, maxim of relation (relevance), maxim of manner
5. Mufradāt

References and Attributions 1

- **Figure 1.1 The sub-disciplines of linguistics and the place of semantics** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a labelled diagram showing the main sub-disciplines of linguistics phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics with semantics positioned at the interface between formal structure and the conceptual/real world." Search string: "linguistics sub-disciplines diagram semantics OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on general linguistics.
- **Figure 1.2 Timeline of key developments in the history of semantics** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a timeline showing the history of semantics, including ancient Greek philosophers, Arabic linguistic schools (Basra and Kufa), Bréal (1897), Saussure (1916), and twentieth-century schools including structural, formal, and cognitive semantics." Search string: "history of semantics timeline linguistics OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on the history of linguistics.
- **Figure 1.3 Semantics and its neighbouring disciplines** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a Venn-style diagram showing the relationships between semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and lexicology, with overlapping areas indicating shared concerns such as meaning in context and word meaning." Search string: "semantics pragmatics syntax lexicology relationship diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on linguistic theory.
- **Series content references**

- Bréal, M. (1897). *Essai de sémantique: Science des significations*. Hachette. (English translation: Cust, M., trans. (1900). *Semantics: Studies in the science of meaning*. Heinemann.)
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* (6th ed.). Blackwell.
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics* (Vols. 1–2). Cambridge University Press.
- Saussure, F. de (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth. (Original work published 1916)
- ‘Umar, A. M. (1988). *‘Ilm al-dalāla* [The science of signification]. ‘Ālam al-Kutub.
- Bloom's taxonomy verbs applied in learning outcomes are based on Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Longman.
- **Institutional referencing style** All references have been presented in a clear and consistent manner, following APA style for educational materials.

Course code: ARA 303

Course title: Semantics

Course credit load: 2 Units

List of Series:

- **Series 1:** Concept and Development of Semantics
- **Series 2:** Contributions of Arabic Linguists
- **Series 3:** Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic
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- **Series 5:** Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series 2: Contributions of Arabic Linguists

Series Outline

This Series will be organised into three main Parts, each with relevant sub-Parts:

- **Part 1 (2.1):** Early Arabic Linguistic Scholarship and Semantic Thought
 - 2.1.1 The origins of Arabic linguistic enquiry
 - 2.1.2 Semantic concerns in early Arabic grammar schools
 - 2.1.3 The relationship between meaning and language in classical Arabic thought
- **Part 2 (2.2):** Major Arabic Linguists and Their Semantic Contributions
 - 2.2.1 Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi and the foundations of Arabic lexicography
 - 2.2.2 Sibawayhi and the grammatical treatment of meaning
 - 2.2.3 Ibn Jinni, Ibn Faris, and later contributions to Arabic semantics

- **Part 3 (2.3): Arabic Semantic Tradition and Its Relevance Today**
 - 2.3.1 The contribution of Arabic semantic thought to modern linguistics
 - 2.3.2 Comparing Arabic and Western approaches to meaning
 - 2.3.3 The legacy of classical Arabic linguists in contemporary Arabic studies

Introduction

Long before European linguistics established itself as a formal discipline, Arab scholars were engaged in sophisticated enquiries into the nature of language and meaning. Motivated initially by the need to preserve the correct understanding of the Qur'an, Arabic linguists developed rich traditions of grammatical, lexicographical, and semantic analysis that anticipated many insights later attributed to modern linguistics. Their contributions represent a foundational chapter in the global history of the study of meaning.

The aim of this Series is to introduce you to the major Arabic linguists who shaped the semantic tradition, to examine their key contributions, and to evaluate the relevance of classical Arabic semantic thought to modern linguistic study.

We shall commence this Series by tracing the origins of Arabic linguistic enquiry and examining how early Arab grammarians approached questions of meaning. Next, we will focus on the major figures of Arabic linguistics Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Faris and analyse their specific contributions to the understanding of meaning in Arabic. Finally, we will assess the broader legacy of the Arabic semantic tradition and compare its approaches with those developed in Western linguistics.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 2.1** trace the origins of Arabic linguistic enquiry and explain the motivations behind early semantic concerns,
- **SLO 2.2** describe the semantic concerns of the early Arabic grammar schools,
- **SLO 2.3** explain the contributions of Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi to Arabic lexicography and semantic thought,
- **SLO 2.4** analyse Sibawayhi's grammatical treatment of meaning in Arabic,
- **SLO 2.5** evaluate the semantic contributions of Ibn Jinni and Ibn Faris, and
- **SLO 2.6** compare the Arabic semantic tradition with Western approaches to meaning and assess its relevance to contemporary Arabic studies.

2.1 Early Arabic Linguistic Scholarship And Semantic Thought

2.1.1 The origins of Arabic linguistic enquiry

The study of Arabic as a formal linguistic discipline emerged in the first Islamic century, driven primarily by a religious imperative: the need to protect the Arabic of the Qur'an from corruption as Islam spread among non-Arab populations. This concern gave rise to the first systematic efforts to describe **Arabic grammar**, **phonology**, and **lexicon**. The cities of **Basra** and **Kufa** in present-day Iraq became the twin centres of early Arabic linguistic scholarship, each developing a distinct school of grammatical thought. From the very beginning, questions of meaning were inseparable from questions of form: Arab scholars understood that grammar could not be properly described without attending to what words and structures signify.

Fill-in-the-blank: The two major centres of early Arabic linguistic scholarship were _____ and Kufa.

2.1.2 Semantic concerns in early Arabic grammar schools

The **Basran school** and the **Kufan school** differed in their methodological approaches but shared a deep concern with the relationship between linguistic form and meaning. Basran grammarians tended towards **analogy (qiyas)** deriving grammatical rules by applying consistent principles across similar cases while Kufan scholars were more willing to accept **usage (sama')** actual attested speech of Bedouin Arabs as the ultimate authority. Both schools recognised that the meaning conveyed by a word or structure was central to its grammatical classification. This interweaving of grammar and semantics is a defining characteristic of the classical Arabic linguistic tradition.

Fill-in-the-blank: The Basran school relied heavily on _____ (qiyas) to derive grammatical rules, while the Kufan school gave greater weight to usage (sama').

2.1.3 The relationship between meaning and language in classical Arabic thought

Classical Arabic scholars conceptualised the relationship between language and meaning through the distinction between **lafz** (the spoken form or expression) and **ma'na** (the meaning or content). This distinction broadly comparable to the modern distinction between the signifier and the signified was central to Arabic rhetoric, grammar, and Qur'anic interpretation. Scholars debated whether the relationship between a word and its meaning was **conventional** (agreed upon by speakers) or **natural** (inherent in the word itself), a debate that parallels controversies in Western philosophy of language. The consensus in the Arabic tradition was that language is primarily **conventional** in nature words acquire meanings through communal agreement and use.

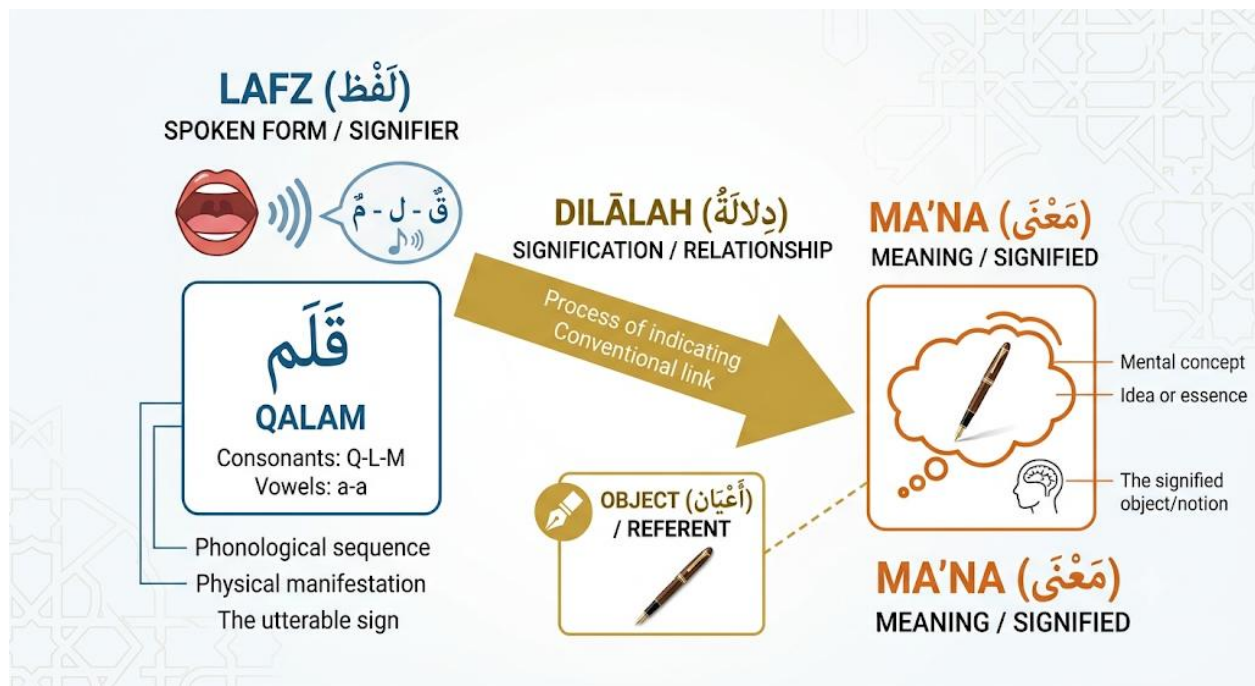


Figure 2.1 The lafz–ma'na distinction in classical Arabic linguistics

A diagram contrasting lafz (spoken form) and ma'na (meaning) in classical Arabic linguistic thought, with examples from Arabic words, parallel to the signifier–signified relationship in modern linguistics.

Pilot questions 2.1

1. What was the primary motivation for the emergence of formal Arabic linguistic study?
2. The two major centres of early Arabic linguistic scholarship were Basra and _____.
3. What is the difference between qiyas and sama' as methodological approaches in Arabic grammar?
4. True or False: The Basran and Kufan schools shared no common concerns about the relationship between form and meaning.
5. What do the terms lafz and ma'na refer to in classical Arabic linguistics?

2.2 Major Arabic Linguists And Their Semantic Contributions

2.2.1 Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi and the foundations of Arabic lexicography

Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (c. 718–786 AD) is one of the towering figures of classical Arabic scholarship. A native of Basra, he is celebrated for two landmark achievements that have direct bearing on Arabic semantics. First, he composed the **Kitab al-Ayn (The Book of Ain)** the earliest known comprehensive dictionary of the Arabic language, organised according to the phonological properties of words rather than alphabetically. By arranging words according to their root consonants and phonetic structure, Al-Khalil demonstrated that form and meaning are systematically interrelated. Second, he devised the science of Arabic **prosody (al-'arud)**, identifying the metrical patterns of Arabic poetry work that required careful attention to the phonological and semantic dimensions of poetic language.

Fill-in-the-blank: Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi composed the Kitab al-Ayn, the earliest known comprehensive _____ of the Arabic language.

2.2.2 Sibawayhi and the grammatical treatment of meaning

Sibawayhi (c. 760–796 AD), a student of the Basran grammarian Al-Khalil, is the author of **al-Kitab (The Book)** the most authoritative and comprehensive grammar of classical Arabic ever produced and one of the most influential works in the history of linguistics. Al-Kitab is not

merely a description of grammatical forms; it is deeply concerned with the **semantic and pragmatic dimensions** of language. Sibawayhi consistently explains grammatical rules with reference to the meanings they encode, distinguishing, for example, between constructions that are grammatically identical but semantically different. His treatment of **verbal sentences** versus **nominal sentences** is particularly revealing of his sensitivity to the way grammatical form reflects and shapes meaning.

Fill-in-the-blank: Sibawayhi's major work, al-Kitab, is widely considered the most authoritative _____ of classical Arabic ever produced.

2.2.3 Ibn Jinni, Ibn Faris, and later contributions to Arabic semantics

Ibn Jinni (c. 941–1002 AD), in his celebrated work **al-Khasa'is (Characteristics of Arabic)**, offered a systematic exploration of the nature, origin, and logic of the Arabic language. He examined how Arabic words acquire meaning through **derivation**, **metaphorical extension**, and **phonetic symbolism** the idea that the sounds of words sometimes reflect their meanings. **Ibn Faris** (c. 941–1004 AD), in his lexicographical masterpiece **Maqayis al-Lugha (Standards of Language)**, demonstrated that most Arabic words can be traced to a limited set of **primary root meanings**, from which a rich network of related meanings is derived. Both scholars deepened the Arabic tradition's understanding of how meaning is generated, extended, and organised in language.

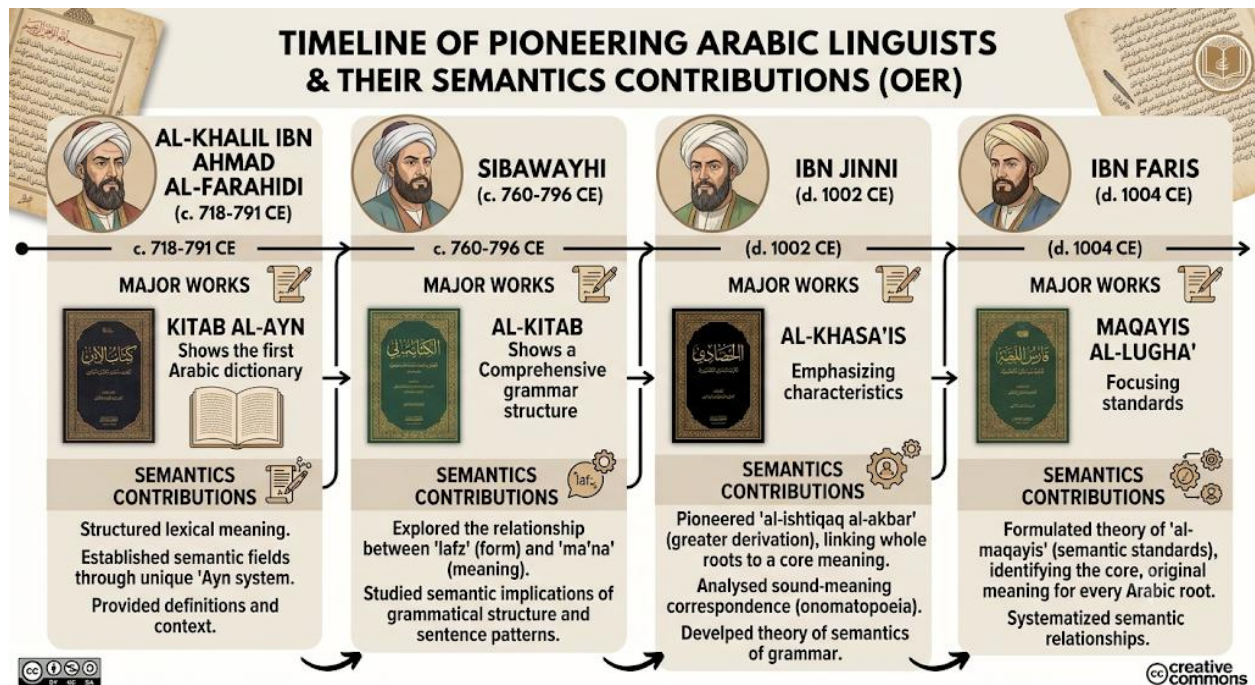


Figure 2.2 Major Arabic linguists and their key semantic contributions

Description: A timeline showing four major Arabic linguists Al-Khalil, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Faris with their approximate dates, major works, and key semantic contribution noted for each.

Pilot questions 2.2

6. What was the Kitab al-Ayn and what principle did Al-Khalil use to organise it?
7. Fill in the blank: Sibawayhi's al-Kitab is concerned not only with grammatical forms but also with the _____ and pragmatic dimensions of language.
8. What is phonetic symbolism as discussed by Ibn Jinni?
9. What did Ibn Faris demonstrate in his Maqayis al-Lugha about Arabic root meanings?
10. True or False: Sibawayhi was a student of Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi.

2.3 Arabic Semantic Tradition And Its Relevance Today

2.3.1 The contribution of Arabic semantic thought to modern linguistics

The classical Arabic linguistic tradition made contributions to the study of meaning that were, in several respects, ahead of their time. Arab scholars developed systematic accounts of **lexical semantics** (the meaning of words), **grammatical semantics** (the meaning encoded in grammatical structures), and **pragmatics** (how context shapes meaning in use) all of which are central concerns of modern linguistics. The attention given to root-based derivation in Arabic lexicography anticipated the **morphosemantic** analyses of twentieth-century linguistics. Moreover, the Arabic debate between conventional and natural theories of meaning parallels debates in Western philosophy of language stretching from Plato to Saussure. Recognition of this parallel has grown in contemporary comparative linguistics.

Fill-in-the-blank: The Arabic debate on whether the relationship between words and meanings is conventional or _____ parallels similar debates in Western philosophy of language.

2.3.2 Comparing Arabic and Western approaches to meaning

When the Arabic semantic tradition is compared with Western approaches, significant parallels and differences emerge. Both traditions recognise the importance of **the relationship between form and meaning**, the role of **context** in interpretation, and the processes of **semantic change** over time. However, the Arabic tradition was shaped by a fundamentally different intellectual environment: the central role of the Qur'an as the supreme linguistic authority, the significance of **Bedouin Arabic** as the standard of correct usage, and the integration of semantics with **rhetoric (balagha)** and **Qur'anic interpretation (tafsir)**. Western linguistics, by contrast, developed largely in the context of classical Greek and Latin analysis, with a stronger tradition of formal logic and philosophy of mind. These different contexts produced complementary rather than competing insights into the nature of meaning.

Fill-in-the-blank: In the Arabic tradition, semantics was closely integrated with rhetoric (balagha) and Qur'anic interpretation known as _____.

2.3.3 The legacy of classical Arabic linguists in contemporary Arabic studies

The works of Al-Khalil, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Faris continue to be studied and cited in contemporary Arabic linguistics, lexicography, and language teaching. Modern Arabic dictionaries remain indebted to the root-based organisational principles pioneered by Al-Khalil. Contemporary Arabic grammar teaching builds on the frameworks established by Sibawayhi. Scholars working in **corpus linguistics**, **computational Arabic**, and **Arabic natural language processing** engage directly with the classical tradition to develop tools for automatic semantic analysis of Arabic text. The classical tradition is therefore not merely a historical curiosity but a living intellectual resource that continues to inform and enrich the study of Arabic in the twenty-first century.

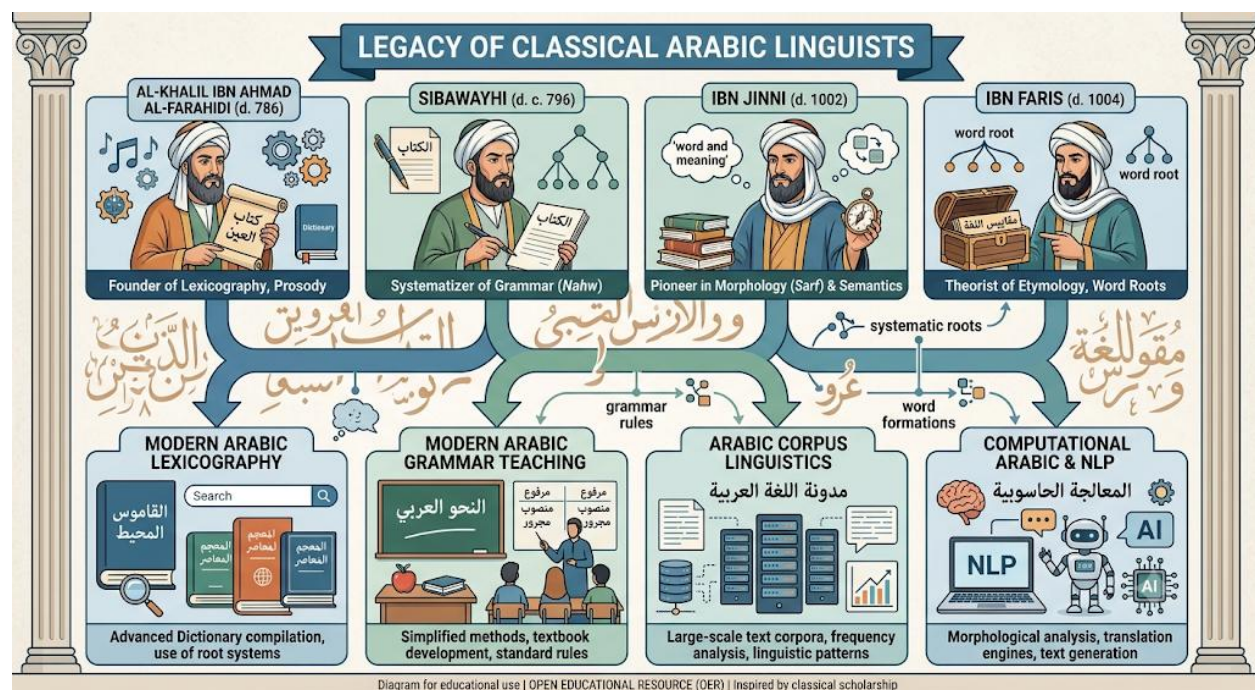


Figure 2.3 The influence of classical Arabic semantics on modern Arabic studies

A diagram showing how the works of classical Arabic linguists (Al-Khalil, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, Ibn Faris) have influenced modern Arabic lexicography, grammar teaching, corpus linguistics, and computational Arabic.

Pilot questions 2.3

11. Name two areas of meaning study that the Arabic linguistic tradition developed which are also central to modern linguistics.
12. What was the central linguistic authority in the Arabic semantic tradition that distinguished it from Western approaches?
13. Fill in the blank: In the Arabic tradition, semantics was integrated with rhetoric and Qur'anic interpretation known as _____.
14. How does the Arabic root-based approach to lexicography relate to morphosemantic analysis in modern linguistics?
15. True or False: The works of classical Arabic linguists have no relevance to contemporary computational Arabic and natural language processing.

Series Summary

This Series has introduced you to the rich tradition of semantic thought within classical Arabic linguistics. We began by tracing the origins of formal Arabic linguistic enquiry in the first Islamic century, examining the motivations behind early semantic concerns and the foundational distinction between lafz (form) and ma'na (meaning). We then explored the major Arabic linguists who shaped the semantic tradition: Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, whose Kitab al-Ayn established the root-based organisation of Arabic vocabulary; Sibawayhi, whose al-Kitab demonstrated the inseparability of grammar and meaning; and Ibn Jinni and Ibn Faris, who deepened the tradition's understanding of derivation, metaphorical extension, and root semantics. Finally, we assessed the broader relevance of this tradition, comparing it with Western approaches to meaning and examining its living legacy in contemporary Arabic studies.

By engaging with these topics, you should now be able to trace the origins of Arabic semantic thought, describe the contributions of major Arabic linguists, analyse key concepts such as lafz, ma'na, qiyas, and sama', evaluate the parallels and differences between Arabic and Western approaches to meaning, and appreciate the continuing relevance of the classical tradition to modern Arabic linguistics. These abilities directly align with the Series Learning Outcomes and provide you with a strong historical and analytical foundation for the rest of this course.

Glossary of Terms

- **Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi:** An eighth-century Arab linguist from Basra, composer of the Kitab al-Ayn (the first comprehensive Arabic dictionary) and the founder of Arabic prosody.
- **Al-Khasa'is:** A major work by Ibn Jinni exploring the nature, origin, and logic of the Arabic language, including discussions of derivation, phonetic symbolism, and metaphorical extension.
- **Al-Kitab:** The monumental grammar of classical Arabic composed by Sibawayhi, considered the most authoritative grammatical work in the history of Arabic linguistics.

- **Analogy (qiyas):** A methodological principle used in Arabic grammar, associated with the Basran school, in which grammatical rules are derived by applying consistent principles across similar cases.
- **Balagha:** Arabic rhetoric; the study of eloquence, figurative language, and effective expression in Arabic, closely linked to the semantic tradition.
- **Basran school:** One of the two major schools of classical Arabic grammar, based in Basra (Iraq), known for its emphasis on analogical reasoning (qiyas) in deriving grammatical rules.
- **Ibn Faris:** A tenth-century Arab linguist and lexicographer, author of Maqayis al-Lugha, which demonstrated that most Arabic words can be traced to primary root meanings from which extended meanings are derived.
- **Ibn Jinni:** A tenth-century Arab linguist and grammarian, author of al-Khasa'is, known for his exploration of derivation, phonetic symbolism, and the logic of Arabic word formation.
- **Kitab al-Ayn:** The first comprehensive dictionary of the Arabic language, compiled by Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, organised according to the phonological properties of words.
- **Kufan school:** One of the two major schools of classical Arabic grammar, based in Kufa (Iraq), known for its greater acceptance of attested usage (sama') as an authority in grammatical description.
- **Lafz:** The spoken form or linguistic expression; in classical Arabic linguistics, contrasted with ma'na (meaning) in the analysis of the relationship between language and content.
- **Ma'na:** Meaning or semantic content; in classical Arabic linguistics, the counterpart of lafz (spoken form) in the analysis of the relationship between expression and meaning.
- **Maqayis al-Lugha:** A lexicographical work by Ibn Faris demonstrating that Arabic vocabulary can be traced to a limited set of primary root meanings, from which a network of related meanings is derived.
- **Morphosemantics:** The study of the relationship between the morphological structure of words (their forms) and their meanings; anticipated in the root-based approach of classical Arabic lexicography.

- **Phonetic symbolism:** The idea, explored by Ibn Jinni, that the sounds of words sometimes reflect or iconically suggest their meanings.
- **Sama':** Usage; the methodological principle, associated with the Kufan school, that actual attested speech of Bedouin Arabs constitutes the ultimate authority in Arabic grammatical description.
- **Sibawayhi:** An eighth-century Arab grammarian of Persian origin, author of al-Kitab, the most authoritative grammar of classical Arabic and a foundational text of Arabic semantic thought.
- **Tafsir:** Qur'anic exegesis or interpretation; the scholarly tradition of explaining the meaning of the Qur'an, which was a major motivation for and context of classical Arabic semantic enquiry.

Here's the **refixing of numbering** for your entire Concept Check Questions 2 and Pilot Questions 2 list, so everything flows sequentially without breaks:

Concept Check Questions 2

Objective Questions

1. The two major centres of early Arabic linguistic scholarship were Basra and _____.
2. Which of the following best describes *qiyas* in the Arabic grammatical tradition: analogical reasoning, attested usage, phonetic symbolism, or root derivation?
3. True or False: Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi organised the *Kitab al-Ayn* alphabetically.
4. Fill in the blank: Sibawayhi's *al-Kitab* is concerned not only with grammatical forms but also with the semantic and _____ dimensions of language.
5. Which Arabic linguist demonstrated in *Maqayis al-Lugha* that most Arabic words can be traced to primary root meanings: Ibn Jinni or Ibn Faris?

Short-Answer Questions

6. Explain the distinction between *lafz* and *ma'na* in classical Arabic linguistics and state why it is important for the study of semantics.
7. Describe the difference between the methodological approaches of the Basran and Kufan schools.
8. What is phonetic symbolism and which classical Arabic linguist explored this concept?
9. State two ways in which the Arabic semantic tradition anticipated concerns of modern linguistics.
10. Identify one area of contemporary Arabic studies in which the work of classical Arabic linguists remains directly relevant.

Long-Answer Questions

11. Analyse the contributions of Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi and Sibawayhi to the development of Arabic semantic thought, explaining how each scholar's work advanced the understanding of the relationship between form and meaning.
12. Compare the Arabic and Western traditions in their approaches to the study of meaning, identifying both parallels and significant differences, and evaluate the importance of the Arabic tradition for a complete understanding of the history of semantics.

Answers to Concept Check Questions 2

13. Kufa
14. Analogical reasoning
15. False it was organised according to the phonological properties of words
(phonetic/root-based organisation)
16. Pragmatic
17. Ibn Faris
18. *Lafz* refers to the spoken form or linguistic expression; *ma'na* refers to the meaning or semantic content. The distinction is important because it establishes that language has two inseparable dimensions form and meaning and that the analysis of either must involve the other.
19. The Basran school relied on analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), deriving rules by applying consistent principles across similar cases. The Kufan school gave greater weight to attested usage (*sama'*) actual speech of Bedouin Arabs as the ultimate authority in grammatical description.
20. Phonetic symbolism is the idea that the sounds of words sometimes reflect or iconically suggest their meanings. It was explored by Ibn Jinni in *al-Khasa'is*.
21. Any two of: development of systematic lexical semantics through root-based lexicography; attention to grammatical semantics; concern with pragmatics; debate between conventional and natural theories of meaning.
22. Any one of: modern Arabic lexicography; contemporary Arabic grammar teaching; corpus linguistics and computational Arabic/NLP.
23. See model responses above.
24. See model responses above.

Pilot Questions 2.1 – Answers

- 25. The need to protect the correct understanding and pronunciation of the Qur'an as Islam spread among non-Arab populations.
- 26. Kufa
- 27. *Qiyas* (analogy) involves deriving grammatical rules by applying consistent principles across similar cases; *sama'* (usage) accepts attested speech of Bedouin Arabs as the ultimate grammatical authority.
- 28. False both schools shared a concern with the relationship between linguistic form and meaning.
- 29. *Lafz* refers to the spoken form or expression; *ma'na* refers to the meaning or semantic content. Together they describe the two inseparable dimensions of any linguistic sign in classical Arabic thought.

Pilot Questions 2.2 – Answers

- 30. The *Kitab al-Ayn* was the first comprehensive dictionary of the Arabic language; Al-Khalil organised it according to the phonological properties of words (root consonants and phonetic structure) rather than alphabetically.
- 31. Semantic
- 32. Phonetic symbolism is the idea that the sounds of words sometimes iconically reflect or suggest their meanings.
- 33. Ibn Faris demonstrated that most Arabic words can be traced to a limited set of primary root meanings, from which a rich network of related meanings is derived through extension.
- 34. True

Pilot Questions 2.3 – Answers

- 35. Any two of: lexical semantics, grammatical semantics, pragmatics, morphosemantics.
- 36. The Qur'an (as the supreme linguistic authority).
- 37. Tafsir

38. The root-based organisation of Arabic lexicography anticipated morphosemantic analyses of twentieth-century linguistics.
39. False their works continue to inform corpus linguistics, computational Arabic, and natural language processing.

References and Attributions 2

- **Figure 2.1 The lafz–ma'na distinction in classical Arabic linguistics:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a labelled diagram showing the distinction between lafz (spoken form) and ma'na (meaning) in classical Arabic semantics, with an arrow showing their relationship and an Arabic word as an example." Search string: "lafz ma'na Arabic semantics diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on Arabic linguistics and semantics.
- **Figure 2.2 Major Arabic linguists and their key semantic contributions:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a labelled timeline showing Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Faris with their approximate dates, major works, and key contributions to Arabic semantics." Search string: "Arabic linguists timeline semantics contributions OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on the history of Arabic linguistics.
- **Figure 2.3 The influence of classical Arabic semantics on modern Arabic studies:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram showing the legacy of Al-Khalil, Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Faris and their influence on modern Arabic lexicography, grammar teaching, corpus linguistics, and computational Arabic." Search string: "classical Arabic linguistics legacy modern Arabic studies diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on contemporary Arabic linguistics.
- **Series content references:**
 - Carter, M. G. (2004). Sibawayhi. I.B. Tauris.
 - Goldenberg, G. (1988). The contribution of Semitic linguistics to the study of language. Brill.
 - Owens, J. (1988). The foundations of grammar: An introduction to medieval Arabic grammatical theory. John Benjamins.

- Versteegh, K. (1997). The Arabic language. Edinburgh University Press.
- Versteegh, K. (Ed.). (2006–2009). Encyclopedia of Arabic language and linguistics (Vols. 1–4). Brill.
- **Bloom's taxonomy:** Verbs applied in learning outcomes are based on Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. New York: Longman.
- **Institutional referencing style:** All references have been presented in a clear and consistent manner, following APA style for educational materials.

Course code: ARA 303

Course title: Semantics

Course credit load: 2 Units

List of Series:

- **Series 1:** Concept and Development of Semantics
- **Series 2:** Contributions of Arabic Linguists
- **Series 3:** Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic
- **Series 4:** Signifier–Signified Relationship and Language vs. Speech
- **Series 5:** Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series 3: Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic

Series Outline

This Series will be organised into three main Parts, each with relevant sub-Parts:

- **Part 1 (3.1):** Lexical Semantics in Arabic
 - 3.1.1 The nature of lexical meaning in Arabic
 - 3.1.2 Synonymy and near-synonymy in Arabic
 - 3.1.3 Antonymy and semantic opposition
- **Part 2 (3.2):** Grammatical and Contextual Semantics in Arabic
 - 3.2.1 Grammatical semantics: meaning encoded in structure
 - 3.2.2 Contextual meaning and the role of situation
 - 3.2.3 Connotative and denotative meaning in Arabic

- **Part 3 (3.3):** Figurative and Rhetorical Semantics in Arabic
 - 3.3.1 Metaphor and simile in Arabic semantic usage
 - 3.3.2 Metonymy and synecdoche
 - 3.3.3 The role of balagha in Arabic semantic expression

Introduction

Arabic is a language of remarkable semantic richness. Its root-based morphology generates an extraordinary network of interrelated meanings, while its long literary and rhetorical tradition has developed sophisticated tools for expressing, extending, and layering meaning far beyond the literal. Understanding the types and features of meaning in Arabic is essential for anyone seeking to read, translate, or analyse Arabic texts with precision and depth.

The aim of this Series is to introduce you to the major types of semantic relationships and meaning categories that operate in Arabic, equipping you with analytical tools to identify and interpret them in both classical and modern Arabic texts.

We shall commence this Series by examining lexical semantics in Arabic, focusing on the nature of lexical meaning and the key relationships of synonymy and antonymy. Next, we will explore grammatical and contextual semantics, considering how meaning is encoded in Arabic grammatical structures and how context and situation shape interpretation. Finally, we will examine figurative and rhetorical semantics, analysing the roles of metaphor, simile, metonymy, and the classical Arabic rhetorical tradition of balagha in creating and extending meaning.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 3.1** explain the nature of lexical meaning in Arabic and identify key features of the Arabic lexical system,

- **SLO 3.2** analyse synonymy, near-synonymy, and antonymy as semantic relationships in Arabic vocabulary,
- **SLO 3.3** describe how meaning is encoded in Arabic grammatical structures and how context shapes interpretation,
- **SLO 3.4** distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning in Arabic,
- **SLO 3.5** identify and analyse metaphor, simile, metonymy, and synecdoche in Arabic usage, and
- **SLO 3.6** evaluate the role of balagha in Arabic semantic and rhetorical expression.

3.1 Lexical Semantics In Arabic

3.1.1 The nature of lexical meaning in Arabic

Lexical semantics is the branch of semantics concerned with the meanings of individual words and the relationships between them. In Arabic, lexical meaning is organised around the **trilateral root system** a foundation of three consonants from which families of semantically related words are derived through the addition of vowel patterns and affixes. For example, the root **k-t-b** (ك-ت-ب) underlies words meaning to write, a book, a writer, an office, and correspondence, all connected by the core semantic idea of writing. This root-based organisation means that Arabic vocabulary is not merely a collection of arbitrary labels but a **structured semantic network** in which the meanings of words are interrelated in systematic and learnable ways.

Fill-in-the-blank: In Arabic, lexical meaning is organised around the _____ root system, in which families of semantically related words are derived from three core consonants.

3.1.2 Synonymy and near-synonymy in Arabic

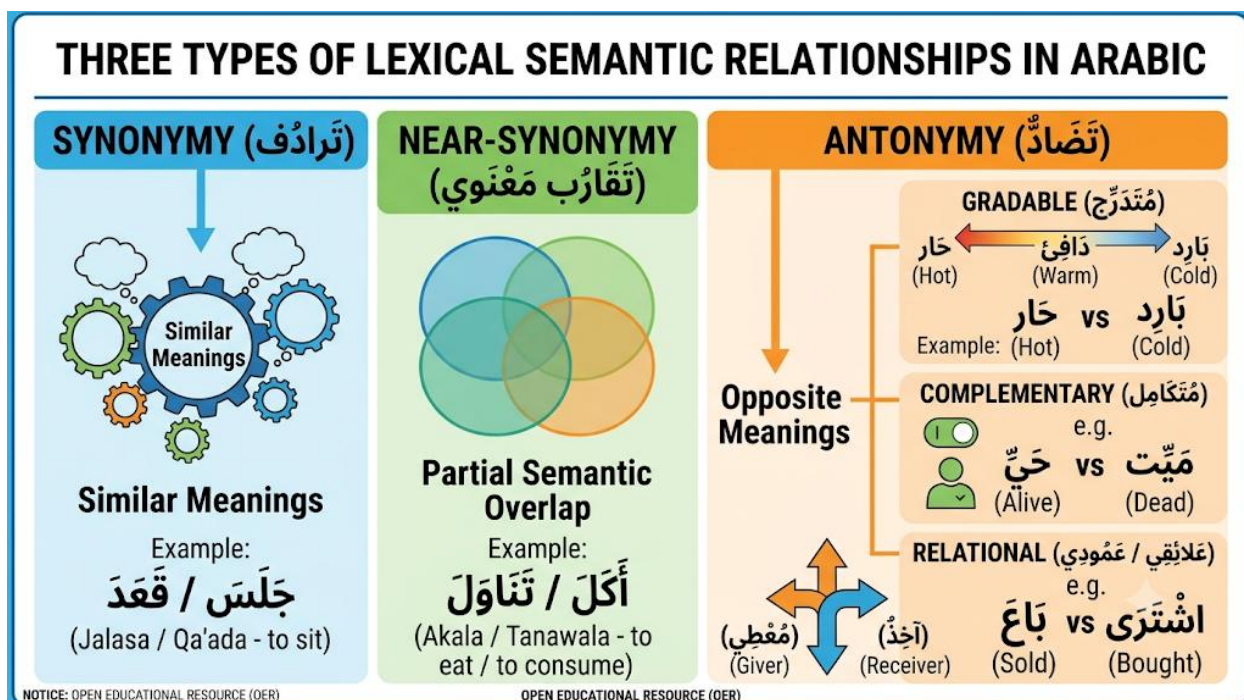
Synonymy refers to the relationship between two or more words that share the same or very similar meanings. Arabic is particularly celebrated for the richness of its synonymous vocabulary a feature that classical Arab lexicographers documented extensively. For example, Arabic has numerous words for lion, sword, and camel, each with subtle connotational or contextual

differences. However, true synonymy where two words are completely interchangeable in all contexts is rare in any language, including Arabic. The more common phenomenon is **near-synonymy** or **partial synonymy**, where words share a core meaning but differ in connotation, register, or contextual appropriateness. Recognising these subtle differences is essential for precise reading and translation.

Fill-in-the-blank: True synonymy where two words are completely interchangeable in all contexts is _____ in any language, including Arabic.

3.1.3 Antonymy and semantic opposition

Antonymy is the semantic relationship of oppositeness between words. Arabic linguists and lexicographers identified several types of semantic opposition. **Gradable antonyms** refer to qualities that exist on a scale, such as hot and cold (**haar** and **baarid**), where intermediate degrees are possible. **Complementary antonyms** are binary opposites with no middle ground, such as alive and dead. **Relational antonyms** (also called converses) describe a relationship from opposite perspectives, such as buyer and seller, or teacher and student. A distinctive phenomenon in Arabic is **al-addaad** words that carry two opposite meanings simultaneously, such as **jawn**, which can mean both black and white. This feature has fascinated Arabic semanticists for centuries.



3.2 Grammatical And Contextual Semantics In Arabic

3.2.1 Grammatical semantics: meaning encoded in structure

Grammatical semantics examines how the grammatical structures of a language encode meaning independently of individual word meanings. In Arabic, grammatical choices carry significant semantic weight. The choice between a **verbal sentence (jumlah fi'liyyah)** and a **nominal sentence (jumlah ismiyyah)** does not merely alter word order but conveys different meanings: the verbal sentence typically emphasises the **action or event** described, while the nominal sentence emphasises a **state or condition** as ongoing or permanent. Similarly, the Arabic **dual** and **plural** forms, the **definite and indefinite article**, and the system of **case endings (i'rab)** all contribute layers of meaning that must be carefully interpreted when reading Arabic texts.

Fill-in-the-blank: In Arabic, a nominal sentence (jumlah ismiyyah) typically emphasises a _____ or condition as ongoing, while a verbal sentence emphasises an action or event.

3.2.2 Contextual meaning and the role of situation

Contextual meaning refers to the meaning a word or expression carries in a specific situation of use, which may differ from its dictionary (or denotative) meaning. The British linguist J.R. Firth, whose ideas have influenced Arabic semantic studies, argued that **meaning is a function of context** that words cannot be fully understood in isolation but only in relation to the social, textual, and situational contexts in which they occur. In Arabic, this principle is especially important because the language has a rich tradition of **ellipsis (hadhf)** the omission of elements understood from context and of **implicature**, where what is meant goes beyond what is literally said. Understanding the role of context is therefore essential for accurate interpretation of Arabic discourse.

Fill-in-the-blank: The principle that meaning is a function of _____ means that words cannot be fully understood in isolation but only in relation to the situation of use.

3.2.3 Connotative and denotative meaning in Arabic

Denotative meaning (also called **referential meaning**) is the literal, dictionary definition of a word the core meaning it has regardless of context. **Connotative meaning** refers to the additional associations, emotional overtones, or cultural values that a word carries beyond its denotation. In Arabic, connotative meanings are often shaped by **religious**, **cultural**, and **historical** associations embedded in the language through centuries of use. For example, words associated with the Qur'an or Islamic tradition carry connotations of reverence and sanctity that go far beyond their literal denotations. Awareness of both denotative and connotative meaning is essential for understanding how Arabic words function in real communicative contexts.

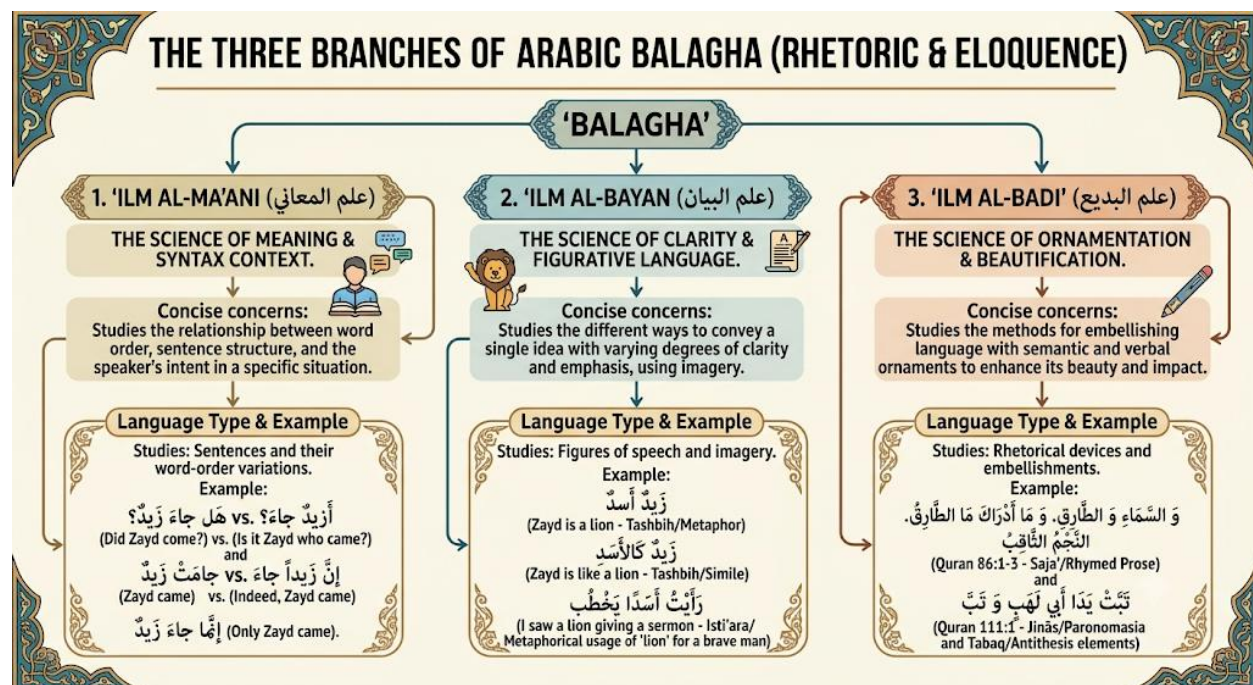


Figure 3.2 Denotative and connotative meaning in Arabic

A diagram contrasting denotative meaning (literal, dictionary definition) and connotative meaning (cultural, religious, emotional associations) using Arabic word examples, with arrows showing the two layers of meaning surrounding a central word.

Search string: "denotative connotative meaning Arabic semantics diagram OER"

Pilot questions 3.2

6. What is the semantic difference between a verbal sentence and a nominal sentence in Arabic?
7. Fill in the blank: Contextual meaning refers to the meaning a word carries in a specific _____ of use.
8. What is ellipsis (hadhf) in Arabic and how does it relate to contextual meaning?
9. Distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning and give one example from Arabic.
10. True or False: Case endings (i'rab) in Arabic carry semantic meaning in addition to their grammatical function.

3.3 Figurative And Rhetorical Semantics In Arabic

3.3.1 Metaphor and simile in Arabic semantic usage

Metaphor (isti'arah in Arabic) is a figure of speech in which a word or expression is applied to something it does not literally denote, in order to suggest a resemblance. In Arabic poetry and prose, metaphor is not merely a decorative device but a fundamental mechanism of semantic extension a way of generating new meanings from existing vocabulary. **Simile** (tashbih) is a related but distinct figure in which a comparison is made explicit using a comparative particle such as **ka** (like) or **mithla** (similar to). Classical Arabic rhetoric developed highly systematic frameworks for classifying metaphors and similes according to their type, degree of explicitness, and aesthetic effect. Both figures have been central to Arabic poetry from the pre-Islamic **Mu'allaqat** odes to contemporary Arabic literature.

Fill-in-the-blank: In Arabic, metaphor is known as _____ (isti'arah) and simile is known as tashbih.

3.3.2 Metonymy and synecdoche

Metonymy (**majaz mursal** in Arabic) is a figure of speech in which a word associated with something is used to refer to that thing itself. For example, using the word '**crown**' to refer to a king, or '**the pen**' to refer to writing or literature, are examples of metonymy. In Arabic, metonymy is closely studied within the framework of **majaz** the broad Arabic category of non-literal or figurative language, as opposed to **haqiqah** (literal meaning). **Synecdoche** is a related figure in which a part is used to refer to the whole, or the whole to refer to a part for example, using '**hands**' to mean workers, or '**Egypt**' to refer to all Egyptians. Both metonymy and synecdoche are important mechanisms of semantic extension in Arabic rhetorical and everyday usage.

Fill-in-the-blank: In Arabic rhetoric, the broad category of non-literal or figurative language is called _____, as opposed to haqiqah (literal meaning).

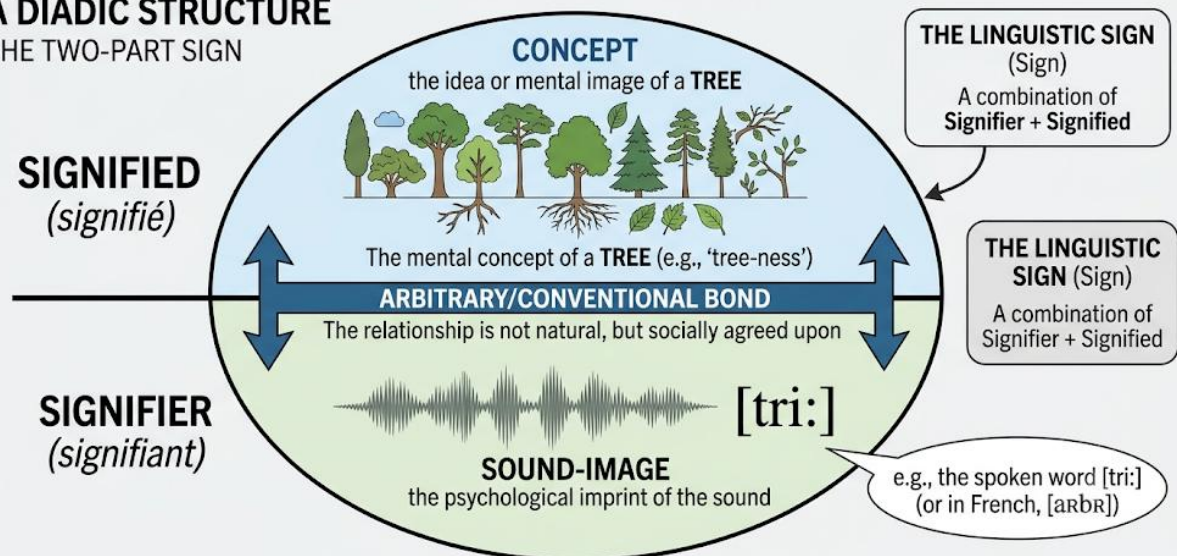
3.3.3 The role of balagha in Arabic semantic expression

Balagha Arabic rhetoric is the classical discipline that analyses the qualities of eloquent and effective expression in Arabic. It is divided into three main branches: '**ilm al-ma'ani**' (the science of meanings, which studies how grammatical structures express meaning effectively), '**ilm al-bayan**' (the science of clarity, which studies figurative language including metaphor, simile, and metonymy), and '**ilm al-badi**' (the science of embellishment, which studies literary devices that enhance the beauty of expression). Balagha is not merely an aesthetic discipline it is deeply semantic, concerned with how form, structure, and figurative language interact to create, layer, and intensify meaning. The analysis of Qur'anic language has been a primary motivation and touchstone of the balagha tradition throughout its history.

SAUSSURE'S MODEL OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

A DIADIC STRUCTURE

THE TWO-PART SIGN



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Figure 3.3 The three branches of balagha and their semantic functions

Description: A diagram showing the three branches of balagha: 'ilm al-ma'ani (science of meanings), 'ilm al-bayan (science of clarity and figurative language), and 'ilm al-badi' (science of embellishment), with brief descriptions and examples of each.

Pilot questions 3.3

11. What is isti'arah in Arabic rhetoric and how does it differ from tashbih?
12. Fill in the blank: In Arabic, the broad category of figurative or non-literal language is called _____, as opposed to haqiqah (literal meaning).
13. Give one example of metonymy (majaz mursal) in Arabic or English usage.
14. Name the three branches of balagha and state the focus of each.
15. True or False: Balagha is purely an aesthetic discipline with no relevance to the study of meaning.

Series Summary

This Series has examined the major types and features of semantics as they operate in the Arabic language. We began with lexical semantics, exploring how Arabic's triliteral root system creates structured semantic networks and examining the key relationships of synonymy, near-synonymy, antonymy, and the distinctive phenomenon of al-addaad. We then moved to grammatical and contextual semantics, analysing how meaning is encoded in Arabic grammatical choices such as the distinction between verbal and nominal sentences and how context, ellipsis, and denotative versus connotative meaning shape interpretation. Finally, we explored figurative and rhetorical semantics, examining the roles of metaphor (isti'arah), simile (tashbih), metonymy (majaz mursal), and synecdoche in Arabic usage, and evaluating the contribution of balagha with its three branches of 'ilm al-ma'ani, 'ilm al-bayan, and 'ilm al-badi' to Arabic semantic expression.

By engaging with these topics, you should now be able to explain the nature of lexical meaning in Arabic, analyse synonymy and antonymy, describe grammatical and contextual semantics, distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning, identify figurative devices in Arabic texts, and evaluate the role of balagha in Arabic semantic expression. These abilities directly align with the Series Learning Outcomes and equip you with the analytical tools needed for the deeper semantic investigations in the Series that follow.

Glossary of Terms

- **Al-addaad:** A distinctive feature of Arabic in which a single word carries two opposite meanings simultaneously; a subject of fascination and debate among classical Arabic semanticists.
- **Antonymy:** The semantic relationship of oppositeness between words, including gradable, complementary, and relational (converse) subtypes.
- **Balagha:** Classical Arabic rhetoric; the discipline concerned with the qualities of eloquent and effective expression, divided into 'ilm al-ma'ani, 'ilm al-bayan, and 'ilm al-badi'.

- **Connotative meaning:** The associations, emotional overtones, and cultural values a word carries beyond its literal denotation.
- **Contextual meaning:** The meaning a word or expression carries in a specific situation of use, shaped by social, textual, and situational context.
- **Denotative meaning:** The literal, dictionary definition of a word its core referential meaning independent of context or cultural association.
- **Ellipsis (hadhf):** The omission of elements from a sentence that are understood from context; a common and significant feature of Arabic discourse.
- **Gradable antonyms:** Opposites that exist on a scale with possible intermediate degrees, such as hot and cold.
- **Grammatical semantics:** The study of how meaning is encoded in the grammatical structures of a language, such as word order, sentence type, case endings, and number.
- **Haqiqah:** Literal meaning in Arabic; the use of a word in its original, direct sense, as opposed to majaz (figurative usage).
- **'Ilm al-badi':** The third branch of balagha, concerned with literary devices and embellishments that enhance the beauty and aesthetic quality of Arabic expression.
- **'Ilm al-bayan:** The second branch of balagha, concerned with figurative language including metaphor (isti'arah), simile (tashbih), and metonymy (majaz mursal).
- **'Ilm al-ma'ani:** The first branch of balagha, concerned with the effective use of grammatical structures to convey meaning clearly and appropriately.
- **Isti'arah:** Metaphor in Arabic rhetoric; the use of a word or expression in a non-literal sense to suggest a resemblance between two things.
- **Jumlah fi'liyyah:** A verbal sentence in Arabic, typically beginning with a verb and emphasising an action or event.
- **Jumlah ismiyyah:** A nominal sentence in Arabic, typically beginning with a noun or pronoun and emphasising a state or condition as ongoing or permanent.
- **Lexical semantics:** The branch of semantics concerned with the meanings of individual words and the systematic relationships between them.
- **Majaz:** Figurative or non-literal language in Arabic; the broad category encompassing metaphor, metonymy, and other departures from literal meaning.

- **Majaz mursal:** Metonymy in Arabic rhetoric; the use of a word associated with something to refer to that thing itself.
- **Near-synonymy:** The relationship between words that share a core meaning but differ in connotation, register, or contextual appropriateness; more common than true synonymy.
- **Synonymy:** The semantic relationship between two or more words that share the same or very similar meanings.
- **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech in which a part is used to refer to the whole, or the whole to refer to a part.
- **Tashbih:** Simile in Arabic rhetoric; an explicit comparison between two things using a comparative particle such as ka (like) or mithla (similar to).
- **Triliteral root system:** The organising principle of Arabic morphology and lexicology, in which most Arabic words are derived from roots of three consonants sharing a core semantic idea.

Concept Check Questions 3

Objective Questions

1. In Arabic, most words are derived from roots consisting of _____ consonants that share a core semantic idea.
2. Which of the following best describes *al-addaad*: a word with two opposite meanings, a word with many synonyms, a type of metaphor, or a grammatical category?
3. True or False: A nominal sentence (*jumlah ismiyyah*) in Arabic typically emphasises an action or event.
4. Fill in the blank: The literal, dictionary definition of a word is called its _____ meaning, while the associations and emotional overtones it carries are called its connotative meaning.
5. Which branch of *balagha* is concerned with figurative language including metaphor and simile: *'ilm al-ma'ani*, *'ilm al-bayan*, or *'ilm al-badi'*?

Short-Answer Questions

6. Explain the triliteral root system in Arabic and state one way in which it shapes lexical meaning.
7. Distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning in Arabic and give one example of a word whose connotative meaning is shaped by religious or cultural association.
8. What is the difference between *isti'arah* (metaphor) and *tashbih* (simile) in Arabic rhetoric?
9. Name the three branches of *balagha* and state the primary focus of each.
10. What is *majaz* in Arabic and how does it relate to *haqiqah*?

Long-Answer Questions

11. Analyse the key types of lexical semantic relationships in Arabic: synonymy, near-synonymy, and antonymy, giving examples of each and explaining their significance for reading and translating Arabic texts.

12. Evaluate the role of *balagha* in Arabic semantic expression, explaining how its three branches *'ilm al-ma'ani*, *'ilm al-bayan*, and *'ilm al-badi'* together provide a comprehensive framework for analysing meaning in Arabic texts.

Answers to Concept Check Questions 3

13. Three
14. A word with two opposite meanings
15. False a nominal sentence emphasises a state or condition as ongoing; it is the verbal sentence that emphasises an action or event
16. Denotative
17. *'Ilm al-bayan*
18. The trilateral root system is the organising principle of Arabic morphology in which most words are derived from roots of three consonants sharing a core semantic idea. It shapes lexical meaning by creating systematic families of related words: for example, the root *k-t-b* underlies words meaning to write, a book, a writer, and an office, all connected by the idea of writing.
19. Denotative meaning is the literal, dictionary definition of a word. Connotative meaning refers to the associations and emotional or cultural overtones a word carries beyond its denotation. For example, words associated with the Qur'an or Islamic tradition carry connotations of reverence and sanctity beyond their literal meanings.
20. *Isti'arah* (metaphor) applies a word or expression to something it does not literally denote in order to suggest a resemblance, without using an explicit comparative particle. *Tashbih* (simile) makes the comparison explicit using a comparative particle such as *ka* (like) or *mithla* (similar to).
21. *'Ilm al-ma'ani*: the science of meanings, concerned with how grammatical structures express meaning effectively. *'Ilm al-bayan*: the science of clarity, concerned with figurative language including metaphor, simile, and metonymy. *'Ilm al-badi'*: the science of embellishment, concerned with literary devices that enhance the beauty and aesthetic quality of expression.

22. *Majaz* is the broad Arabic category of figurative or non-literal language the use of words in senses other than their original literal meanings. It is contrasted with *haqiqah* (literal meaning), which refers to words used in their direct, original sense.

Pilot Questions 3.1 – Answers

23. The triliteral root system is the organising principle in which most Arabic words are derived from roots of three consonants sharing a core semantic idea; it organises lexical meaning by creating systematic families of semantically related words from each root.
24. Rare
25. Antonymy is the semantic relationship of oppositeness between words; types include gradable antonyms (hot/cold), complementary antonyms (alive/dead), and relational antonyms (buyer/seller).
26. *Al-adda'ad* is a feature of Arabic in which a single word carries two opposite meanings simultaneously; it is distinctive because it challenges the assumption that words have a single, stable meaning.
27. True

Pilot Questions 3.2 – Answers

28. A verbal sentence (*jumlah fi 'liyyah*) typically begins with a verb and emphasises the action or event; a nominal sentence (*jumlah ismiyyah*) typically begins with a noun or pronoun and emphasises a state or condition.
29. Situation (or context)
30. Ellipsis (*hadhf*) is the omission of elements from a sentence that are understood from context; it relates to contextual meaning because the omitted elements can only be recovered by the listener or reader who understands the situation of use.
31. Denotative meaning is the literal, dictionary definition of a word; connotative meaning refers to the additional associations and cultural or emotional overtones it carries.
Example: *Allah* denotes God but carries connotations of reverence, divine majesty, and Islamic faith.
32. True

Pilot Questions 3.3 – Answers

33. *Isti‘arah* is the use of a word or expression in a non-literal sense to suggest a resemblance without an explicit comparative particle; *tashbih* is a simile that makes the comparison explicit using a comparative particle such as *ka* (like) or *mithla* (similar to).
34. *Majaz*
35. Example: using “the pen” to mean writing or literature; or “the crown” to refer to a king.
36. *‘Ilm al-ma‘ani*: grammatical structures and meaning. *‘Ilm al-bayan*: figurative language. *‘Ilm al-badi‘*: embellishments and aesthetics.
37. False *balagha* is deeply semantic, concerned with how form, structure, and figurative language interact to create and intensify meaning.

References and Attributions 3

- **Figure 3.1 Types of semantic relationships in Arabic lexical semantics:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a labelled diagram showing three types of lexical semantic relationships in Arabic: synonymy, near-synonymy, and antonymy (with subtypes: gradable, complementary, relational), including Arabic word examples." Search string: "lexical semantic relationships Arabic synonymy antonymy diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on Arabic lexical semantics.
- **Figure 3.2 Denotative and connotative meaning in Arabic:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram contrasting denotative and connotative meaning in Arabic, showing a central Arabic word with its literal denotation on one side and its cultural, religious, and emotional connotations on the other." Search string: "denotative connotative meaning Arabic semantics diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on Arabic semantics and meaning.
- **Figure 3.3 The three branches of balagha and their semantic functions:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram showing the three branches of Arabic balagha: 'ilm al-ma'ani, 'ilm al-bayan, and 'ilm al-badi', with a brief description of each branch's concern and an example of the type of language it studies." Search string: "balagha branches Arabic rhetoric semantics diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on Arabic rhetoric and balagha.
- **Series content references:**
 - Holes, C. (2004). Modern Arabic: Structures, functions, and varieties. Georgetown University Press.
 - Levin, A. (1995). The grammatical terms al-mujmal and al-mubayyan as used by Sibawayhi. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 19, 1–28.

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- **Bloom's taxonomy:** Verbs applied in learning outcomes are based on Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.

- **Institutional referencing style:** All references have been presented in a clear and consistent manner, following APA style for educational materials.

Course code: ARA 303

Course title: Semantics

Course credit load: 2 Units

List of Series:

- **Series 1:** Concept and Development of Semantics
- **Series 2:** Contributions of Arabic Linguists
- **Series 3:** Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic
- **Series 4:** Signifier–Signified Relationship and Language vs. Speech
- **Series 5:** Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series 4: Signifier–Signified Relationship and Language vs. Speech

Series Outline

This Series will be organised into three main Parts, each with relevant sub-Parts:

- **Part 1 (4.1):** The Linguistic Sign and the Signifier–Signified Relationship
 - 4.1.1 Saussure's model of the linguistic sign
 - 4.1.2 The arbitrariness of the sign
 - 4.1.3 Linearity and the syntagmatic nature of the signifier
- **Part 2 (4.2):** Langue and Parole: Language versus Speech
 - 4.2.1 Saussure's distinction between langue and parole
 - 4.2.2 Langue as a social system
 - 4.2.3 Parole as individual usage

- **Part 3 (4.3): Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives on Language**
 - 4.3.1 Synchronic linguistics: language at a given point in time
 - 4.3.2 Diachronic linguistics: language change over time
 - 4.3.3 Relating langue/parole and synchrony/diachrony

Introduction

At the heart of modern linguistic theory lies a set of foundational distinctions first articulated with great precision by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Two of these distinctions are central to understanding how language functions as a system of meaning: the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the linguistic sign, and the distinction between language as an abstract social system (langue) and language as concrete individual usage (parole). A third related distinction between studying language at a single point in time (synchronic analysis) and studying how it changes over time (diachronic analysis) completes this foundational framework.

These distinctions are not merely historical curiosities; they remain the conceptual bedrock on which much of contemporary semantics, structuralism, and linguistic theory is built.

Understanding them equips you with the tools to analyse how meaning is constructed within a linguistic system, how that system relates to the individual acts of speech that instantiate it, and how both may be examined either as a snapshot in time or as an evolving process.

This Series will commence by examining the linguistic sign itself its structure as a union of signifier and signified, the arbitrariness of that union, and the linear nature of the signifier. We will then explore Saussure's celebrated distinction between langue and parole, considering the characteristics that distinguish language as a shared social system from speech as individual, situated performance. Finally, we will examine the synchronic and diachronic perspectives on language, and consider how these two axes of analysis relate to the langue/parole distinction.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 4.1** describe Saussure's model of the linguistic sign and explain the relationship between signifier and signified,
- **SLO 4.2** explain the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign and evaluate its significance for linguistic theory,
- **SLO 4.3** distinguish between langue and parole and explain the characteristics of each,
- **SLO 4.4** analyse language as a social system in contrast with speech as individual usage,
- **SLO 4.5** differentiate between synchronic and diachronic approaches to the study of language, and
- **SLO 4.6** relate the langue/parole distinction to the synchronic/diachronic distinction in linguistic analysis.

4.1 The Linguistic Sign And The Signifier–Signified Relationship

4.1.1 Saussure's model of the linguistic sign

In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), **Ferdinand de Saussure** proposed that language is fundamentally a system of **signs**, and that each linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity composed of two inseparable elements. The **signifier** (*signifiant*) is the form the sign takes for spoken language, this is the sound-image, the mental impression of a sequence of sounds. The **signified** (*signifié*) is the concept or mental content that the signifier evokes. Crucially, Saussure insisted that the sign unites not a word and a thing in the world, but a **sound-image** and a **concept** both of which are psychological, existing in the mind of the language user. The word *tree*, for instance, is a sign uniting the sound-image /tri:/ with the concept of a tree, not the physical object itself.

Fill-in-the-blank: According to Saussure, the linguistic sign unites a _____ (the sound-image) and a signified (the concept), both of which exist in the mind of the language user.

4.1.2 The arbitrariness of the sign

One of Saussure's most influential principles is the **arbitrariness of the sign**: the bond between the signifier and the signified is **not motivated** by any natural or logical connection. There is nothing about the sequence of sounds /tri:/ that inherently resembles or necessitates the concept of a tree – the connection is established purely by **convention** within a given speech community. This is demonstrated by the simple fact that different languages use entirely different signifiers for the same signified: English *tree*, French *arbre*, and Arabic **shajarah** (شجرة) all refer to the same concept using completely different sound-images. Saussure did note certain limited exceptions, such as **onomatopoeia** (words that imitate sounds, such as *buzz* or *miaow*), where the connection appears less arbitrary – though even these are shaped and conventionalised differently across languages. The arbitrariness of the sign has profound implications: it means that meaning is not inherent in sounds themselves but is established and maintained by social convention within a linguistic community.

Fill-in-the-blank: The arbitrariness of the sign means that the bond between signifier and signified is established by social _____ rather than by any natural connection.

4.1.3 Linearity and the syntagmatic nature of the signifier

A second principle Saussure identified is the **linearity of the signifier**: because the signifier is auditory in nature, it unfolds **sequentially** in time, one element after another, and cannot present more than one element simultaneously. This is distinct from, for example, visual signifiers, which can present multiple elements at once. The linear character of the signifier has significant consequences for how language is structured: it means that spoken (and written) language must be organised as a **chain** of successive units – sounds, syllables, words – that combine according to rules of sequence. This linear, sequential dimension of language is what Saussure called the **syntagmatic** axis of language, in contrast with the **paradigmatic** (or associative) axis, which concerns the set of items that could substitute for one another at a given point in the chain. Together, these two axes – the linear combination of signs and the associative relationships

between signs that could occupy the same position form the basis of structural analysis in linguistics.

Fill-in-the-blank: The linearity of the signifier means that it unfolds _____ in time, forming what Saussure called the syntagmatic axis of language.

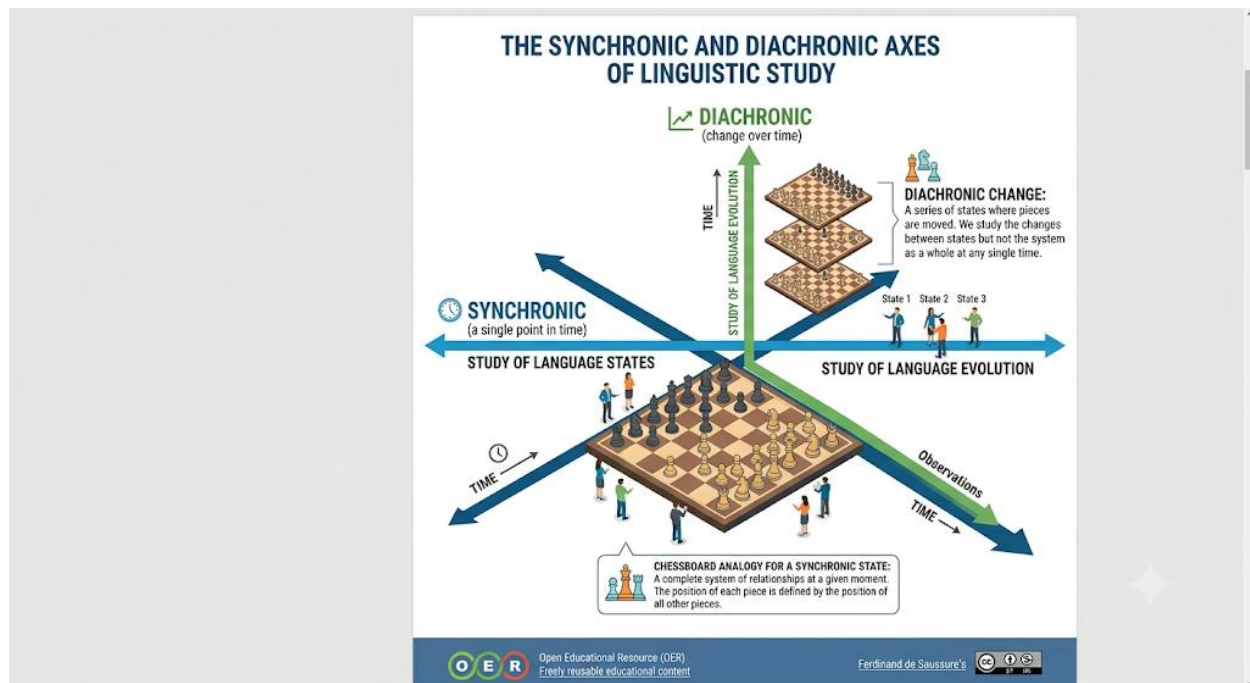


Figure 4.1 The linguistic sign: signifier and signified

Description: A diagram showing Saussure's model of the linguistic sign as an oval divided into two parts the signified (concept, e.g. a tree) above and the signifier (sound-image, e.g. /tri:/) below connected by an arbitrary, conventional bond.

Pilot questions 4.1

1. What are the two components of the linguistic sign according to Saussure?
2. Fill in the blank: The bond between signifier and signified is _____, meaning it is not motivated by any natural connection.

3. Give one example that illustrates the arbitrariness of the sign.
4. What does the linearity of the signifier mean, and which axis of language does it define?
5. True or False: Saussure argued that the linguistic sign unites a word and a real-world object.

4.2 Langue And Parole: Language Versus Speech

4.2.1 Saussure's distinction between langue and parole

Alongside the linguistic sign, Saussure introduced a second foundational distinction: that between **langue** and **parole**. **Langue** refers to language as an **abstract system** the shared set of conventions, rules, and structures that exist collectively in the minds of the members of a speech community, independent of any individual's use of it. **Parole**, by contrast, refers to **speech** the concrete, individual acts of language use by particular speakers on particular occasions, including all their personal variation, hesitation, and idiosyncrasy. Saussure compared this relationship to that between a musical score (langue) and any individual performance of it (parole): the score is a fixed, shared structure, while each performance realises that structure in a unique and variable way. This distinction allowed Saussure to argue that linguistics should take **langue** as its primary object of study, since it is the systematic, shared component that makes communication possible in the first place.

Fill-in-the-blank: Langue refers to language as an abstract, shared _____, while parole refers to individual, concrete acts of speech.

4.2.2 Langue as a social system

Langue is fundamentally **social** in nature. It is not the property of any single individual but exists as a shared code held collectively by a speech community, passed down through learning and used as a common reference point that makes mutual understanding possible. Because it is a system, langue is characterised by **structure**: its elements sounds, words, grammatical rules do not have meaning in isolation but only in relation to one another, as parts of an interconnected

whole. Langue is also relatively **stable** at any given moment, since a language system that changed unpredictably from one instant to the next would be unusable for communication. Because langue is a mental and social phenomenon shared across a community, it can be studied systematically as an object with identifiable rules and structure in a way that the endless variability of parole cannot.

Fill-in-the-blank: Langue is fundamentally _____ in nature, existing as a shared code held collectively by a speech community rather than by any single individual.

4.2.3 Parole as individual usage

Parole is the realm of **individual** and **concrete** language use. Every time a speaker produces an utterance, they draw on the shared resources of langue but combine and realise them in a particular, situated way shaped by their voice, their choices, the context of the moment, and countless other individual factors. Parole is therefore characterised by **variability**: no two utterances, even of the same sentence by the same speaker, are ever perfectly identical. Parole is also where **innovation** in language begins: new words, new pronunciations, and new grammatical constructions first appear in individual acts of speech before if adopted widely enough by the community they may eventually become part of langue itself. This relationship reveals that langue and parole are not entirely separate but are dynamically interconnected: langue makes parole possible by providing the shared system that speakers draw upon, while parole is the site where langue is both realised and, over time, changed.

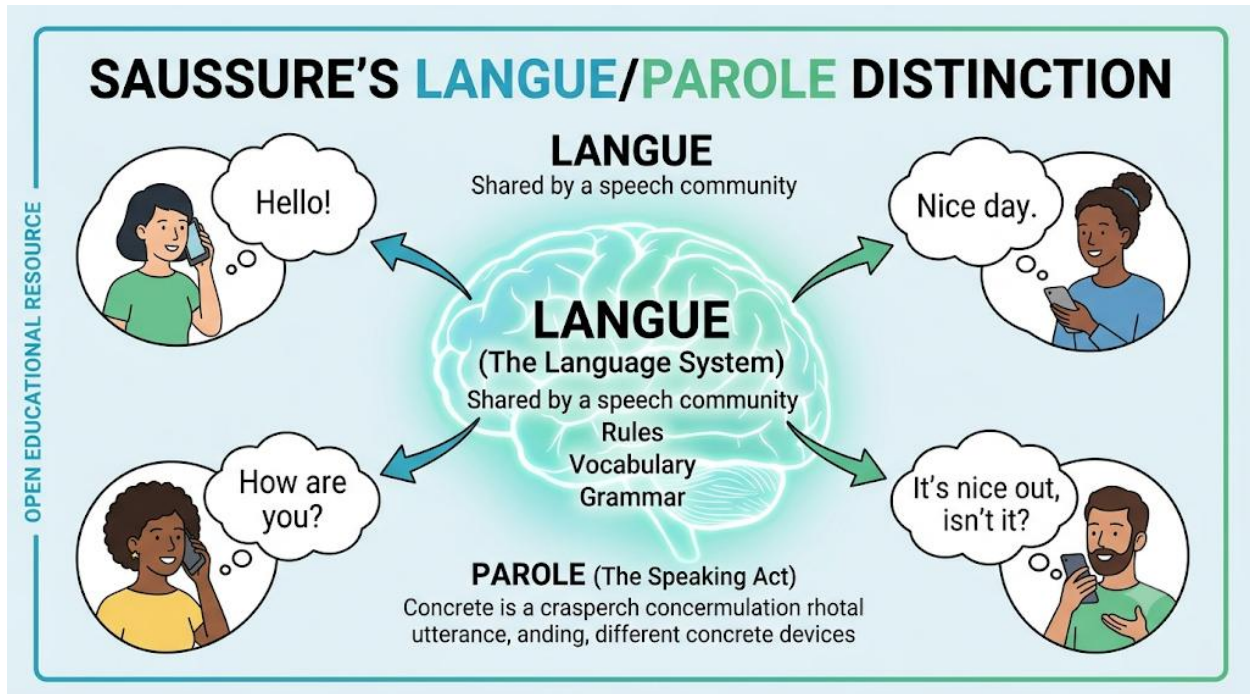


Figure 4.2 Langue and parole: the relationship between language and speech

Description: A diagram showing langue as a shared, abstract, stable social system at the centre, with multiple arrows radiating outward to individual instances of parole (concrete utterances by different speakers), each varying slightly while drawing on the same shared system.

Pilot questions 4.2

6. Define langue and parole in your own words.
7. Fill in the blank: Langue is _____ in nature, existing as a shared code within a speech community.
8. What analogy did Saussure use to illustrate the relationship between langue and parole?
9. Explain how parole can, over time, influence or change langue.
10. True or False: Parole is characterised by stability, while langue is characterised by variability.

4.3 Synchronic And Diachronic Perspectives On Language

4.3.1 Synchronic linguistics: language at a given point in time

Synchronic linguistics is the study of a language as it exists at a **particular point in time**, without reference to its historical development. A synchronic analysis of Arabic, for example, might examine the grammatical rules, vocabulary, and sound system of Modern Standard Arabic as it is used today, treating the language as a coherent, self-contained system in its current state. Saussure regarded the synchronic perspective as essential for understanding how a language functions as a system, since the relationships between its elements – the structural oppositions and associations that give words their value – can only be properly analysed within a single state of the language at one time. Synchronic analysis is therefore closely aligned with the study of **langue**, since it treats language as a structured system to be described in its own terms.

Fill-in-the-blank: Synchronic linguistics studies a language as it exists at a particular _____, without reference to its historical development.

4.3.2 Diachronic linguistics: language change over time

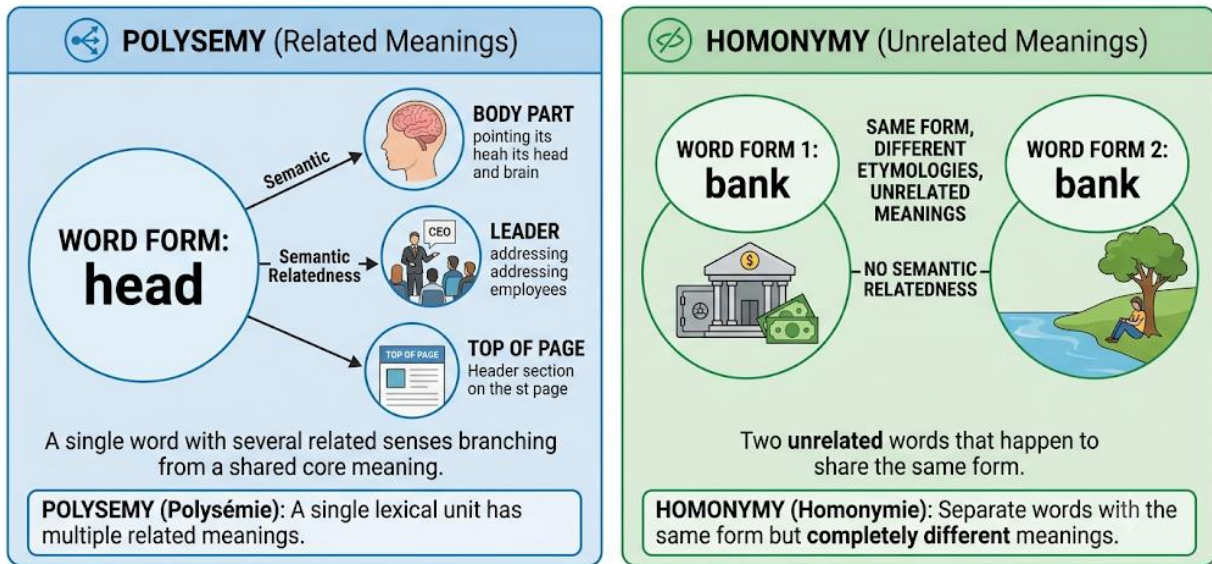
Diachronic linguistics (also called **historical linguistics**) is the study of how a language **changes over time**. A diachronic analysis might trace how the sound system, vocabulary, or grammar of Arabic has evolved from Classical Arabic to Modern Standard Arabic and the various spoken dialects, or how the meanings of particular words have shifted across centuries of use. Diachronic study reveals that languages are never static: sounds shift, word meanings narrow or broaden or shift entirely, and grammatical structures are lost, gained, or reanalysed. Saussure was careful to distinguish diachronic study from synchronic study, arguing that the two require different methods: a diachronic study traces a sequence of changes across successive states of a language, while a synchronic study examines the relationships that hold within a single state at one moment. He famously illustrated this with the image of a chess game: a snapshot of the board at any single move is a synchronic state, complete and analysable in its own terms, whereas the sequence of moves that produced that state is diachronic.

Fill-in-the-blank: Diachronic linguistics, also called historical linguistics, studies how a language _____ over time.

4.3.3 Relating langue/parole and synchrony/diachrony

The langue/parole distinction and the synchronic/diachronic distinction are closely related but operate along different axes. **Langue** and **parole** distinguish between the **shared system** of language and its **individual realisation** in speech, while **synchronic** and **diachronic** distinguish between studying language at **one point in time** and studying its **change across time**. These two distinctions can be combined: one can study langue synchronically (describing the grammar of a language at a given moment) or diachronically (tracing how that grammar has changed); and while parole, being made up of individual, fleeting acts of speech, is less amenable to structural description, the accumulated record of parole across time is in fact the raw evidence from which diachronic changes in langue are ultimately reconstructed. Understanding how these two foundational distinctions intersect provides a comprehensive framework for analysing language both as a structured system and as a historically evolving phenomenon.

POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY: A SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIP DIAGRAM



FREE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE - DESIGNED FOR LINGUISTICS & SEMANTICS STUDY

Figure 4.3 Synchronic and diachronic axes of linguistic study

Description: A diagram showing two intersecting axes: a horizontal synchronic axis representing a language system at a single point in time, and a vertical diachronic axis representing successive states of the language across history, illustrated with Saussure's chessboard analogy.

Pilot questions 4.3

11. What is the difference between synchronic and diachronic linguistics?
12. Fill in the blank: Synchronic linguistics studies a language at a particular _____, without reference to its history.
13. What analogy did Saussure use to distinguish synchronic and diachronic study, and what does it illustrate?
14. Explain how the langue/parole distinction relates to the synchronic/diachronic distinction.
15. True or False: The accumulated record of parole across time can serve as evidence for diachronic changes in langue.

Series Summary

This Series has examined two of the foundational distinctions in Saussurean linguistics: the structure of the linguistic sign, and the relationship between language as a system and speech as individual usage. We began by exploring Saussure's model of the linguistic sign as a union of signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept), examining the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign and the linear, syntagmatic nature of the signifier. We then examined the distinction between *langue* the abstract, shared, social system of language and *parole* the concrete, individual, variable acts of speech that realise that system, noting how *parole* can, over time, give rise to change in *langue*. Finally, we explored the synchronic and diachronic perspectives on language, distinguishing the study of a language at a single point in time from the study of how it changes across time, and considering how these two axes relate to the *langue/parole* distinction.

By engaging with these topics, you should now be able to describe the structure of the linguistic sign, explain the arbitrariness of the sign, distinguish *langue* from *parole*, analyse language as a social system in contrast with individual speech, differentiate synchronic from diachronic approaches, and relate these two foundational distinctions to one another. These conceptual tools are essential for the study of meaning multiplicity and linguistic taboo that follows in the final Series of this course.

Glossary of Terms

- **Arbitrariness of the sign:** Saussure's principle that the bond between a signifier and its signified is unmotivated and established purely by social convention.
- **Diachronic linguistics:** The study of how a language changes over successive periods of time; also called historical linguistics.
- **Langue:** Language considered as an abstract, shared social system of conventions, rules, and structures held collectively by a speech community.
- **Linearity of the signifier:** The principle that the signifier, being auditory, unfolds sequentially in time rather than presenting multiple elements simultaneously.

- **Linguistic sign:** The basic unit of Saussurean linguistics, formed by the union of a signifier and a signified.
- **Onomatopoeia:** Words that appear to imitate the sounds they describe, cited by Saussure as a limited exception to the arbitrariness of the sign.
- **Parole:** Speech; the concrete, individual, and variable acts of language use by particular speakers on particular occasions.
- **Paradigmatic axis:** The set of associative relationships between a linguistic unit and other units that could substitute for it in the same position.
- **Signified:** The concept or mental content evoked by a signifier within a linguistic sign.
- **Signifier:** The form of a linguistic sign; for spoken language, the sound-image or mental impression of a sequence of sounds.
- **Synchronic linguistics:** The study of a language as it exists at a particular point in time, without reference to its historical development.
- **Syntagmatic axis:** The linear, sequential dimension of language along which signs combine into chains such as phrases and sentences.

Concept Check Questions 4

Objective Questions

1. According to Saussure, the linguistic sign is composed of a signifier and a _____.
2. The principle that the bond between signifier and signified is unmotivated is called the _____ of the sign.
3. True or False: *Langue* refers to individual, concrete acts of speech.
4. Fill in the blank: _____ linguistics studies a language at a single point in time, while _____ linguistics studies how it changes over time.
5. Which of the following best describes *parole*: an abstract social system, an individual act of speech, a historical change in grammar, or a type of sign?

Short-Answer Questions

6. Explain the relationship between signifier and signified in Saussure's model of the linguistic sign.
7. Give one example that illustrates the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and explain why it demonstrates arbitrariness.
8. Distinguish between *langue* and *parole*, using Saussure's musical score analogy.
9. What is the difference between synchronic and diachronic linguistics?
10. Explain how *parole* can contribute to change in *langue* over time.

Long-Answer Questions

11. Explain Saussure's model of the linguistic sign, including the concepts of the signifier, the signified, the arbitrariness of the sign, and the linearity of the signifier. Illustrate your answer with examples.
12. Analyse the relationship between the *langue/parole* distinction and the *synchronic/diachronic* distinction, explaining how the two frameworks intersect and why both are necessary for a comprehensive study of language.

Answers to Concept Check Questions 4

13. Signified
14. Arbitrariness
15. False *langue* refers to the abstract, shared social system of language; it is *parole* that refers to individual, concrete acts of speech
16. Synchronic; diachronic
17. An individual act of speech
18. The signifier is the form of the sign (the sound-image), and the signified is the concept it evokes. Together they form an inseparable two-sided unit: the linguistic sign.
19. Example: the same concept “tree” is expressed by entirely different sound-images in different languages (English *tree*, French *arbre*, Arabic *shajarah*). This shows the bond between signifier and signified is conventional, not natural.
20. *Langue* is like a musical score a fixed, shared structure held by the community while *parole* is like an individual performance of that score, realising the shared structure in a unique way.
21. Synchronic linguistics studies a language as it exists at one point in time; diachronic linguistics studies how a language changes across successive periods of time.
22. New words, pronunciations, or grammatical forms often first appear in individual acts of *parole*; if adopted widely enough, they may eventually become part of *langue*.
23. See model responses above.
24. See model responses above.

Pilot Questions 4.1 – Answers

25. The signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept).
26. Arbitrary
27. Example: the same concept is expressed by different sound-images across languages (e.g. *tree*, *arbre*, *shajarah*), showing the connection between sound and meaning is conventional rather than natural.
28. Linearity means the signifier, being auditory, unfolds sequentially in time rather than all at once; it defines the syntagmatic axis of language.
29. False Saussure argued the sign unites a sound-image and a concept, both mental/psychological, not a word and a real-world object.

Pilot Questions 4.2 – Answers

- 30. *Langue* is the abstract, shared system of language held collectively by a speech community; *parole* is the concrete, individual, variable use of language by particular speakers in particular acts of speech.
- 31. Social
- 32. Saussure compared *langue* to a musical score and *parole* to an individual performance of that score.
- 33. Innovations first appear in individual acts of *parole*; if adopted widely enough, they can become established as part of *langue*.
- 34. False *parole* is characterised by variability, while *langue* is relatively stable at any given moment.

Pilot Questions 4.3 – Answers

- 35. Synchronic linguistics studies a language at a single point in time; diachronic linguistics studies how a language changes across successive periods of time.
- 36. Point in time
- 37. Saussure used the analogy of a chess game: a snapshot of the board at one move is synchronic (a complete state in its own right), while the sequence of moves that produced it is diachronic (change over time).
- 38. *Langue/parole* distinguishes the shared system from its individual realisation, while *synchronic/diachronic* distinguishes a single time-state from change across time; *langue* can be studied either synchronically or diachronically, and the accumulated record of *parole* provides evidence for diachronic change.
- 39. True

References and Attributions 4

- **Figure 4.1 The linguistic sign: signifier and signified:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram illustrating Saussure's model of the linguistic sign, showing an oval divided into 'signified' (concept) and 'signifier' (sound-image), connected by a bidirectional arrow labelled 'arbitrary/conventional bond', using the example of the concept of a tree." Search string: "Saussure linguistic sign signifier signified diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on structural linguistics.
- **Figure 4.2 Langue and parole: the relationship between language and speech:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram illustrating Saussure's langue/parole distinction, showing langue as a central abstract system with arrows connecting it to several individual instances of parole." Search string: "Saussure langue parole language speech diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on general linguistics.
- **Figure 4.3 Synchronic and diachronic axes of linguistic study:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram showing the synchronic and diachronic axes of linguistic study as two intersecting lines, using a chessboard as a visual analogy for a synchronic state." Search string: "synchronic diachronic linguistics Saussure chessboard diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on the history of linguistics.
- **Series content references:**
 - Culler, J. (1986). Ferdinand de Saussure (Rev. ed.). Cornell University Press.
 - Harris, R. (2001). Saussure and his interpreters. Edinburgh University Press.
 - Saussure, F. de (1983). Course in general linguistics (R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth. (Original work published 1916)
 - Sturrock, J. (2003). Structuralism (2nd ed.). Blackwell.
 - Versteegh, K. (1997). The Arabic language. Edinburgh University Press.

- **Bloom's taxonomy:** Verbs applied in learning outcomes are based on Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.
- **Institutional referencing style:** All references have been presented in a clear and consistent manner, following APA style for educational materials.

Course code: ARA 303

Course title: Semantics

Course credit load: 2 Units

List of Series:

- **Series 1:** Concept and Development of Semantics
- **Series 2:** Contributions of Arabic Linguists
- **Series 3:** Types and Features of Semantics in Arabic
- **Series 4:** Signifier–Signified Relationship and Language vs. Speech
- **Series 5:** Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series 5: Multiplicity of Meanings and Linguistic Taboo

Series Outline

- **Part 1 (5.1):** Multiplicity of Meaning: Polysemy and Homonymy
 - 5.1.1 Polysemy: multiple related meanings
 - 5.1.2 Homonymy: multiple unrelated meanings
 - 5.1.3 Distinguishing polysemy from homonymy
- **Part 2 (5.2):** Semantic Change and Ambiguity
 - 5.2.1 Types of semantic change
 - 5.2.2 Lexical and structural ambiguity
 - 5.2.3 Vagueness and generality
- **Part 3 (5.3):** Linguistic Taboo and Euphemism
 - 5.3.1 The concept of linguistic taboo
 - 5.3.2 Euphemism and dysphemism
 - 5.3.3 Taboo and euphemism in Arabic

Introduction

Words rarely carry a single, fixed meaning. A single word may carry several related senses, two entirely unrelated words may happen to share the same form, and the meanings of words shift, narrow, broaden, and sometimes reverse over time. At the same time, certain words and topics become socially restricted avoided, softened, or replaced because they touch on matters a community considers sensitive, sacred, or shameful. These two phenomena, the multiplicity of meaning and linguistic taboo, together reveal just how dynamic, layered, and socially embedded the semantic life of a language really is.

This Series brings together two strands of semantic inquiry that complete your foundation in this course. The first strand examines how a single word can carry more than one meaning through polysemy, homonymy, semantic change, and ambiguity and how these phenomena can be identified and analysed. The second strand examines linguistic taboo: the social and cultural forces that lead communities to avoid certain words or topics, and the linguistic strategies chiefly euphemism that speakers use to navigate these restrictions.

We shall commence by examining the multiplicity of meaning, distinguishing polysemy from homonymy and considering the tests linguists use to tell them apart. Next, we will explore semantic change and ambiguity, considering how word meanings shift over time and how ambiguity and vagueness arise in language. Finally, we will examine linguistic taboo, exploring the concept itself, the mechanisms of euphemism and dysphemism, and how these phenomena operate specifically within the Arabic language.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 5.1** distinguish between polysemy and homonymy and apply tests for identifying each,
- **SLO 5.2** describe the major types of semantic change that affect word meaning over time,
- **SLO 5.3** analyse lexical and structural ambiguity, and distinguish ambiguity from vagueness,
- **SLO 5.4** explain the concept of linguistic taboo and identify the domains in which it typically arises,
- **SLO 5.5** distinguish euphemism from dysphemism and evaluate their social functions, and
- **SLO 5.6** analyse patterns of linguistic taboo and euphemism as they operate in Arabic.

5.1 Multiplicity Of Meaning: Polysemy And Homonymy

5.1.1 Polysemy: multiple related meanings

Polysemy refers to a situation in which a single word has **multiple, related meanings** that stem from a common origin. The English word *head*, for example, can refer to the part of the body, the top of an organisation (*the head of department*), the top of a page, or the source of a river (*the head of the Nile*) all senses connected by an underlying idea of a topmost or leading position. In Arabic, the root ‘-y-n (ع-ي-ن) gives rise to the polysemous word ‘**ayn** (عين), which can mean an eye, a spring or water source, and the essence or self of something meanings that are related through the shared image of a visible, central point of origin. Polysemy demonstrates that word meanings are not isolated units but **networks of related senses** that extend outward from a core meaning through processes such as metaphor and metonymy.

Fill-in-the-blank: Polysemy occurs when a single word has multiple, _____ meanings that stem from a common origin.

5.1.2 Homonymy: multiple unrelated meanings

Homonymy refers to a situation in which **two or more words** happen to share the same form the same spelling, the same pronunciation, or both but have **entirely unrelated meanings** and, typically, entirely different historical origins. The English word *bank*, meaning the side of a river, and *bank*, meaning a financial institution, are homonyms: they sound and are spelled identically, but their meanings share no historical or conceptual connection. Linguists further distinguish **homophones** (words that sound alike but are spelled differently, such as *write* and *right*) from **homographs** (words that are spelled alike but may be pronounced differently, such as *lead* the metal and *lead* meaning to guide). Because homonymy arises from historical coincidence rather than semantic extension, homonymous meanings are typically listed as **separate dictionary entries**, whereas polysemous meanings are typically listed as **numbered senses within a single entry**.

Fill-in-the-blank: Homonymy occurs when two or more words share the same form but have _____ meanings, typically arising from historical coincidence.

5.1.3 Distinguishing polysemy from homonymy

Because both polysemy and homonymy involve a single form associated with more than one meaning, distinguishing them can be challenging in practice. Linguists rely on several tests. The **historical or etymological test** asks whether the different meanings can be traced back to a common historical origin if so, the case is polysemy; if the meanings arose from separate, unrelated origins that happen to have converged in form, the case is homonymy. The **relatedness test** asks whether native speakers intuitively perceive the meanings as connected related senses (as with *head*) suggest polysemy, while unrelated senses (as with *bank*) suggest homonymy. A further complication is that **dictionaries** do not always agree, since judgements of historical relatedness can be difficult to make with certainty, and meanings that were once related can drift

so far apart that they come to feel, synchronically, like separate words. This shows that the boundary between polysemy and homonymy is not always sharp, but exists along a **continuum** of semantic relatedness.

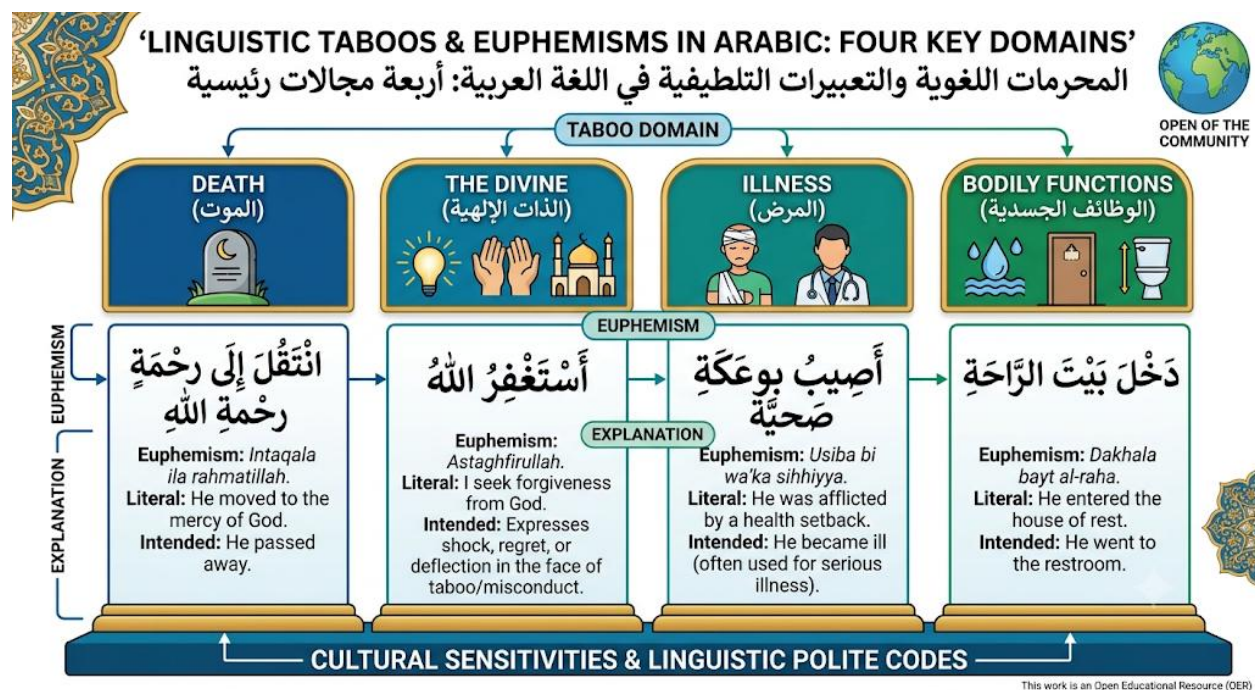


Figure 5.1 Polysemy versus homonymy

Description: A diagram contrasting polysemy (one word, multiple related senses radiating from a central core meaning, e.g. 'head') with homonymy (two separate words that happen to share the same form but have unrelated meanings, e.g. 'bank').

Pilot questions 5.1

1. Define polysemy and give one example.
2. Fill in the blank: Homonymy occurs when two or more words share the same form but have _____ meanings.
3. What is the difference between a homophone and a homograph?
4. Name two tests linguists use to distinguish polysemy from homonymy.

5. True or False: The boundary between polysemy and homonymy is always sharp and easy to determine.

5.2 Semantic Change And Ambiguity

5.2.1 Types of semantic change

Word meanings are rarely static; they shift gradually across generations of use. Linguists identify several recurring patterns of **semantic change**. **Widening** (or **broadening**) occurs when a word's meaning expands to cover a larger range of referents than it originally had the English word *dog* once referred to a specific breed but now covers all domestic canines. **Narrowing** occurs when a word's meaning becomes more restricted the English word *meat* once meant food in general but narrowed to mean specifically animal flesh. **Amelioration** occurs when a word's meaning becomes more positive over time, while **pejoration** (or **degeneration**) occurs when it becomes more negative the English word *knight* underwent amelioration from meaning simply 'boy' or 'servant' to denoting a noble rank, while *silly* underwent pejoration from meaning 'blessed' or 'innocent' to meaning 'foolish'. These patterns show that semantic change, far from being random, tends to follow identifiable directions shaped by social attitudes and usage.

Fill-in-the-blank: _____ occurs when a word's meaning becomes more negative over time, while amelioration occurs when it becomes more positive.

5.2.2 Lexical and structural ambiguity

Ambiguity occurs when a linguistic expression can be interpreted in more than one distinct way. **Lexical ambiguity** arises from a single word having more than one possible meaning in a given context for example, the sentence '*I went to the bank*' is ambiguous because *bank* could refer to a financial institution or a riverside. **Structural** (or **syntactic**) **ambiguity** arises not from individual word meanings but from the way a sentence's grammatical structure can be parsed in more than one way for example, '*visiting relatives can be tiring*' can be understood as either 'relatives who visit can be tiring' or 'the act of visiting relatives can be tiring', depending on how

the sentence is structurally analysed. Distinguishing these two types of ambiguity is important for understanding where in the linguistic system an ambiguity originates, and both types are of considerable interest in fields such as translation, law, and natural language processing, where a single unintended interpretation can have significant consequences.

Fill-in-the-blank: _____ ambiguity arises from a word having more than one meaning, while structural ambiguity arises from a sentence's grammar allowing more than one parsing.

5.2.3 Vagueness and generality

Vagueness is often confused with ambiguity but is a distinct phenomenon. A vague expression does not have multiple discrete meanings; rather, it has **unclear or fuzzy boundaries** of application. The word *tall*, for instance, is vague because there is no precise height at which a person definitely becomes 'tall' rather than 'not tall' the boundary is a matter of degree rather than a choice between distinct senses. **Generality** is a related concept describing words whose meaning is broad and unspecified with respect to some dimension for example, *parent* is general with respect to gender, since it applies equally to mothers and fathers without specifying which. Unlike ambiguity, which can typically be resolved by identifying which of a finite set of discrete meanings is intended, vagueness and generality cannot be resolved this way, since they do not involve a choice between distinct senses but rather a lack of precision or specification along a continuous or unspecified dimension.

THREE TYPES OF SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY

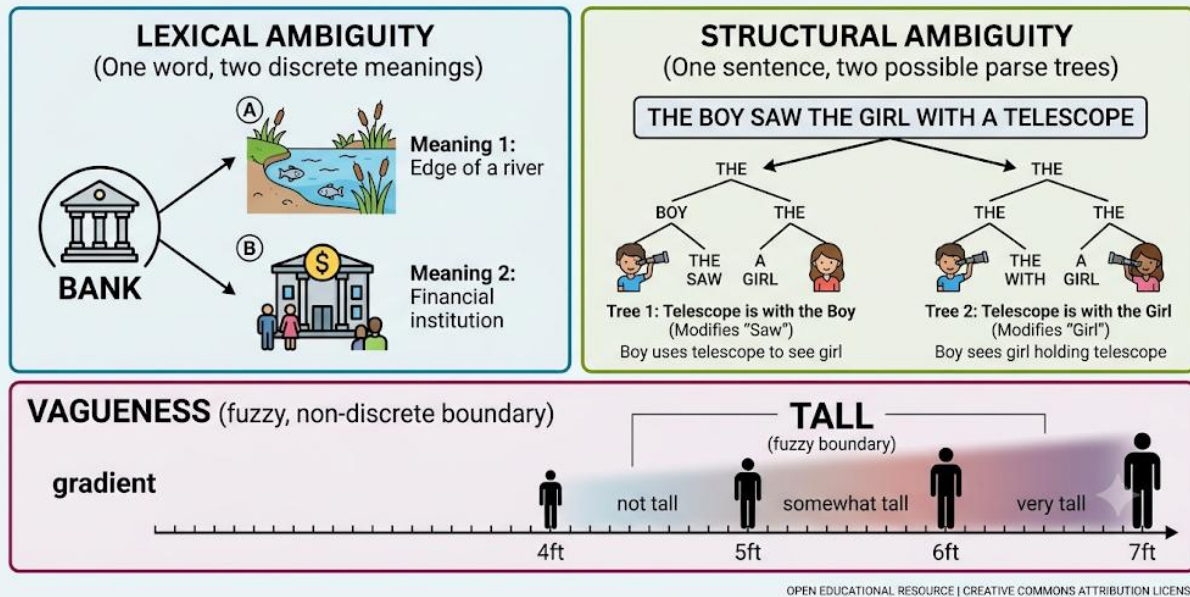


Figure 5.2 Ambiguity versus vagueness

Description: A diagram contrasting lexical ambiguity (a word with two distinct, discrete meanings, e.g. 'bank'), structural ambiguity (a sentence with two possible grammatical parsings), and vagueness (a word with fuzzy, non-discrete boundaries, e.g. 'tall').

Pilot questions 5.2

- Define widening and narrowing as types of semantic change, with one example each.
- Fill in the blank: Amelioration occurs when a word's meaning becomes more _____ over time.
- Distinguish between lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity, with an example of each.
- What is vagueness, and how does it differ from ambiguity?
- True or False: Vagueness can be resolved by selecting between a finite set of distinct meanings, just as ambiguity can.

5.3 Linguistic Taboo And Euphemism

5.3.1 The concept of linguistic taboo

Linguistic taboo refers to words or topics that a speech community avoids, restricts, or treats with special caution because they are considered offensive, embarrassing, sacred, dangerous, or otherwise socially sensitive. Taboo is not a property of language itself but a **social and cultural phenomenon** the same referent may be freely discussed in one community and strictly avoided in another, and what counts as taboo shifts across time and context. Common domains of linguistic taboo across cultures include **death, bodily functions, sex, disease, certain animals, and the sacred or divine** the last of these often protected not because it is shameful but because it is considered too powerful or holy for casual use. Because taboo attaches to the **concept** being referred to rather than to any particular word, speakers develop alternative ways of referring to taboo topics without directly naming them.

Fill-in-the-blank: Linguistic taboo is fundamentally a _____ and cultural phenomenon, not an inherent property of language itself.

5.3.2 Euphemism and dysphemism

Euphemism is the substitution of a mild, indirect, or inoffensive expression for one considered harsh, blunt, or unpleasant. English examples include '*pass away*' for *die*, or '*let go*' for *fired*. Euphemisms typically work through strategies such as **metaphor** ('*kick the bucket*'), **abstraction** ('*collateral damage*'), **circumlocution** (using more words to avoid a direct term), or **borrowing** a foreign or technical term that carries less emotional weight. The opposite process, **dysphemism**, involves substituting a harsher, more blunt, or deliberately offensive expression for a neutral one often used for emphasis, humour, or insult, as when '*die*' is replaced with '*croak*' or '*kick it*'. Both euphemism and dysphemism reveal that the choice of words for a given concept is rarely neutral: it always carries social, emotional, and evaluative weight.

Fill-in-the-blank: _____ is the substitution of a harsher or more blunt expression for a neutral one, the opposite process to euphemism.

5.3.3 Taboo and euphemism in Arabic

Linguistic taboo and euphemism operate extensively in Arabic, shaped by religious, cultural, and social norms. In matters concerning **death**, Arabic speakers commonly use euphemistic expressions such as **intaqala ila rahmat Allah** (انتقل إلى رحمة الله 'he moved to God's mercy') rather than direct terms for dying. In matters concerning **the divine**, certain expressions of humility and deference such as always following a statement of intention with **in shaa' Allah** (إن شاء الله 'God willing') reflect a linguistic norm of avoiding overly direct or presumptuous claims about the future. Topics such as **illness**, **bodily functions**, and **certain animals** (such as the pig, considered ritually impure in Islamic tradition) are also commonly approached through indirect or euphemistic language across Arabic-speaking communities. Classical Arabic rhetoric itself recognised this phenomenon, treating euphemistic and indirect expression as a mark of eloquence within the broader tradition of **balagha**, where saying a difficult truth gently was often considered more skilful than stating it bluntly.

POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY: A SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIP DIAGRAM

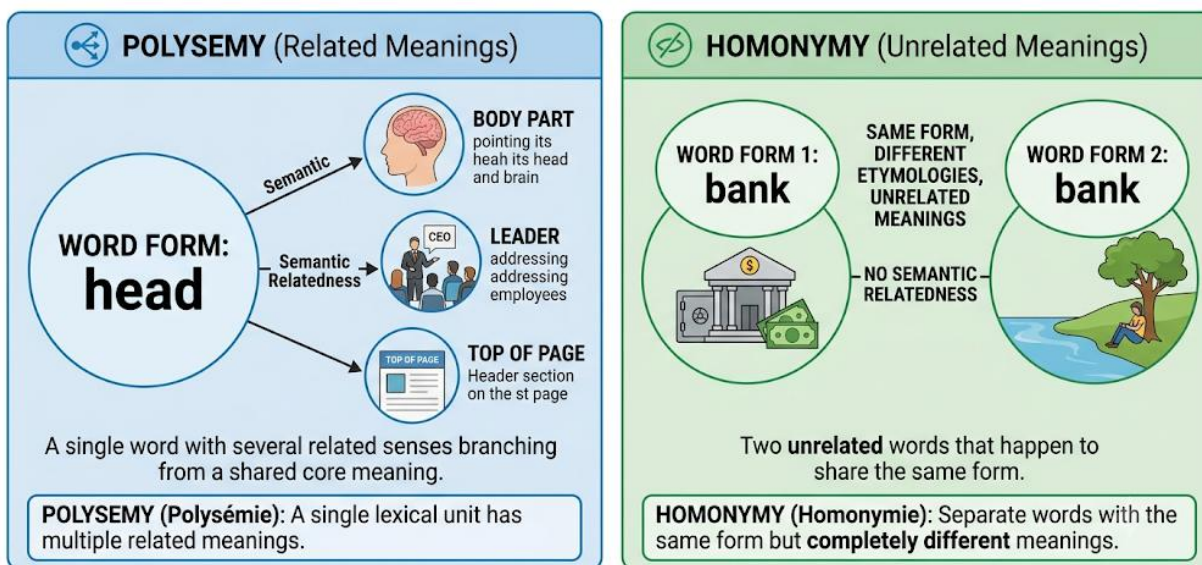


Figure 5.3 Domains of linguistic taboo and corresponding euphemistic strategies in Arabic

Description: A diagram showing common domains of linguistic taboo in Arabic-speaking communities death, the divine, illness, and bodily functions each paired with an example euphemistic expression used to address that domain indirectly.

Pilot questions 5.3

11. What is linguistic taboo, and why is it described as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than a property of language itself?
12. Fill in the blank: _____ is the substitution of a mild or indirect expression for one considered harsh or unpleasant.
13. Name two common domains of linguistic taboo found across cultures.
14. Give one example of a euphemistic expression used in Arabic in relation to death or the divine.
15. True or False: Dysphemism involves replacing a neutral expression with a harsher or more blunt one, often for emphasis or insult.

Series Summary

This Series has examined the multiplicity of meaning in language and the phenomenon of linguistic taboo. We began by distinguishing polysemy a single word with multiple related meanings from homonymy, where unrelated words happen to share the same form, and considered the historical and relatedness tests used to distinguish them along what is, in practice, a continuum. We then examined semantic change, including widening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration, before distinguishing lexical and structural ambiguity from the related but distinct phenomenon of vagueness. Finally, we explored linguistic taboo as a social and cultural phenomenon, examining the mechanisms of euphemism and dysphemism and considering how taboo and euphemistic expression operate specifically within Arabic, particularly in relation to death, the divine, illness, and bodily functions.

By engaging with these topics, you should now be able to distinguish polysemy from homonymy, describe types of semantic change, analyse lexical and structural ambiguity and distinguish it from vagueness, explain the concept of linguistic taboo, distinguish euphemism from dysphemism, and analyse patterns of taboo and euphemism in Arabic. Together with the previous four Series, this equips you with a comprehensive foundation in the concepts, historical development, Arabic-specific features, structural distinctions, and social dimensions of semantics.

Glossary of Terms

- **Amelioration:** A type of semantic change in which a word's meaning becomes more positive over time.
- **Ambiguity:** A property of a linguistic expression that allows more than one distinct interpretation, arising from either lexical or structural sources.
- **Dysphemism:** The substitution of a harsher, blunter, or deliberately offensive expression for a neutral one, often for emphasis, humour, or insult.

- **Euphemism:** The substitution of a mild, indirect, or inoffensive expression for one considered harsh, blunt, or unpleasant.
- **Generality:** A property of a word whose meaning is broad and unspecified with respect to some dimension, such as gender or number.
- **Homograph:** A word that is spelled the same as another but may be pronounced differently and has an unrelated meaning.
- **Homonymy:** The relationship between two or more words that share the same form but have unrelated meanings, typically arising from historical coincidence.
- **Homophone:** A word that sounds the same as another but is spelled differently and has an unrelated meaning.
- **Lexical ambiguity:** Ambiguity arising from a single word having more than one possible meaning in a given context.
- **Linguistic taboo:** Words or topics that a speech community avoids, restricts, or treats with caution because they are considered offensive, sacred, or otherwise sensitive.
- **Narrowing:** A type of semantic change in which a word's meaning becomes more restricted over time.
- **Pejoration:** A type of semantic change in which a word's meaning becomes more negative over time; also called degeneration.
- **Polysemy:** A relationship in which a single word has multiple, related meanings stemming from a common origin.
- **Semantic change:** The process by which the meaning of a word shifts over time, including widening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration.
- **Structural ambiguity:** Ambiguity arising from a sentence's grammatical structure allowing more than one interpretation; also called syntactic ambiguity.
- **Vagueness:** A property of a linguistic expression whose boundaries of application are unclear or fuzzy, as opposed to allowing a choice between discrete meanings.
- **Widening:** A type of semantic change in which a word's meaning expands to cover a broader range of referents; also called broadening.

Here's the **refixing of numbering** for your entire **Concept Check Questions 5** and **Pilot Questions 5** list so everything flows sequentially without breaks:

Concept Check Questions 5

Objective Questions

1. A single word with multiple related meanings stemming from a common origin is an example of _____.
2. Which of the following best describes homonymy: one word with related senses, two unrelated words sharing the same form, a type of semantic change, or a type of taboo?
3. True or False: Vagueness can be resolved by choosing between a finite set of discrete meanings.
4. Fill in the blank: _____ is the substitution of a mild or indirect expression for one considered harsh or unpleasant.
5. Name one common domain of linguistic taboo found across cultures.

Short-Answer Questions

6. Distinguish polysemy from homonymy and explain one test used to tell them apart.
7. Define widening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration, giving one example of any two.
8. Explain the difference between lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity, with an example of each.
9. What is linguistic taboo, and why is it considered a social rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon?
10. Distinguish euphemism from dysphemism and give one example of each from Arabic or English.

Long-Answer Questions

11. Analyse the multiplicity of meaning in language by comparing polysemy, homonymy, ambiguity, and vagueness.

12. Evaluate the role of linguistic taboo and euphemism in Arabic, explaining the domains in which taboo commonly arises and the strategies speakers use to navigate them.

Answers to Concept Check Questions 5

13. Polysemy
14. Two unrelated words sharing the same form
15. False vagueness involves unclear, non-discrete boundaries and cannot be resolved by choosing among a finite set of distinct meanings, unlike ambiguity
16. Euphemism
17. Any one of: death, bodily functions, sex, disease, certain animals, the sacred/divine
18. Polysemy involves a single word with multiple related meanings from a common origin (e.g. *head* as body part and as leader); homonymy involves two or more words that share a form by coincidence but have unrelated meanings (e.g. *bank* as riverside and financial institution). One test is the historical/etymological test.
19. Widening: meaning expands (e.g. *dog* once a specific breed, now all canines).
Narrowing: meaning becomes restricted (e.g. *meat* once food in general, now specifically animal flesh). Amelioration: meaning becomes more positive (e.g. *knight*). Pejoration: meaning becomes more negative (e.g. *silly*).
20. Lexical ambiguity: one word with multiple meanings (e.g. *bank*). Structural ambiguity: grammar allows multiple interpretations (e.g. *visiting relatives can be tiring*).
21. Linguistic taboo refers to words/topics avoided because they are offensive, sacred, or sensitive. It is social because taboo depends on community values, not inherent linguistic properties.
22. Euphemism substitutes a mild expression (e.g. *pass away*); dysphemism substitutes a harsher one (e.g. *croak*).
23. See model responses above.
24. See model responses above.

Pilot Questions 5.1 – Answers

25. Polysemy is a relationship in which a single word has multiple related meanings stemming from a common origin. Example: *head* (body part, leader, source of river).
26. Unrelated
27. A homophone sounds the same as another word but is spelled differently (e.g. *write/right*); a homograph is spelled the same but may differ in pronunciation (e.g. *lead* metal / *lead* to guide).
28. The historical/etymological test and the relatedness test.
29. False the boundary between polysemy and homonymy is not always sharp; it exists along a continuum.

Pilot Questions 5.2 – Answers

30. Widening: meaning expands (e.g. *dog*). Narrowing: meaning becomes restricted (e.g. *meat*).
31. Positive
32. Lexical ambiguity: one word with multiple meanings (e.g. *bank*). Structural ambiguity: grammar allows multiple interpretations (e.g. *visiting relatives can be tiring*).
33. Vagueness: lack of clear boundaries (e.g. *tall*). Ambiguity: discrete alternative meanings.
34. False vagueness cannot be resolved this way.

Pilot Questions 5.3 – Answers

35. Linguistic taboo refers to words/topics avoided as offensive, sacred, or sensitive; it is social and cultural.
36. Euphemism
37. Any one of: death, bodily functions, sex, disease, certain animals, the sacred/divine
38. Example: *intaqala ila rahmat Allah* (“he moved to God’s mercy”) instead of a direct term for dying; or *in shaa’ Allah* (“God willing”) to avoid presumptuous claims.
39. True

References and Attributions 5

- **Figure 5.1 Polysemy versus homonymy:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram contrasting polysemy and homonymy, showing a single word with several related senses branching from a shared core meaning versus two unrelated words that happen to share the same form." Search string: "polysemy homonymy semantic relatedness diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on lexical semantics.
- **Figure 5.2 Ambiguity versus vagueness:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram contrasting lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, and vagueness, using clear examples for each." Search string: "lexical ambiguity structural ambiguity vagueness semantics diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on semantic theory.
- **Figure 5.3 Domains of linguistic taboo and corresponding euphemistic strategies in Arabic:** Suggested AI prompt: "Create a diagram showing domains of linguistic taboo relevant to Arabic-speaking communities, paired with example Arabic euphemistic expressions." Search string: "linguistic taboo euphemism Arabic examples diagram OER" Attribution: Adapted from Open Educational Resources on sociolinguistics and Arabic pragmatics.
- **Series content references:**
 - Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language. Cambridge University Press.
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- **Bloom's taxonomy:** Verbs applied in learning outcomes are based on Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. New York: Longman.
- **Institutional referencing style:** All references have been presented in a clear and consistent manner, following APA style for educational materials.