



The Development Of The Concept Of The Linguistic Sign Among Arabs And The West: A Comparative Semantic Study

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Abstract:

This research deals with the concept of "linguistic sign" in linguistic studies among Arabs and the West, both historically and in the present, from different perspectives within a specific historical context. Language is a system of meaningful signs that encompasses a wide range of concepts. It is a linguistic field that includes all concepts derived from reality. There is a correlation between the auditory image (signifier) associated with this image (signified). Therefore, a discussion of semantics requires a discussion of the linguistic sign. Since the beginning of existence, signs have existed due to man's interaction with nature and his attempt to interpret its meaning in order to change and control phenomena, thus achieving social conditions as a human characteristic. This tendency can only be realised in the presence of a terminological system of meaningful signs, among which is the "linguistic sign". What is the linguistic sign? What are its characteristics and types? How have Arab and Western scholars approached it historically and contemporarily?

Keywords: Linguistic sign, signifier and signified, linguistic sign among Arabs, linguistic sign in the West.

Introduction:

Natural language is, at its core, the connection between sounds and meanings achieved in the communicative context between members of a linguistic community. This makes language a system of meaningful signs covering a wide range of concepts. It is therefore a linguistic field that encompasses all the concepts derived from reality, achieving the correlation between the auditory image (signifier) and the associated image (signified). Thus, a discussion of semantics requires a discussion of signs. Signs have existed since the beginning of existence itself, given the connection between human beings and nature and their interaction with it, in order to interpret and control phenomena by interpreting their meaning in order to achieve social conditions as a human characteristic. This tendency can only be realised in the presence of a terminological system of meaningful signs, including the "linguistic sign".

It is worth asking: What is the concept of the linguistic sign? What are its characteristics and types? How have Arab and Western scholars approached it historically and contemporarily?

In order to answer these questions, I have divided this study into two sections:

Section One: In this section, I present the conceptual framework of the linguistic sign.

Section Two: In this section, I discuss the development of the concept of the linguistic sign among Arab and Western scholars, both historically and contemporarily.

First: The concept of the linguistic sign

1/ Linguistic concept:

In order for human beings to communicate and exchange information clearly and directly, the presence of an excellent communication system is necessary. There are different ways of transmitting information and therefore there is a need for signals or signs that facilitate the communication process, such as linguistic signs.

Through our research, we observe variations in the concept of the linguistic sign in both ancient and modern Arabic dictionaries, in terms of its diversity and different methods of arrangement. Each linguist defines it according to his own understanding.

In "Lisan al-Arab" by Ibn Manzur, it is mentioned: "The sign and the knowledge are different, and the sign and the knowledge are something that is placed on the roads to guide the lost"¹.

In "Al-Qamus al-Muhit" it is stated: "(The sign) is a mark similar to the knowledge with a dammah (a diacritical mark), and its plural is 'a'lam. It distinguishes between the two paths and is placed on the road to provide guidance, similar to (the flag) in them"².

In "Mujam al-Wasit" it is defined as: "Al-'alamah (the sign) is what is placed on the road to provide guidance. Its plural is 'ala'mun. In medicine, it refers to the signs revealed by the examining physician"³.

In the Noble Qur'an it is mentioned: "And indeed, it is the knowledge of the Hour" (Surah Az-Zukhruf, 43:61), indicating that the appearance of Jesus 'alaihi-salâm' and his descent to earth is a sign of the approaching Hour.

From this, we can deduce the following:

In Arabic dictionaries, the term "al-'alamah" revolves around three main meanings: characteristic, indication and sign.

The sign has different meanings that can be determined from its contexts.

2/ Conceptual definition:

¹- Ibn Manzur, the language of the Arabs, edited by Abdullah Ali Al-Kabeer et al, Dar Al-Ma'arif, Corniche El Nil, Cairo, vol. 1, 1st edition, 119, p. 3084.

²- Majd al-Din Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Fayruzabadi, the comprehensive dictionary, revised by Anas Muhammad al-Shami et al, Dar al-Hadith, Cairo, Harf al-'Ain, 1429 AH - 2008 CE, p. 1136.

³- Ibrahim Mustafa et al, The Intermediate Dictionary, Arabic Language Academy, General Administration of Lexicons and Heritage Revival, Parts 1 and 2, 2nd edition, 1972, p. 675.

In linguistic terminology, a sign is an uttered or written indication that conveys the intention of the speaker regarding the relationship between the meanings of words as desired. These signs serve to indicate to the listener or reader the relationships intended by the speaker¹.

De Saussure defined the linguistic sign as "a two-sided entity, one side being the signifier and the other the signified; the signifier is the material side of the sign; when one feels one's vocal cords vibrating, it becomes clear that sounds are being produced (which are undoubtedly material)"².

From this we can deduce that a sign is something that stands for and represents something else, generally taking on the meaning of indication, symbol or mark, serving as a means of identifying something based on the diversity of contexts and the branching of sciences.

Second: Characteristics and types of linguistic signs.

1/ Characteristics of the linguistic sign:

The linguistic sign has inherent characteristics that distinguish it from other signs. Some of these characteristics are:

A. Arbitrariness (Arbitraire): This means that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. In other words, there is no inherent or natural relationship between the linguistic symbols (the phonemes that make up the sign) and their meanings in the external world. For example, there is no natural relationship between the word "tree" and the components of an actual tree, such as the trunk, the leaves, or the colour green. The relationship is socially constructed within a community based on convention³.

The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is therefore an unquestioned principle. No two individuals would differ in acknowledging the arbitrariness of signs. But it is easier to discover the truth than to place it in its proper context. The first principle (arbitrariness) dominates the study of linguistics and has myriad implications. These implications may not be immediately apparent because they require exploration and effort. Only then can one grasp the fundamental importance of this principle⁴. Thus the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign lies in the conventional relationship between the linguistic sign and what it signifies. It depends on social convention rather than on a natural relationship. Arbitrariness is a fundamental property of language, similar to iconicity.

¹- Mohammed Awad Saleh al-Masoud, "The linguistic sign and its role in morphological analysis: A Morphological Study in the Light of Modern Semiotics", Islamic University of Sciences and Technology, Amman, Jordan, Journal of the College of Islamic Studies, No. 36, p. 1446.

²- Paul Collie et al, Semiotics, translated by Jamal Al-Jaziri, reviewed and supervised by Abdel Fattah Imam, No. 549, Supreme Council of Culture, Opera Square, Cairo, 1st edition, 2005, p. 16.

³- Khudrah Shtouh, Lectures on General Linguistics for Second Year Masters Students, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Muhammad Boudiaf University, M'sila, p. 43.

⁴- Ferdinand de Saussure, General Linguistics, translated by Yunil Yousif Aziz, Dar Afak Arabiya, Baghdad, 3rd edition, 1985, p. 87.

B. Linearity: Linearity has three characteristics that distinguish linguistic signs from other signs:

- **Temporality:** According to Gallison and Cost in their dictionaries, since the signifier is an auditory image, it unfolds in time and can be represented as an extension in one direction, resembling a line¹.

- **Succession:** The signifier presents itself sequentially, not as a whole. The difference between succession and totality is a fundamental distinction between two different types of sign. The linguistic sign can only be pronounced in the form of letters that follow one another in a phonetic sequence. Visual signs, on the other hand, are of a different nature.

- **System:** The signifier is a system of sounds (phonemes) that represent the material face of the sign. The linguistic community has agreed on its manifestation in a specific form. Therefore, individuals cannot manipulate the sounds of the sign by changing their order or timing, as this would inevitably disrupt the system of its manifestation².

C. The permanence and change of the sign: Describing the sign as both permanent and changeable may seem contradictory, but by juxtaposing these opposites, Saussure wanted to emphasise that language undergoes change despite the speakers' inability to change it². Signs tend to be more permanent because of forces that resist linguistic change and arbitrariness. These forces include a large vocabulary, a complex linguistic structure and the inertia that characterises language, as well as the fact that language is everyone's property³.

Linguistic value: According to Saussure, value can only be a system of abstract values, and the value of a word lies in its ability to represent a specific idea. Saussure introduced the idea of value from an economic point of view⁴.

D. Linguistic value: According to Desaussure, linguistic value can only exist as a system of abstract values, and the value of a word lies in its ability to represent a specific idea. Desaussure introduced the concept of value from an economic point of view⁵.

2/ Types of linguistic signs:

Scientists have been interested in classifying, distinguishing and explaining signs in order to understand their broader nature. They have divided the types of signs into two main categories:⁶

Types of signs based on the nature of the signifier:

¹- Mundhir Ayyash, *Semiotics: A Reading in Arabic Linguistic Sign*, Alam Al-Kitab Al-Hadith, Irbid, Jordan, 1st edition, 2012, p. 22.

²- The same reference, p. 22.

³- Khudrah Shtouh, *Lectures on General Linguistics*, p. 44.

⁴- Nawal Mandil, *Lectures on General Linguistics for Second Year Bachelor Students*, Literary Studies, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Constantine University, Academic Year: 2019/2020, p. 41.

⁵- Khoula Talib Al-Ibrahimi, *Principles of General Linguistics*, 2nd edition, Dar Al-Qasba for Publishing, Algeria, 2006, p. 22.

⁶- The same reference, p. 76.

A. Verbal signs: These signs are embodied in human speech sounds that enable communication between people. Verbal signs are the primary type of sign in the field of semiotics.

*What distinguishes this type of sign is that it has two main characteristics:

- Its ability to be translated into all other systems without exception, while the reverse is not true.
- Its susceptibility to study and precise analysis in phonetic units¹.

*Non-verbal signs:

These are signs that do not rely on human speech sounds in a specific way, but instead use coding systems based on the human body or natural objects. These systems include:

- Body movements and postures, and facial expressions in general.
- Indications of proximity or distance in space, such as "here" and "there".
- Man-made objects that carry meaning and symbolism, such as clothing, jewellery, music, and various forms of symbolic art².

B. In terms of the relationship between signifier and signified, non-verbal signs can be categorised as either situational, mental or natural³.

***Situational signs:**

These are conventional signs agreed upon in a social context or among members of a community. This category includes all verbal signs. For example, a girl may be called a 'gazelle' to indicate her agility, while a man may be called a 'camel' to symbolise his patience and endurance. These signs are in the realm of figurative language⁴.

***Natural signs:**

These are signs that arise from natural events, whether they are related to the natural sound or the physical carrier of the sign. All signs that reflect the sounds of nature, such as the sound of running water or the rustling of trees, are considered part of this category. Also included are the sounds that accompany emotions and physiological expressions, such as facial expressions⁵.

***Mental signs:**

This refers to the concept of signifying the effect on those affected, such as smoke signifying fire or clouds signifying rain. Mental signs are limited to the relationship of inference or causality. In the Arabic heritage, this type of sign is primarily based on causal relationships, where the mind finds an inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. It is not easy to

¹- Same reference, same page.

²- Belqasim Dakka, Semiotics in Arab Heritage, p. 76.

³- Same reference, same page.

⁴- The same reference, p. 77.

⁵- Belqasim Dakka, Semiotics in Arab Heritage, p. 76.

subject linguistic signs to a binary relationship between signifier and signified¹, as they are dynamic and characterised by movement and acquire their meaning from the social context.

Second topic: Linguistic signs according to Arab and Western scholars

First topic: The linguistic sign according to Arab scholars

The linguistic sign according to Al-Ghazali: Al-Ghazali gave a precise and comprehensive description of the linguistic sign in his book "Criterion of Knowledge in Logic". He said: "An object exists in reality, then in the mind, then in words, then in writing. Writing signifies speech, and speech signifies the meaning that exists in the mind, which is an example of what exists in reality... Existence in reality and in the mind does not differ between countries and nations, unlike words and writing, because they are relative and conventional signs"².

In his description, Al-Ghazali was referring to the signifier, the signified and linguistic evidence. This is the basis of Western theories. He pointed to the linguistic sign, which exists in the languages of nations and is agreed upon by the scholars of each language. The objects themselves exist in all minds and in all nations, but the signs used to express them vary from one language to another³.

The semantic nature of the sign is limited to three aspects: correspondence, implication and obligation.

Al-Ghazali considered the verbal aspect of the sign from the perspective of placement, stating that "the word is such that when it is uttered or imagined, its meaning is understood through its placement. It is divided into correspondence, implication and commitment, which are accompanied by commitment in the mind. For example, a human being signifies a complete speaking animal by correspondence, a part of it by implication, and the capacity for knowledge by commitment"⁴.

According to Abdul Rahman Al-Haj Saleh, the linguistic sign consists of a form and a substance that refers to the word and its meaning. The meaning is the essence of language, while the word is the primary source from which man derives the measure of language. The linguistic sign does not associate anything with a name, but it associates a concept with an auditory form, not the audible sound itself, but the psychological effect that the sound has on us. In other words, it is the perception that our senses give us of the sound⁵.

The linguistic sign or symbol is therefore composed of two elements.

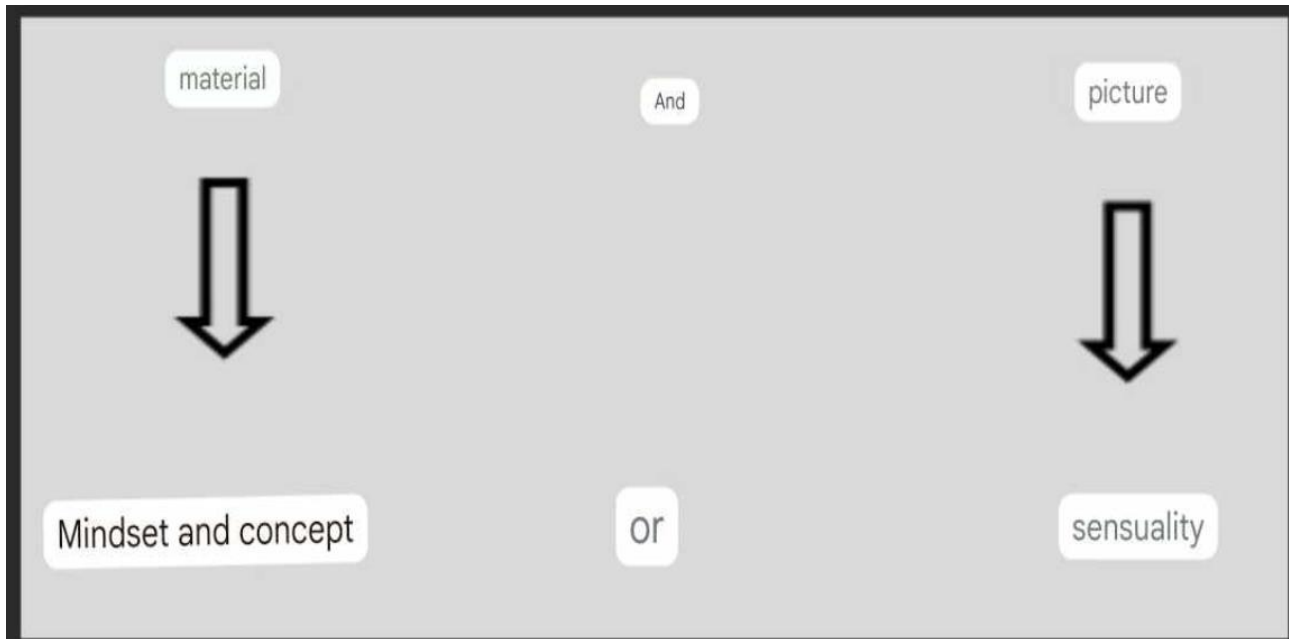
¹- Imam Abu Ahmad Al-Ghazali, *Maqasid al-'Ilm fi al-Mantiq*, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 47-48.

²- Mohammed Awad Saleh Al-Saud, same reference, p. 1473.

³- Samira Ben Malik, *The Concept of the Linguistic Sign and Its Modern Applications in the Arab Maghreb*, p. 23.

⁴- The same reference, p. 24.

⁵- The same reference, p. 26.



As for its appearance, it is the meaning people have conventionally associated with it. Linguistic signs (verbal signs) are humble in this regard. They only indicate their meanings through the conventions adopted by users, in accordance with the mental and natural laws governing the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In every language, there is an arbitrary relationship, and this characteristic is not limited to that relationship alone. It also extends to the partial norms governing all linguistic units. Thus, it is in itself a system of modest evidence¹. According to Abdelrahman Haj Saleh, the linguistic sign is a state of placement and usage before it becomes a word and meaning.

Thirdly: The Linguistic Sign in Western Scholars' Perspectives

The Linguistic Sign According to Peirce:

Peirce's approaches or theories are characterized by comprehensiveness. According to him, the sign reveals the "Object" from the field of linguistics, referring to the subject matter. In Peirce's framework, the sign corresponds to the "Representamen," constituting a triadic relationship composed of the image without an object, which corresponds to the signified, and the interpreter counterpart according to Peirce².

Peirce sees the linguistic sign as "something that stands for something, for someone, in some respect or capacity". It is therefore composed of three basic elements:

- The perceptible level of speech, which falls within the domain of expression.
- The implicit level of language, which includes the realm of meaning.

¹- Adel Fakhoury, *Semiotics in Arab Heritage, Comparative Study with Modern Semiotics*, Lebanon - Beirut, 2nd edition, 1994, p. 15.

²- Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*, Paris, PUF, 1988, p. 40.

- The referent to which the speech alludes, which exists in reality and belongs to the realm of reference¹.

Thus, Peirce's definition of the sign can be summarised in his statement: "The sign is what mediates between the first and the second, and its object is a triadic relation which is authentic in that it carries with it a third element called the interpretant of the sign. The interpretant itself achieves the same triadic sign that it achieves with the same object"².

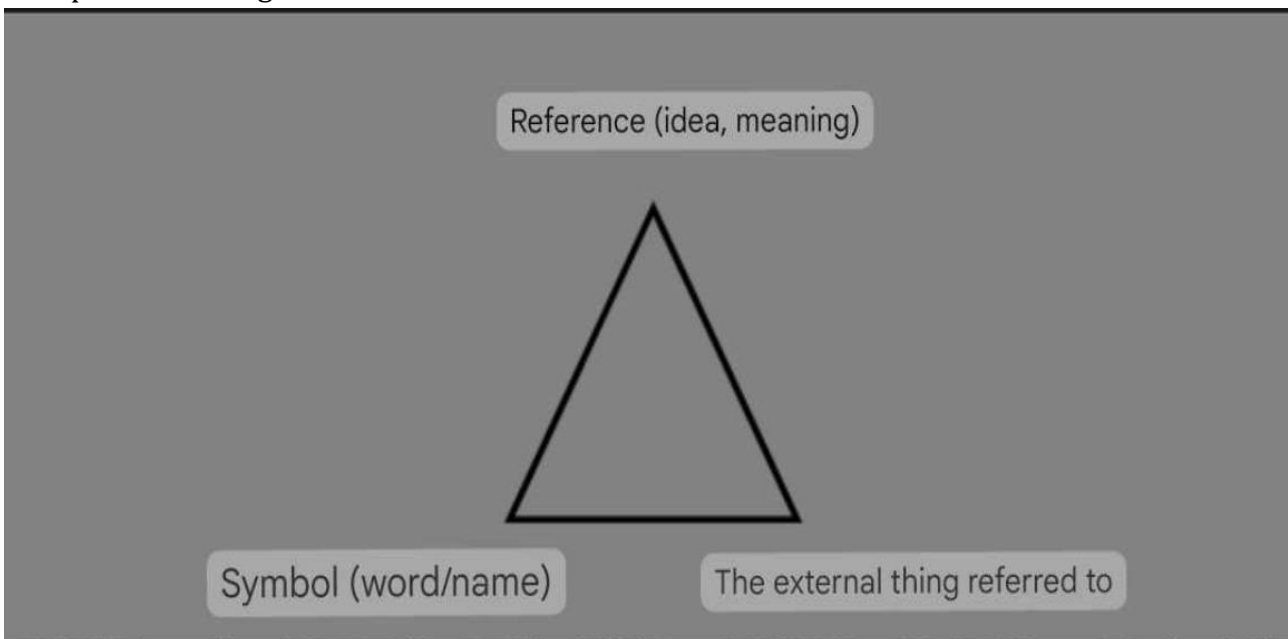
From the previous statement we can conclude that, according to Peirce, the sign consists of three elements:

- Representamen: This is the perceptible element in language. It manifests itself sensorially in sound or writing.

- Object: This is what the sign represents, i.e. the thing as it exists in reality. For example, the word "lion" represents an animal known by that name and which exists in reality. The object can be sensual, such as tangible objects, or it can be abstract, such as patterns of human behaviour, various relationships, and multiple concepts that appear in reality through various embodiments. Concepts such as love, freedom and hope can vary from person to person according to their understanding of these ideas.

- Interpretant: This refers to the ideas generated in the mind, the meaning that emerges. One of its salient characteristics is that it is absent; it is neither tangible nor perceptible. It does not appear directly but through another relationship.

Therefore, the interpretant includes all the meaning contained in the linguistic sign that can be interpreted. The sign is thus summarised in this triad³.

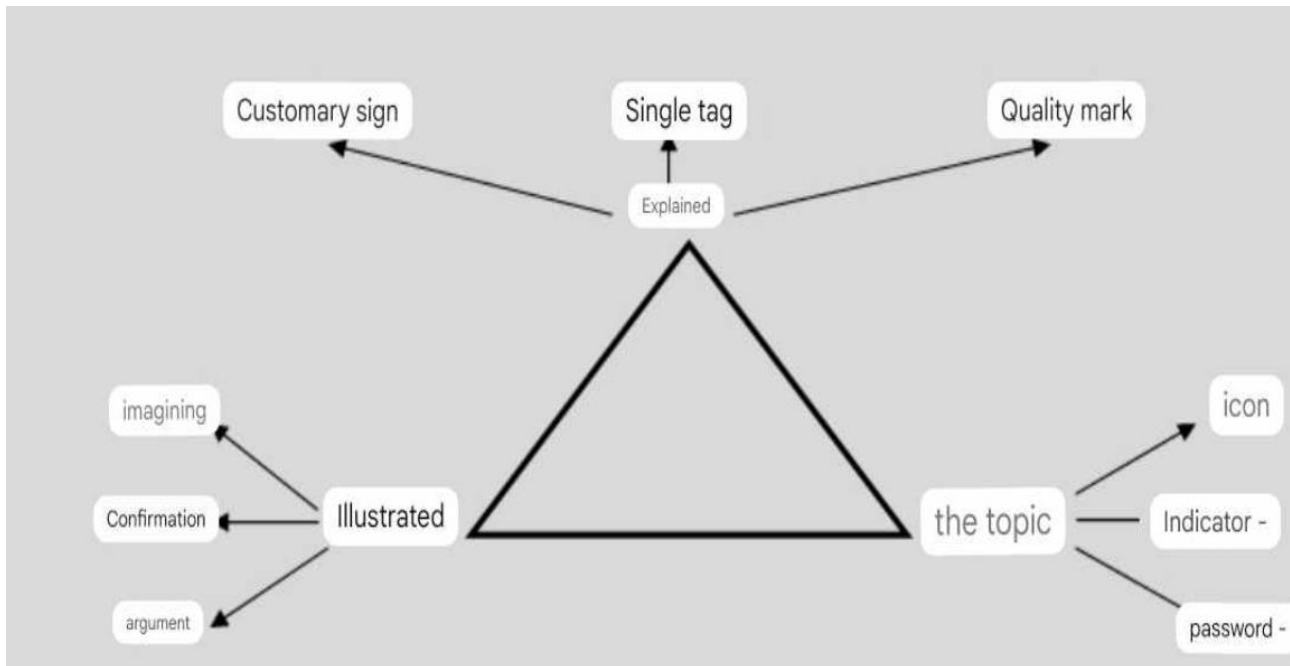


¹- Shahrazad Ben Younes, Lectures on Semiotics, same reference, p. 12.

²- Shahrazad Ben Younes, Lectures on Semiotics, same reference, p. 13.

³- Mohamed Kawan, Symbols and Signs: Concepts and Fields, Fourth National Symposium "Semiotics and Literary Text", University of Biskra, Algeria, 2006, p. 72.

Peirce also attempted to classify signs in order to arrive at a comprehensive theory that would encompass most of the signs found in reality. He distinguished between three types of sign: the symbol, the icon and the index. Peirce defined each type independently of its interpreter, i.e. the effect it has on the perceiver. Moreover, Peirce didn't stop at identifying the elements of the sign, but also subdivided each element into the triadic branch. This is illustrated in the following diagram:



Based on these concepts and considerations, Peirce arrived at a general law of the process by which signs are composed and manifested. This law is concerned with interpretation, starting from an initial stimulus and leading to all subsequent interpretive conclusions. Peirce treated the sign as a case in the process of its formation and discovered its initial stages, which allowed an understanding of its truth and interpretive possibilities. This led to the development of a semiotic framework based on the vocabulary of logic and synchronic analysis in Peirce's works. From this we can deduce the following:

1. The Peircean sign is a network of relations that can be analysed in three basic dimensions.
2. The sign in Peircean terms is a triadic relationship between three components.
3. The sign is a possible tool for meaning making and communication.
4. The representamen constitutes the level of primacy, while the object constitutes the level of secondary importance.

With regard to Umberto Eco's perspective on the sign:

Umberto Eco's influence on Peircean semiotics was obvious, as shown by studies and Eco's own admission. This led him to focus on the sign and how it works along the lines of Peirce's theories. In his book *The Sign*, Eco explores the ways in which signs function in relation to meaning. His definition of the sign is consistent with that found in philosophy dictionaries, which defines the

sign as anything that refers to something else or to an event. This definition is shared by both ancient and modern philosophies¹.

According to Eco, a sign exists whenever someone uses something in place of something else, thereby forming the customs and codes of a particular community and enabling communication between its members². According to Eco, a series of everyday uses shows us that the sign is a clear indication that allows us to draw conclusions about hidden things. For him, the sign is something that stands for something else, and the thing is a tangible entity, a material entity produced or recognised by humans. However, it is capable of performing a function to express something else, or it is a category or pattern of possible tangible expressions. The ambiguity lies in the other thing to which it refers or for which it stands³.

Eco distinguishes between natural signs and intentional signs, noting that there are two patterns of signs that seem to conceal communicative definition, namely:

A. Events that come from a natural source.

B. Human behaviour not intentionally sent by the sender.

For example, it is possible to infer the presence of fire from smoke. Such cases illustrate inference. It is worth noting that our daily lives are filled with such inferential actions, which indicates the existence of inferential actions that should be recognised as semiotic actions⁴.

Eco's aim was never to establish a single meaning for the sign, but rather to demonstrate its multiple meanings and its openness to different interpretations. This means that the sign is man's tool or form in the cultural world, unleashing immense potential for expression. Therefore, Eco did not try to approach signs as mere carriers of predefined information or meanings. Instead, he went beyond the traditional approach of seeing signs as mere tools for expressing a single, singular meaning of a thing, or as a means of abstract communication with reality. Instead, he sought to give the sign a new destiny by making it an expression of multiple meanings⁵.

The sign is seen as a relationship between the signifier and the signified. While the signifier is the word or expression, the signified is the meaning or content. The meaning of the signifier is not limited to a single fixed meaning, but is multiple in meaning and connotation. The sign represents a relationship between two levels: the level of expression and the level of content. This relationship primarily reflects diversity and difference, determined by the interplay of the presence and absence of meanings and connotations in the semiotic chain, as nothing more than

¹- Saida Khandaali, The linguistic sign according to Umberto Eco, its mechanisms and concerns, Volume 07, Issue 03, December 2021, pp. 305/306.

²- Ghada Mohammed Mahmoud Al-Imam, The Theory of the Sign and Its Impact on My Creative and Receptive Experience According to Umberto Eco, Faculty of Philosophy, Cairo University, p. 395.

³- Umberto Eco, Semiotics and Philosophy of Language, translated by Ahmed al-Samai, Arab Organisation for Translation, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 2005, p. 406.

⁴- The same reference, p. 407.

⁵- Ghada Mohammed Mahmoud Al-Imam, The Theory of the Sign and Its Impact on My Creative and Receptive Experience According to Umberto Eco, same reference, p. 395.

a series of signifiers. Eco sees signs in their essence as possessing multiple meanings and subject to a range of different interpretations¹.

In conclusion, this study aims to stimulate discussion on the linguistic sign, bridging the gap between the Arab and the West, between the ancient and the modern, in an attempt to link the present with the past and modernity with heritage. On the basis of the above, and after addressing these linguistic issues in the light of the theory of the linguistic sign, which emerged prominently with the advent of structural linguistics, we have arrived at the following results: The linguistic sign in Arabic lexicons revolves around three main meanings: the indicative feature and the reference.

The concepts and themes of the linguistic sign have branched out and diversified, widening the scope of its study among the ancients and the moderns.

The linguistic sign, according to De Saussure, is produced by the relationship between the signifier and the signified, or between the auditory image and the concept.

Under the influence of the semiotician Peirce, which was an important background for Eco, his concept of the sign was more superficial than profound.

There is an urgent need to reconcile modern linguistic studies with the Arabic linguistic heritage and to bring it into dialogue with the latest linguistic theories, with the aim of developing and revitalising it, removing the dust of stagnation and inertia.

This research remains a modest endeavour, although it is part of an ambitious effort to build a modern Arabic linguistic civilisation, grounded in the past and moving forward with steady scientific steps.

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¹- The same reference, p. 397

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