

"The Sign" and "Isomorphism" in the Interface of Translation and Arabization

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Abstract:

This research by Dr. Mounia Atika Boukhelda addresses the problem of translation and Arabization in linguistic and semiotic terminology, shedding light on the terms "sign" and "isomorphism," two of the most prominent terms that have sparked controversy among Arab critics. In Western linguistics, the term "sign" represents the binary relationship between the signifier and the signified, as de Saussure defined it and critics such as Roland Barthes expanded upon it. Arabic translations vary between "sign," "feature," "evidence," and "indication," reflecting the diversity of positions on translation and Arabization. As for "isotopie," it began as a concept denoting semantic repetition that ensures discourse coherence. It later expanded to include both formal and semantic aspects, and has been translated as "isomorphism," "conformity," "homonymy," and others. The contributions of Arab critics have been distinguished by their attempts to root these terms within the Arab cultural context, relying on traditional concepts such as antithesis, alliteration, and repetition. This demonstrates a relentless pursuit of a balance between preserving scientific meaning and accuracy, while remaining faithful to the specificities of the Arabic language.

Keywords: Sign, Isotopy, Translation, Semiotics, Linguistics, Signifier and Signified.

Introduction:

The linguistic world today has become a small, intertwined box. Perhaps the Arabs are an important part of this scientific landscape, anticipating every modern Western arrival. This includes the developments of general linguistics following de Saussure's lectures, and the structuralist school's adoption of his views and ideas. This has left Arabs divided between those who insist on translating terminology for reasons they defend in adopting their terminology, on the grounds that the science is new and it is better to transmit it as it is. Meanwhile, there are conservatives who have begun to dust off Arabic dictionaries, aware that Arabic is malleable and capable of embodying ideas using purely Arabic terminology. Thus, terms have been intertwined between translation and Arabization.

Anyone who follows linguistic terminology knows for certain that they are so numerous that one article is not enough to list them all. Rashid ibn Malik included them in a dictionary, and so I wanted to shed light on two terms that have received the attention of the most famous Arab critics, both ancient and modern: "al-'alam" (the sign) and "tashkaul" (heteronymy).

1. The sign:

In Western culture, the sign is a key element of semiotics (or semiology), prompting significant engagement from Western literary scholars. The term 'sign' (signe) is derived from the Latin 'signum' and is synonymous with terms such as 'indicator'¹, like the dark cloud that indicates impending rain. Signs represent ideas.

According to the linguistic dictionary by Jean Dubois and his colleagues, the term 'sign' is a social and cultural² act requiring a contractual relationship among community members and conventions. The term signe similarly encompasses meanings such as symbol, index and signal.

In specialised French lexicons, *signe* is a masculine noun that encompasses indices and signs, such as signs of illness, rain, or fertility. Therefore, phrases and names act as signifiers of ideas, reflecting a variety of thoughts and conveying what is intended to be said or done.

Beyond these definitions, there are other interpretations of '*signe*' and related terms such as '*sign*' and '*symbol*' in French and Western critical literature. For example, the semiotic dictionary by Greimas and Courtés presents Ferdinand de Saussure's view that the sign is a product of the union of two elements: the signifier and the signified. Consequently, language is seen as a system of signs, where a term is merely '*something brought to represent something else*'³.

Saussure considers the sign to be the result of the interconnected relationship between the signifier and the signified. Roland Barthes echoes this definition, stating that '*the sign is a perceived event that informs us about another event that is not directly perceived*'⁴. He introduces several closely related terms, such as '*signal*', '*index*', '*symbol*', and '*allegory*', each representing a relationship between presence and absence⁵.

Regarding the term '*signe*' in the writings of contemporary Arab critics, various related terms have emerged, including '*indicator*', '*sign*', '*symbol*', and '*signal*'⁶.

In the writings of contemporary Arab critics, the term '*signe*' has given rise to various related terms, including '*indicator*', '*sign*', '*symbol*', and '*signal*'. Arab critics have thoroughly explored the term '*signe*', providing detailed explanations in their structural and semiotic writings through translation, definition or derivation. They have also compared it with foreign terms, relying on Arabic linguistic rules that support general linguistic principles.

In the Arabic lexicon, Bassam Baraka cites the term *signe*⁷ as representing the term indicator, contrasting it with the foreign term *symptôme*. He discusses the meaning of 'mark' and compares it with various words, such as 'badge', 'feature', and 'label', asserting that anything considered a sign is an indicator that is marked and distinguished.

In another section of the dictionary, the researcher compares the term *signe* with symbol, signal and sign. The essence of this lies in movement and a mark that clarifies the pronunciation above or below a letter, also referencing terms such as 'sign' and 'badge' as translations of the word 'signal'⁸.

Researcher Mohamed Rashad Al-Hamzawi defines language as a system of signs or symbols consisting of sounds produced by the human speech apparatus and perceived by the ear, which form words with conventional meanings. He has articulated several key opinions on this subject, including:⁹

1. Equating the terms 'sign' and 'feature' with the foreign term 'marque'.
2. Introducing terms such as 'signifié' (the signified) and 'signifiant' (the signifier).
3. Emphasising that the sign relies, to some extent, on individual or social interpretation.
4. Creating terms such as 'semiotics' to refer to the study of word meanings, origins and developments, and the resulting linguistic effects, as well as the term 'symbol of symbols'.

However, an examination of the state of this semiotic linguistic term and its evolution in Arabic criticism reveals it to be more complex and variable in both its Arabised and translated forms.

When discussing signs, Abdel Salam Al-Masdi introduces terms such as 'signifier', 'signified' and 'signification', contrasting 'signe' with 'marque' on the basis that the former represents the linguistic sign, in accordance with Saussurean principles. He

views language as a collection of signs, each of which is perceived through sensory experience, either visual or auditory.

He believes the concept comprises a physical, sensory aspect recognised visually in writing and audibly in speech. The process uniting the two elements (the signifier and the signified) is termed 'signification'. According to Al-Masdi, the conventional meaning arises from an agreed term, whether explicitly stated or implicitly understood.

The essence of a sign should be naturally conventional and encompass all types of signification. Consequently, 'symbol' and 'sign' are synonymous, based on signification, with no distinction made between the two terms. The researcher likely resorts to this equivalence due to his belief that symbols are specific to the science of signs, directing attention to other events or objects.

Reflecting on the term 'feature', the researcher notes that the letters و (w), س (s) and م (m) signify the idea of marking, historically achieved through methods such as branding. This leads to terms such as 'السيمياء', 'السيمة', 'السيما', 'السيميا', all of which denote the sign as the starting point of semiotics¹⁰.

The debate surrounding the term *signe* among Arab critics in the Maghreb is becoming increasingly complex, with a variety of different viewpoints emerging. Some scholars have noted that all semiological terms, such as 'indicator', 'symbol', 'index', 'representation', 'relationship' and 'icon', necessarily refer to a relationship between two contracting parties. Consequently, there has been an effort to distinguish between the sign and the indicator, the latter of which is not considered a sign. This is contrary to the view of scholar Prieto, who regards every sign as an indicator, but not vice versa¹¹.

The evolution of the term 'سمه' becomes even more intricate when some Maghrebi critics prefer the term 'indicator', as seen in the works of Tunisian critics such as Mohamed Chaouch, Mohamed Ajina and Saleh Qarmadi in their collectively translated

work, 'Lessons in General Linguistics'. These authors emphasise the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, or the name and the named. Other contributors to this discourse include Anwar Al-Murtaja in Semiotics of Literary Texts and Hanoon Mubarak in Lessons in Semiotics.

For example, Anwar Al-Murtaja asserts the interactivity principle between the two sides of the linguistic indicator. He states that there is no signifier without a signified, nor a signified without a signifier. He further explains that, through its auditory aspect, the indicator unfolds over time, equating the terms 'indicator' and 'signal'.

Hanoon Mubarak, on the other hand, examines the term from similar and different perspectives, translating 'sign' from 'signal' and 'index' from 'indice'¹².

When examining the usage of this term in Algerian semiotic studies, Abdul Malik Murtad's attempts to ground the term within two axes, tradition and modernity, are evident. In several articles, he states that nations have recognised the concept of 'sma' and dealt with it in various ways, the most significant of which are 'the indication', the use of colour and the establishment of rituals related to religious practices and expressions of liberation.

Murtad distinguishes between the two terms, arriving at the following conclusions:

- The term 'sign' has been used in Arabic grammatical thought to mean a suffix attached to a verb or noun, transforming it from one state to another. This ancient grammatical term complicates the understanding of semiotic concepts.
- It appears that the term " is closer to what Western semioticians refer to as 'سمةsigne' than to the term 'علامة'.
- Using "سمة" to denote the concept of "Signe" reflects a philosophical orientation, particularly in light of Charles Peirce's three-part relationships:¹³

1. Quali-sign (descriptive sign)
2. Sin-Signe (individual sign).
3. Legi-sign (conventional sign).

The researcher's confusion when translating the term *signe* is evident when he asserts that 'the concept of "سمة" is equivalent in many respects to *indice*'. When discussing the term 'القريية' within Peirce's framework, the researcher introduces two additional terms: 'indicator' and 'scientificness'¹⁴.

In the same context, Abdul Qadir Fidouh suggests replacing 'سمة' with 'image', stating: 'This leads us to favour "سمة" as a substitute for "image".' Ultimately, he settles on two terms: first, the concept of 'sign' in its various forms; and second, 'indicator'.

Another facet of the term 'signe' is its usage by some critics within semiotic studies, which manifests in various ways. For example, the term 'signal' is used to describe the relationship between the signifier and the signified, as well as between expression and content¹⁵. According to Al-Munthir Ayashi, a signal activates any sensitive essence, and its mental image is shared with our thoughts and linked to another activator. This requires preparation for communication. This involves a characteristic that is purposefully aimed at conveying meanings¹⁶.

2. Isotopy:

The term 'isotopy' derives from two Greek words: 'iso', meaning equal, and 'topos', meaning place. Thus, it signifies a place of equality or equal position, particularly in the context of discourse¹⁷. Western linguists and semioticians have developed the term semantically to denote the specificity of a particular semantic unit, enabling the

regulation of discourse as a whole (tout signification), with multiple isotopies potentially present within a discourse.

When tracing the term's origins in Western terminology, it is often associated with the term 'isomorphisme', which refers to similarity in form. In contrast, 'isotopie' indicates the repetition or recurrence of semantic categories¹⁸.

Key definitions of isotopy include Greimas's description as an accumulated set of meaningful propositions after resolving ambiguities. This resolution is directed by coherent reading, limiting the term's usage to a narrow scope — primarily within the domain of meaning rather than expression (focusing on the significance of the content).

In the same article, researcher Francesco Rastier defines isotopy as the repetition of any linguistic unit¹⁹, thereby broadening the concept to encompass both expression and meaning. However, Greimas criticised this broader definition as potentially misleading.

From a lexical perspective, Bassam Baraka introduces two terms: 'isotopie', indicating the repetition of semantic categories, and 'isomorphisme', denoting similarity in form. This highlights the overlap between the two terms. The French prefix "iso" means "equal", and "isomorphisme" relates to chemistry, mathematics, and materials, describing symmetry between different systems.

Abdul Malik Murtad extensively explores the concept of isotopy without referring to isomorphisme, instead correlating it with terms such as 'isotopy', 'similarity', 'homogeneity', and 'similar'. He favours defining it as 'everything that balances visible components of meaning and content, represented in expression or preservation, and appearing morphologically²⁰, syntactically, rhythmically, or structurally similar through a network of substitutions and variations'. This is facilitated by contextual relationships that determine the meaning of discourse²¹.

Similarly to Greimas's approach, Murtad derives additional terms to enrich his concept, such as 'bi-isotopy' and 'pluri-isotopy', which address the interplay of meanings, significations, and contexts within a single discourse²².

Mohamed Muftah has provided a wealth of definitions for isotopy and identified its use in contemporary critical discourse. He first introduced the concept in his book *Analysis of Linguistic Discourse*, coining the Arabic term "as an equivalent to the French "تشاكل" "termisotopie", which he believes translates from "Allotopie" and "Hétérotopie". In his view, these concepts are important for discourse analysis, and Rastier's interpretation of isotopy encompasses both expressive and substantive forms.

Consequently, Mohamed Muftah rejects the absolute connotation of the term, describing Greimas's definitions as too specific and Rastier's as too general and expansive. Ultimately, he concludes that isotopy occurs in the development of discourse only through the specification of linguistic units, requiring two essential conditions for its realisation:²³

1. meaningful repetition that elevates the inspiration of speech; and 2.
2. The correctness of spoken syntactic structures, including equality and sentence structure.

To clarify further, the researcher has proposed the following definition: 'Isotopy is the development of a core meaning, whether positive or negative, through compulsory or voluntary engagement with phonetic, lexical and structural elements, thereby ensuring the coherence of the message.' Some critics have interpreted this definition as implying that isotopy generates a cumulative expressive and substantive effect, which is dictated by the nature of language itself. This includes temporal, spatial, epistemological and aesthetic isotopies, which work together to create aesthetic and emotional dimensions

that enable the audience to engage with meaning in open contexts, thereby broadening their interpretive perspectives.

In a later phase of the isotopy study, the researcher agrees with certain epistemological decisions and the recurring meanings associated with them. He discusses the influence of Aristotelian and morphological theories on contemporary semiotic and semantic studies, and attempts to address some misconceptions²⁴.

1. Merleau-Ponty's view: He argues that analysis based on elements is limited to lexical definitions.
2. Umberto Eco's perspective: Eco attributes sequential or morphological analysis to its natural roots and differentiates between the concepts of lexicon and extension.
3. The French semiotic paradox: The researcher notes the paradoxes presented by French semiotician Rastier. Mohamed Muftah concludes by emphasising the importance of analysis and applying discourse analysis to various fields, including education, poetics, semiotics and lexicography²⁵.

Overall, these opinions reflect the methodological and procedural tools used for reading and interpreting literary texts, taking into account both expression and content in order to ensure message coherence.

From this overview of the term, one can also identify Hamid Lahmidani's key propositions regarding Muftah's reading and the evolution of the term, summarised below:

- Isotopy as Development: This represents the development of a core meaning by integrating the transformational structural aspects of expression and signification.
- Compulsory and Voluntary Engagement: This aspect equates to intertextuality.

- Sociological dimension: The pragmatic aspect can also be viewed through a sociological lens.

Returning to the issues raised by Abdul Malik Murtad, it becomes clear that he offers several definitions of 'isotopy'. He distinguishes between the terms 'isotopy' and 'non-isotopy' or 'disparity', translating the latter as 'hétérotopie'. By highlighting these concepts and invoking terms such as 'statement' and 'creation', as well as 'antithesis' and 'contrast' as equivalent terms for disparity, Murtad seeks to delve into rhetorical traditions. Scholar Mohamed Rashad Al-Hamzawi refers to this as 'La dissimilation'²⁶.

Murtad defines disparity as 'a semiotic concept based on understanding the relationship between the subject and the axis', suggesting that readers may be misled by words. For example, consider the phrase 'the morning is the evening'. Here, two signifiers appear disparate — one meaning morning and the other evening — but the relational term influences their interaction, making them seem equivalent²⁷.

He notes that non-isotopy is based on the composition of contradictory elements. While isotopy identifies similar or comparable relationships among meanings within a text, the discourse highlights conflicting or diminishing relationships that ultimately define the semiotic significance of meaning²⁸.

This research could be further enriched by incorporating additional terms that reflect this modern concept, such as balance, repetition, parallelism, homogeneity, reiteration, segmentation and fragmentation. Interestingly, exploring this concept leads us to the remarkable conclusion that ancient Arabic scholarship has indeed engaged with this notion and its branches. One such term is 'similarity', which Murtad defines as 'mentioning something with the word of another due to their occurrence together'.

It also means 'repeating the same word, in the same number and type, two times or more', a definition found in the works of Al-Sijilmasi, who classifies it among the

categories of homoioteleuton. However, Ibn Abi Al-Asbab was keen to distinguish between similarity and homoioteleuton, commenting on a verse by a poet:

“The deadlines are deadlines,

For a man, it is a battle.’

He noted that the first instance of ‘deadlines’ refers to herds of wild cattle, while the second signifies the end of life. This indicates a problem in form and word, with the primary focus being ‘the matter of meaning’.

In his analysis of the text, Abdul Malik Murtagh critiques traditional rhetorical studies for their treatment of isotopic patterns.

‘قصيدة قراءة – شعرية قصيدة ‘ أشجان يمانية.

, in which he examines thirty-seven verbal and meaningful isotopic patterns. Moving beyond Murtagh and his proposed semiotic critical vocabulary regarding the term ‘isotopy’, there have been significant semiotic developments in Algeria. Scholars such as Rashid Ben Malik have translated concepts from French semiology, introducing the term isomorphism as a hypothesis that distinguishes between designation and content within the semantic structure²⁹. Ben Malik has adopted this mechanism and other concepts to develop a specialised semiotic vocabulary, referencing isotopy in its international and semiotic forms in both French and English³⁰.

In addition to Abdul Qadir Fidouh’s observations on Mohamed Muftah’s definitions, Ben Malik has formulated the term ‘تشاكل’ based on two semiotic directions: Greimas’s and Rastier’s. He has also proposed the term ‘contrast’ as an alternative to ‘disparity’.

It is therefore undeniable that Arab scholars have made significant efforts to bridge the gap between Western terminology and Arabic studies, whether through translation or Arabisation. This understanding can be applied to other terms discussed in this context.

Footnotes:

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 - ³- R. Barthes, Elements of Semiotics in Communication, pp. 12-13.
 - ⁴- Moulay Ali Boukhatem, Previous Reference, p. 164.
 - ⁵- Same Reference, p. 165.
 - ⁶- Same Reference, p. 166.
 - ⁷- Bassam Baraka, Linguistic Dictionary (French, Arabic), Jrous Publications, Press, Tripoli – Lebanon, 1st ed., 1985, p. 187.
 - ⁸- Same Reference, same page.
 - ⁹- Mohammed Rashad Al-Hamzawi, Modern Linguistic Terms, p. 129.
 - ¹⁰- Abdul Salam Al-Masdi, Duality and Parallels in Critical Terminology, pp. 33-34 and beyond.
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 - ²⁵- Moulay Ali Boukhatem, Previous Reference, p. 185.
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 - ²⁷- Same Previous Source.
 - ²⁸- Moulay Ali Boukhatem, Previous Reference, p. 187.
 - ²⁹- Same Reference, same page.
 - ³⁰- Bachir Al-Qamari, The Concept of Intertextuality Between Origin and Extension, p. 34.