

Meaning Shift in Arabic Social Media: A Cultural-Semantic Study

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Abstract

The phenomenon of social media has introduced new dynamics in the development of the Arabic language, particularly in relation to shifts in vocabulary meanings influenced by cross-cultural interaction, digital technology, and online communication practices. This study aimed to examine meaning shifts in Arabic as used on social media through a cultural-semantic approach. The research focused on identifying vocabulary items that underwent semantic change, whether through narrowing, broadening, or connotative shifts, and on analyzing the cultural factors underlying these changes. The study employed a qualitative method using a cultural-semantic framework, with data drawn from utterances, posts, and conversations circulating on popular platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok. The findings indicate that semantic shifts in Arabic social media emerge through complex interactions among linguistic, social, and cultural dimensions. Based on Cruse's theory of semantics, most meaning changes occur at the level of sense relations, primarily through mechanisms such as broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension. For instance, the word متابع (*mutabi*), which lexically means "follower," has undergone narrowing to specifically denote a "social media follower" in the digital context. From Duranti's perspective of cultural semantics, these shifts are not merely linguistic phenomena but also reflect processes of identity formation and value negotiation within Arab digital communication

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culture. Each term that experienced semantic change embodies the dynamics of digital life, reflecting values such as *ijtima'iyah* (social connectedness), *shubrah* (popularity), and *ta'bir dhāti* (self-expression).

Keywords: Meaning shift, Arabic language, social media, cultural semantics

Introduction

Arabic is a Semitic language that originated in the Arabian Peninsula and historically evolved into a literary form (*fuṣṣḥā*) used in religious traditions, notably as the language of the Qur'an,¹ which possesses many unique qualities.² Language functions not merely as a medium of communication but also as a tool through which humans construct, process, and express their thoughts.³ Likewise, Arabic language education has developed rapidly in various countries worldwide, including Indonesia.⁴

Language constitutes a dynamic system of symbols that reflects the social, cultural, and technological developments of its speech communities.⁵ The Arabic language, in both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, is subject to semantic change. The evolution of Arabic vocabulary is profoundly influenced by the interrelation of cultural factors and religious meanings, which collectively shape how words are conceptualized and interpreted across diverse communities.⁶ In Arabic, semantic relations between words can be categorized into synonymy (*al-tarādūf*), antonymy (*al-taḍādd*), hyponymy (*al-taḍakkul al-ma'nawī*), and meronymy (*al-juz'īyyah*). For example, the word *asad* lexically denotes "lion," yet metaphorically it is often used to describe a person's courage. The Arab sociocultural context exerts a strong influence on the interpretation of word meanings, as exemplified by the term *shabāb*, which originally referred to "youth"

¹ Kurniawan, R., Asmara, M., & Hardivizon, H. (2021). Bahasa Arab dan Konsep Iâ€™™ jaz al-Qurâ€™™ an (Kritik Pemikiran Louwis â€™™ Awad). *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 5(1 May), 161-172. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v5i1.2622>

² Khaled Yahya Abdurrahman and Noza Aflisia, "Al-Balāghah 'Inda Al-Zamakhsharī: Marhalah Nadhji Al-Bahtsi Haula Al-'Jāz Al-Qur'Ānī," *Al-Irfan: Journal of Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 13, 2022): 34–46, <https://doi.org/10.36835/alirfan.v5i1.5460>.

³ Fikri, A., Aflisia, N., Muid, A., & Harisah, H. (2025). Directed Reading Activity (DRA) method and students' Arabic reading comprehension: An experimental research. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 46(2), 460219-460219.

⁴ Aflisia, N., Syohdikin, S., & Abrilian, R. N. R. (2025). Positioning Arabic Education Study Program Through Student Research Results 2011-2023. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 9(1), 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v9i1.12555>

⁵ Putri, B. T., Ayu, C. S., Ginting, M. A. B., Saidah, S., & Nasution, S. (2025). Budaya dan bahasa: Refleksi dinamis identitas masyarakat. *Semantik: Jurnal Riset Ilmu Pendidikan, Bahasa dan Budaya*, 3(1), 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.61132/semantik.v3i1.1321>

⁶ Harianto N, Semantic Dynamics of Arabic: Evolution of Meaning Over Time. *Prosiding Seminar Internasional* 2024 September;17:6.

but in social media discourse is now frequently used to address a group of people more generally, regardless of age.⁷ Such semantic shifts illustrate the dynamic nature of Arabic lexical semantics as shaped by digital media and cross-cultural interaction.

Semantic change (*taṭawwur al-ma'nā*) in Arabic emerges as a consequence of technological advancement, sociocultural transformation, and lexical borrowing from foreign languages. In contemporary scholarship, the study of Arabic lexical semantics is no longer confined to classical philological approaches but is increasingly supported by corpus linguistics and natural language processing (NLP) methodologies. These computational frameworks enable the systematic mapping of lexical frequency, collocational patterns, and semantic variation.⁸ Recent empirical research has shown that Arabic vocabulary in social media discourse frequently undergoes processes of semantic broadening (*al-tawsi' al-ma'nā*), semantic narrowing (*taḍyīq al-ma'nā*), and even radical semantic shift (*inqilāb al-ma'nā*). Such phenomena highlight the relevance of Arabic lexical semantics not only for advancing theoretical linguistics but also for informing practical applications such as machine translation, digital lexicography, and Arabic language pedagogy.

Theories of meaning and reference have been central to analytic philosophy since the early twentieth century.⁹ One of the key themes in the study of meaning is lexical and cultural semantics.¹⁰ Lexical semantics, a branch of semantics, examines the meanings of words and the semantic relationships among lexical units within a language. It focuses on how words, as lexical units, convey meaning and how these meanings interact within the linguistic system. Lyons defines lexical semantics as the systematic study of word meaning, both individually and in relation to other words.¹¹ This approach views a language's vocabulary as a complex network of meanings, where changes in one element may influence others. Cultural semantics, on the other hand, emphasizes the relationship between linguistic meaning and culture. It maintains that the meanings of words, expressions, and discourse cannot be understood solely in linguistic terms but

⁷ Jaelani, J., Syahidin, S., & Sumarna, E. (2021). Islam and Women's Involvement in Education (Abu Syuqqah Thought Study in Taḥrīr al-Mar'ah Fī 'Aṣr al-Risālah). *Jurnal Kajian Peradaban Islam*, 4(2), 99-110. <https://doi.org/10.47076/jkpis.v4i2.93>

⁸ Ermanto, S. P., Ardi, H., & Juita, N. (2023). *Linguistik Korpus: Aplikasi Digital Untuk Kajian Dan Pembelajaran Humaniora*. PT. RajaGrafindo Persada-Rajawali Pers.

⁹ Lahlou, H. (2020). The motivations for the semantic change in the category GREEN in Arabic: A synchronic and diachronic corpus-based analysis. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 18-28. DOI/10.4236/jss.2020.81002

¹⁰ Deo, A., & Thomas, W. C. (2025). Addressing the widest answerable question: English "just" as a domain widening strategy. *Journal of Semantics*, 42(1-2), 1-37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jos/ffae015>

¹¹ Zahra, N., Sonia, Y., Adilla, S., Mardiyah, R. A., & Amelia, D. (2024). Semantik dalam Bahasa Indonesia. *Morfologi: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan, Bahasa, Sastra Dan Budaya*, 2(6), 156-164. <https://doi.org/10.61132/morfologi.v2i6.1163>

must also be interpreted in relation to the values, norms, beliefs, social practices, and collective experiences of the speech community.¹²

The scope of lexical semantics encompasses denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and a range of semantic relations such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, polysemy, and homonymy.¹³ Denotative meaning refers to the literal or dictionary definition of a word, whereas connotative meaning relates to the emotional or cultural associations attached to it. These semantic relations help explain how words form interconnected networks of meaning within a language.

In modern linguistic traditions, semantics, the study of linguistic meaning, has undergone a significant transformation through the contributions of various scholars, one of whom is Cruse. In his seminal work *Lexical Semantics* (1986), Cruse places primary emphasis on the analysis of lexical meaning as the fundamental unit of linguistic interpretation. According to Cruse, linguistic units possess meaning not only in isolation but also in relation to other elements within the language system.¹⁴ Cruse developed a semantic analytical framework that accounts for the relationships among word meaning, conceptual structure, and their use in utterances. By adopting an approach that highlights the systemic and differential aspects of meaning, Cruse rejects the view that meaning can be reduced merely to real-world reference or dictionary definitions. He demonstrates that meaning is complex and context-dependent.

A key aspect of Cruse's theoretical framework is the distinction between sense and reference. He adopted and refined Frege's view, which differentiates between the meaning of a word and the object referred to by that word. For Cruse, this distinction is crucial for understanding how words function within discourse.¹⁵ Sense refers to the internal semantic content of a lexical expression, which allows speakers to identify meaning even when its referent is unknown or nonexistent. Reference, on the other hand, concerns the external relationship between a word and a real or imagined entity in the world. For instance, in the sentence "The unicorn has four legs," although unicorns have no real-world referent, the sense of unicorn remains comprehensible to language users.

Beyond lexical semantics, word meaning cannot be separated from the cultural dimensions that shape it, since language is not merely a system of signs for conveying information but also a reflection of the culture and worldview of its speakers. The meanings of words, expressions, and discourse are never neutral; they are always influenced by the values, norms, and social practices embedded

¹² Wierzbicka, A. (1992). *Semantics, Culture and Cognition: Universal human concepts in culture-specific configurations*. Oxford University Press.

¹³ Aulawi, A. (2025). Makna Leksikal dan Makna Gramatikal dalam Bahasa Arab. *Muhibbul Arabiyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab*, 5(1), 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.35719/pba.v5i1.168>

¹⁴ Saragi, C. N. (2024). Pengantar Linguistik. *Pengantar Linguistik: Teori, Konsep dan Penerapan*. PT. Green Pustaka Indonesia. Yogyakarta

¹⁵ Ardia, D. (2025). *Filsafat Bahasa*. PT. Nasya Expading Management. Jawa Tengah

within the speech community. From this awareness arises the field of cultural semantics, an approach within semantics that emphasizes the intrinsic connection between language and culture. Cultural semantics seeks to reveal how words do not simply denote objects or events but also represent collective experiences, patterns of thought, and even the ideologies of a society.

Cultural semantics is a branch of semantic study that examines how the meanings of words, expressions, or symbols are shaped, maintained, and transformed by the cultural contexts of their speakers, including values, beliefs, social practices, cognitive schemas, and shared historical experiences. In this approach, meaning is not viewed merely as a lexical definition in a dictionary but rather as the product of interaction between language and the systems of knowledge and cultural practices that encompass it.¹⁶ It emphasizes cultural meaning beyond lexical meaning, as seen in terms related to rituals, food, or emotions that carry distinctive cultural connotations. The approach often employs ethnolinguistic and qualitative methods, as well as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework, to explicate cultural concepts. Cultural semantics has proven useful in studies of cross-cultural translation, linguistic anthropology, and cultural discourse analysis.¹⁷

Cultural semantics is rooted in theories from anthropological linguistics, cognitive semantics, and cultural pragmatics. Several major theories form the foundation of this approach, including the NSM developed by Wierzbicka and Goddard.¹⁸ By employing basic words such as *person*, *good*, *feel*, *do*, or *think*, NSM enables semantic analysis that remains independent of the technical terminology of any particular language. For example, the English word *shame* and the Indonesian word *malu* convey similar meanings but differ in their sociocultural contexts of use.¹⁹ NSM provides a systematic framework for disentangling such differences.²⁰

In Indonesia, several studies have explored the relationship between meaning and culture, such as research on the *Adus Nggawan* ritual.²¹ This ritual is not merely a spiritual practice but also contains ecological and social values that

¹⁶ Cabezas-García, M., & Reimerink, A. (2022). Cultural context and multimodal knowledge representation: Seeing the forest for the trees. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 824932. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.824932>

¹⁷ Wang, H., Zhang, H., Jiang, S., Tang, G., Zhang, X., & Zhou, L. (2022). City association pattern discovery: A flow perspective by using cultural semantic similarity of place name. *Applied Geography*, 139, 102629. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2021.102629>

¹⁸ Goddard, C. (2009). "Cultural scripts: Applications of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage." *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 6(2), 145–172. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IPRG.2009.008>

¹⁹ Wierzbicka, A. (1996). *Semantics: Primes and Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Goddard, C., & Wierzbicka, A. (2014). *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages, and Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹ Rifanda R, Setiawati E. Menyelami makna ritual Adus Nggawan terhadap potensi mitigasi berbasis nilai kearifan lokal. *Fon: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*. 2025;21(1):194–214. <https://doi.org/10.25134/fon.v21i1.11313>

can be understood as a form of culture-based mitigation. Through linguistic symbols and ritual actions, the Wolio community articulates a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and supernatural forces. In the ethnolinguistic context, the meaning of this ritual is not limited to verbal expression but also represents a form of collective knowledge that is transmitted and internalized through language and social practices.

Furthermore, studies on metaphors in the Wolio language provide deep insight into how local communities conceptualize the world through language and symbols.²² From an ethnolinguistic perspective, metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a reflection of thought patterns and cultural value systems embedded within society. Each metaphor carries collective knowledge, historical experience, and the community's way of interpreting the relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual life. For example, metaphors that link nature with the human body or social life convey ecological, moral, and social messages that serve as guidance for living. Thus, metaphors in the Wolio language function as a repository of cultural wisdom through which local knowledge is articulated and transmitted across generations.

Nevertheless, most studies on semantic change in Arabic tend to focus primarily on etymological and lexicographical dimensions rather than examining the cultural and social foundations of meaning. From the perspective of cultural semantics, meaning is not a fixed linguistic structure; rather, it is shaped by the cultural values, belief systems, and social practices embedded within the community of speakers. Consequently, the semantic shifts observed in contemporary Arabic, particularly in online discourse, should be understood not merely as linguistic phenomena but as cultural indicators of changing social identities and value systems in the Arab world. The central problem addressed in this study, therefore, concerned how semantic shifts occurred in Arabic within modern cultural contexts and what cultural meanings or value transformations these shifts represented. Specifically, this article sought to answer the following questions: (1) What are the forms and patterns of semantic shift in Arabic as used in contemporary social and digital contexts? and (2) What cultural factors influence these shifts in meaning?

The primary data consisted of excerpts, comments, and posts in Arabic that contained terms that had undergone a semantic shift. Data sources were selected based on content popularity, cultural representativeness, and the recurring appearance of certain terms in online discourse. Data collection was conducted through documentation and digital observation (netnography)²³ on platforms such as Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram over a three-month period. The main

²² Relawati H. *Metafora dalam bahasa Wolio: Kajian etnolinguistik* [skripsi]. Jakarta: FITK UIN Syarif Hidayatullah; 2023. <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/handle/123456789/77386>

²³ Kozinets, R. V., & Gambetti, R. C. 2021. *Netnography Unlimited: Understanding Technoculture Using Qualitative Social Media Research*. London: Routledge.

focus was on words or phrases that experienced semantic change, whether through broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, or metaphorical and ironic usage.²⁴

The analysis followed three stages: (1) Classification of meanings based on conventional semantic theory (lexical semantics); (2) Identification of the social and cultural contexts in which the words or expressions were used; and (3) Interpretation of meaning shifts in relation to identity, values, and the dynamics of Arab digital digital communities. The theoretical framework referred to Cruse's semantic model,²⁵ which included elements such as synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, hyponymy, homonymy, ambiguity, semantic shift, and the relationship between semantics and grammar. It also drew on Duranti's cultural approach, emphasizing holism, interaction, context, behavior and culture, language, participation, performance, and indexicality.

Findings and Discussion

Arabic Learning Process

Forms and patterns of semantic shift in Arabic as used in contemporary social and digital contexts

The research findings were based on screenshots collected from social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok.



Figure 1. Instagram screenshot

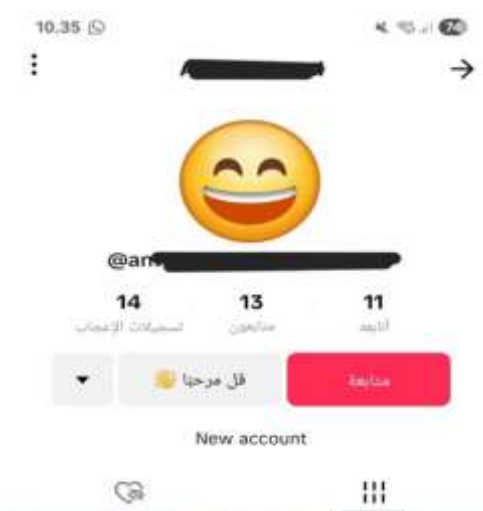


Figure 2. TikTok screenshot

²⁴ Herring SC, Androutsopoulos J. Computer-Mediated Discourse 2.0. In: Tannen D, Hamilton HE, Schiffrin D, editors. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell; 2015. p. 127–51.

²⁵ Cruse, DA. 2011. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

First, Meaning Shift of كَفُو (kafū) and مُتَابِع (mutābi‘)

In Classical Arabic, the word كَفُو (kafū) derives from the root ك ف أ (k-f-‘), meaning equal, suitable, or worthy.²⁶ Traditionally, it referred to social or moral equivalence, for instance, a “suitable match” in marriage or a “person of equal status” in moral or social terms. However, in contemporary digital Arabic, particularly on Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram, the meaning of kafū has undergone a significant semantic and pragmatic shift. The term now functions as a colloquial expression of praise or admiration, equivalent to “you’re cool,” “respect!” or “awesome!” in English.²⁷

According to Cruse, this reflects an evaluative shift, a process in which a word’s meaning changes its value orientation (from formal and moral to emotional and expressive) without losing its core semantic feature.²⁸ Thus, kafū retains the central sense of worthiness but recontextualizes it as a marker of respect, solidarity, or admiration within digital discourse.

From Duranti’s perspective in linguistic anthropology, such change demonstrates how language functions as a form of social action.²⁹ Saying “أنت كفو” (anta kafū!) on social media is not merely descriptive; it constitutes a social act of recognition and inclusion. It signals group belonging and cultural identity, thereby strengthening relationships within digital communities.

Within Wierzbicka’s framework of cultural semantics, kafū expresses a cultural script rooted in Arab values of honor, capability, and solidarity (murūwwa, karāmah).³⁰ In the digital era, this script has been reshaped: kafū now extends beyond traditional masculine contexts to gender-neutral and humorous interactions, symbolizing the flexibility and modernization of Arabic cultural expression.

The word مُتَابِع (mutābi‘), on the other hand, originates from the root ت ب ع (t-b-‘), meaning to follow, pursue, or track.³¹ In Classical Arabic, it described a follower in a physical or intellectual sense, such as a disciple, student, or a person who follows events or news.

In digital communication, however, mutābi‘ has been resemanticized into a technological and social concept: it now denotes a follower on social media, someone who subscribes to another user’s digital content.³² From Cruse’s semantic perspective, this represents conceptual broadening, where the core

²⁶ Ibn Manzur. (1994). *Lisan al-‘Arab*. Beirut: Dar Sadir.

²⁷ Al-Firuzabadi (1987) **Al-Qāmūs al-Muhit**. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr.

²⁸ Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Wierzbicka, A. (1992). *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*. Oxford University Press

³¹ Wehr, H. (1994). *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Spoken Language Services.

³² Sarkhoh, N., & KhosraviNik, M. (2020). Social media discourses of Arabism and the negotiation of Self in the Middle East. *World Englishes*, 39(4), 609-622. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12502>

meaning (following) remains, but the referential domain expands from the physical to the virtual realm.³³ For Duranti, this shift constitutes a new form of social action: following someone online becomes a symbolic act of digital affiliation, recognition, and participation within a networked community.³⁴ According to Wierzbicka, this change reflects the emergence of new cultural values in modern Arab societies, connection, visibility, and recognition, which replace earlier notions of spiritual or scholarly following with digital participation and social presence.³⁵

Table 1. Forms and Patterns of Meaning Shift in كَفُو (kafū) and مُتَابِع (mutābi')

Analytical Aspect	كَفُو (kafū)	مُتَابِع (mutābi')	Type of Meaning Shift	Theoretical Interpretation
Lexical Meaning (Cruse)	Equal, worthy, suitable	Follower (physical/intellectual)	Evaluative and Conceptual Shift	Cruse: The core meaning remains, but its value and scope change depending on context.
Contextual Meaning (Cruse)	Used as praise or recognition in digital discourse	Refers to a social media follower	Pragmatic Recontextualization	Contextual factors add social and emotional dimensions to the original meaning.
Social Meaning (Duranti)	Symbol of solidarity, admiration, and social identity	Symbol of affiliation, recognition, and digital connection	Sociocultural Reinterpretation	Duranti: Language as social action that performs identity and relationships.
Cultural Meaning (Wierzbicka)	Reflects values of honor and strength in Arab culture	Reflects modern values of connectivity and recognition	Cultural Resemantization	Wierzbicka: Meanings evolve alongside changing cultural scripts and values.
Pragmatic Function (Integrated)	Praise, solidarity, or appreciation	Digital affiliation and social identity	Metaphorical and Social Shift	Both terms illustrate how the interaction between language, culture, and technology reshapes meaning.

³³ Cruse, DA. 2011. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Duranti, A. (2009). *Linguistic anthropology: History, ideas, and issues. Linguistic anthropology: A reader*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.

³⁵ Wierzbicka, A. (2006). *English: Meaning and Culture*. Oxford University Press.

Research findings were based on screenshots from Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok.



Figure 3. (Twitter (X) screenshot)



Figure 4. (Instagram screenshot)

Etymologically, the Arabic word زَنَانَة (*zanāna*) derives from the root ز ن ن (z-n-n), which denotes a continuous humming or buzzing sound.³⁶ In Classical Arabic, it referred to the noise produced by mosquitoes, bees, or any monotonous, irritating sound.

In the contemporary context of the Gaza war, however, the word has undergone a profound semantic and cultural shift. It is now commonly used by Palestinians to refer to Israeli military drones that constantly hover over Gaza, producing a persistent droning noise day and night.³⁷ This sound has become synonymous with fear, anxiety, and trauma, transforming *zanāna* into a symbol of collective psychological suffering.

According to Cruse (1986), this is an instance of metonymic semantic shift, where meaning extends from the effect (the sound) to the source (the drone).³⁸ What was once “the buzzing sound” now denotes “the thing that buzzes.”

From Duranti’s anthropological perspective (1997), this linguistic shift exemplifies language as social action.³⁹ The use of *zanāna* expresses not only a description of an object but also a shared social experience, embodying collective fear and resistance. It functions as a performative linguistic act that reinforces group identity and resilience in the face of domination. Within Wierzbicka’s cultural semantics framework (1992), *zanāna* becomes part of a cultural script of

³⁶ Ibn Manzur. (1994). *Lisan al-‘Arab*. Beirut: Dar Sadir.

³⁷ Al-Khālidi, M. (2023). *Everyday Life under Drones in Gaza: The Soundscape of Fear*. *Arab Media & Society*, 37(2), 55–73

³⁸ Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁹ Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

trauma and endurance.⁴⁰ The word conveys cultural values such as *ṣabr* (patience), *ṣumūd* (steadfastness), and *ma‘ānāh* (meaningful suffering). Thus, *zanāna* functions as a cultural signifier of moral and emotional endurance, rather than merely a technical term.

Second, Meaning Shift of #البطيخ (#watermelon)

Literally, البطيخ (*al-baṭṭikh*) means watermelon in Arabic.⁴¹ However, since 2021, particularly during the Gaza conflict, the hashtag #البطيخ (#watermelon) has evolved into a digital symbol of Palestinian solidarity. The fruit’s colors, including red, green, white, and black, mirror those of the Palestinian flag.⁴² When images of the flag were censored on social media, users adopted the watermelon emoji (🍉) and the #watermelon hashtag as subtle expressions of protest and unity. Consequently, the literal meaning of “fruit” has undergone a semantic shift, transforming into a symbol of resistance and national identity.

From Cruse’s semantic theory, this represents a metaphoric and referential shift, where a concrete noun (fruit) acquires an abstract symbolic meaning (political identity and moral stance).⁴³

According to Duranti, this use of a hashtag constitutes a form of collective linguistic action, a socially coordinated performance of digital solidarity and political resistance.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, from Wierzbicka’s cultural semantics perspective, #watermelon exemplifies a cultural script of solidarity, rooted in Arab values such as *‘izzah* (dignity), *hurriyyah* (freedom), and *wahdah* (unity).⁴⁵ It conveys emotional and moral meanings embedded within cultural identity. Thus, the hashtag operates not merely as a digital icon but as a linguistic–cultural expression of shared resistance and belonging.

Table 2. Forms and Patterns of Meaning Shift in زَنَانَة (*zanāna*) and #البطيخ (#watermelon) within the Social-Digital Context of Gaza

Analytical Aspect	زَنَانَة (<i>zanāna</i>)	#البطيخ (#watermelon)	Type of Meaning Shift	Theoretical Interpretation
Original Lexical Meaning	A buzzing sound (of insects)	Watermelon (fruit)	—	Literal, physical referent.

⁴⁰ Wierzbicka, A. (1992). *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*. Oxford University Press

⁴¹ Wehr, H. (1994). *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Spoken Language Services.

⁴² Al-Sakkaf, L. (2022). *The Watermelon as a Digital Symbol of Palestinian Resistance*. *Arab Media & Society*, 34(2), 78–92

⁴³ Cruse, DA. 2011. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Duranti, A. (2001). *Linguistic Anthropology: History and Scope*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 213–229

⁴⁵ Wierzbicka, A. (2006). *English: Meaning and Culture*. Oxford University Press.

Analytical Aspect	زَنَانَة (zanāna)	#البطيخ (#watermelon)	Type of Meaning Shift	Theoretical Interpretation
New Social Meaning	Israeli surveillance drone; symbol of fear and oppression	Symbol of Palestinian resistance and digital solidarity	Referential Expansion	Meaning expands from concrete to social and ideological referents.
Semantic Shift (Cruse)	Metonymy: effect → source (sound → drone)	Metaphor: fruit → symbol (solidarity/resistance)	Contextual Re-semantization	Meaning changes through contextual reinterpretation.
Social Function (Duranti)	Expresses shared trauma and resistance	Enacts collective solidarity online	Language as Social Action	Language used to perform identity and shared social purpose.
Cultural Function (Wierzbicka)	Embodies the cultural script of suffering and steadfastness	Embodies the cultural script of unity and dignity	Cultural Script Renewal	Cultural values reinterpreted through digital discourse. ⁵
Pragmatic and Emotional Dimension	Fear, anxiety, steadfastness	Empathy, pride, collective hope	Evaluative and Emotive Shift	Shift from descriptive to expressive and symbolic meaning.

Cultural Factors of Meaning Shifts

According to Wierzbicka's cultural semantics theory, the meaning of words is shaped not only by linguistic structures but also by the values, norms, and lived experiences of the speech community. Language reflects how a particular culture thinks and feels about the world, as what Wierzbicka calls "cultural scripts," shared meanings embedded in social behavior and communication patterns.⁴⁶

The word كَفُو (kafū) in Classical Arabic originally meant equal, suitable, or worthy, and was often used in social contexts such as marriage or expressions of respect. However, in the digital age, particularly within discourse surrounding Gaza, its meaning has expanded to convey moral honor, bravery, and social justice. On Arab social media, *kafū* is used to commend acts of heroism or solidarity with Gaza, demonstrating that "worthiness" is now defined not by social status but by ethical and humanitarian values.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, مُتَابِع (mutābi'), literally meaning follower (in the social media sense), has undergone a semantic shift from denoting a passive role to signifying an active identity marker. In the digital Arab world, especially in discussions related to Gaza, *mutābi'* implies emotional and ideological participation rather than mere following. This reflects

⁴⁶ Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. Oxford University Press

⁴⁷ Sarkhoh, N., & KhosraviNik, M. (2020). Social media discourses of Arabism and the negotiation of Self in the Middle East. *World Englishes*, 39(4), 609-622. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12502>

the strong collectivist nature of Arab societies, where belonging entails moral engagement and communal responsibility.⁴⁸

The word زُنَانَة (*zanāna*), traditionally referring to a buzzing mosquito, has acquired a new, culturally loaded meaning in Gaza, denoting Israeli military drones that constantly hover and instill fear. This metaphorical shift illustrates how cultural cognition operates: the buzzing sound and persistent disturbance of a mosquito are reinterpreted as symbols of continuous threat and psychological terror. Thus, collective trauma and wartime experience reshape the community's semantic framework.⁴⁹ Finally, #البطيخ (#watermelon) has emerged as a powerful cultural symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance. In Arab visual culture, the watermelon's colors, including red, green, white, and black, correspond to the Palestinian flag. Within Wierzbicka's framework, this represents a non-verbal cultural script of defiance and solidarity, where meaning is constructed through shared symbols and emotional values rather than explicit linguistic forms.⁵⁰

Therefore, these semantic shifts cannot be fully understood through linguistic analysis alone. They are deeply rooted in Arab cultural values, collective identity, war experiences, and digital symbolism. The cultural factors driving these changes include solidarity, trauma, collectivism, and symbolic resistance, all of which shape how Arabic speakers reinterpret meaning in the context of Gaza and contemporary digital discourse.

Meaning Shifts in Arabic Social Media and Arabic Language Learning

Arabic serves multiple roles and functions, including religious and liturgical functions (as the language of the Qur'an and religious disciplines); linguistic, scientific, and literary functions (as seen in the traditions of *nahwu*, poetry, and classical prose);⁵¹ and educational and modern communicative functions (such as the teaching of Arabic, the development of learning materials, and the use of technology in education).⁵²

In the context of Arabic language learning, this phenomenon has strategic implications. *First*, Arabic language teachers can utilize authentic data from social media to introduce contemporary vocabulary that has undergone semantic shifts, enabling students to master not only *kitābiyyah* (classical) Arabic but also *‘āmiyyah*

⁴⁸ Albirini, A. (2020). Language-identity dynamics in post-ARAB Spring era: The case of Jordan. In *The Routledge handbook of Arabic and identity* (pp. 176-193). Routledge.

⁴⁹ Sharaf Eldin, A. A. T., Hamouda, W., Reda Ali, W., & Mohamed, H. S. (2024). The role of metaphor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a cognitive linguistic approach. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11(1), 2394283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2394283>

⁵⁰ Wierzbicka, A. (2018). *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language*. Oxford University Press

⁵¹ Rini, R. (2019). Ushul al-Nahwi al-Arabi: Kajian Tentang Landasan Ilmu Nahwu. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 3(1 May), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v3i1.773>

⁵² Iswanto, R. (2017). Pembelajaran bahasa arab dengan pemanfaatan teknologi. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 1(2 December), 139-152. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v1i2.286>

(everyday) Arabic. This aligns with the cultural semantics approach, which views language as a reflection of cultural practices and social values.⁵³

Second, integrating semantic shift studies into learning encourages students to develop pragmatic and intercultural competence. They learn not only the lexical meanings of words but also the Arab digital cultural contexts that influence meaning changes. For example, the term هاشتاغ (*hāshṭāgh*) is not merely understood as “hashtag,” but also as a cultural symbol of participation in modern Arab public discourse.⁵⁴

Third, the application of this approach enriches pedagogical strategies by integrating cultural context into learning materials and classroom media. Since learning materials and media are key components of Arabic language instruction,⁵⁵ incorporating cultural context makes the learning process more relevant and meaningful. By examining cases of semantic shift on social media, teachers can design project-based learning activities, such as analyzing Arabic posts on Twitter (X) or Instagram to identify changes in word meanings. This not only enhances student engagement through technology and interactive media⁵⁶ but also fosters critical thinking skills, digital literacy, and cultural awareness.

In conclusion, the study of semantic shifts in Arab social media is not only theoretically significant in the fields of linguistics and cultural semantics but also makes a tangible contribution to the development of contextual, interactive, and culturally grounded approaches to Arabic language learning.

Conclusion

In contemporary social and digital contexts, the Arabic language has undergone significant semantic shifts that reflect the dynamic interaction between culture, identity, and modern Arab social realities. These shifts demonstrate how words that once carried neutral, formal, or religious meanings have acquired new emotional, social, and ideological nuances through their use on social media platforms. In terms of form, these semantic shifts can be categorized into several main patterns: (1) Semantic broadening, when a classical term expands to cover new meanings. For example, كَفُو (*kafū*), which originally meant “equal” or “suitable,” is now used online to mean “cool,” “awesome,” or “admirable”; (2)

⁵³ Goddard, C., & Wierzbicka, A. (2014). *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, and Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁴ Sarkhoh, N., & KhosraviNik, M. (2020). Social media discourses of Arabism and the negotiation of Self in the Middle East. *World Englishes*, 39(4), 609-622. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12502>

⁵⁵ Saleh, S. R., Hula, I. R. N., & Doni, C. P. (2025). Design and Development of Arabic Language Style for the Needs of Beginner-Level Speaking Proficiency Materials. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 9(1), 205-226. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v9i1.11618>

⁵⁶ Dahlia, I., Azzahra, L. Q., Fauziah, A., & Gunawan, R. (2025). Developing ‘Mumtaz Al-Lughah Al-Arabiyyah’: QR Code Innovation for Arabic Learning. *Arabiyatuna: Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, 9(1), 95-116. <https://doi.org/10.29240/jba.v9i1.11295>

Semantic narrowing, when a word's meaning becomes more specific. For instance, مُتَابِع (*mutābiʿ*) once referred to a “follower” in a general sense, but now primarily denotes a “social media follower” on platforms such as Twitter (X) or Instagram; (3) Connotative shift, when a word acquires new emotional or evaluative meaning. For example, زَنْآنَة (*zanāna*), which literally means “buzzing,” is now used metaphorically to refer to a “military drone,” particularly in the context of the Gaza conflict; and (4) Symbolic reinterpretation, as seen in the hashtag #البطيخ (#watermelon), which has become a symbol of Palestinian solidarity and identity in Arab digital culture, the fruit's colors representing the banned Palestinian flag.

These patterns reveal that language does not merely react to social change; it also functions as an active medium of cultural and political expression. Social media, in particular, serves as a new linguistic arena where meanings are continuously negotiated and redefined by communities of speakers.

The cultural factors influencing these semantic shifts include: (1) Collective identity and social solidarity: language is used to express group belonging and unity, such as support for Palestine or regional Arab identities; (2) Technology and digital media: online platforms accelerate meaning change and promote more informal, emotional, and visually mediated communication; (3) Political and social dynamics: socio-political events in the Arab world, including conflict, censorship, and social movements, often infuse words and symbols with ideological significance; and (4) Traditional values and modernity: the coexistence of classical Arabic (*fushḥa*) and colloquial varieties (*ʿammiyya*) in online discourse encourages creativity, adaptability, and semantic flexibility.

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