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SEMANTIC DISTRIBUTION IN ARABIC DRAMA: A STUDY IN THE MECHANISMS OF MEANING FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper proposes a "Semantic Distribution" framework as a novel methodology for analyzing Arabic drama. Moving beyond traditional, monolithic interpretations, the study conceptualizes the Arabic dramatic text as a dynamic "semiotic ecosystem" where meaning is not centrally located but emerges from the complex interplay of its constituent parts. The paper delineates four primary mechanisms through which meaning is systematically dispersed: (1) the mechanism of character, where persona functions as a semantic field through linguistic registers and narrative roles; (2) the mechanism of dialogue, which generates meaning through ideological conflict and strategic subtext; (3) the mechanism of space and mise-en-scène, where culturally coded settings and objects act as potent signifiers; and (4) the mechanism of structural and symbolic patterning, which weaves heritage forms and recurring motifs into a deep semantic architecture. Governed by the core principles of Multiplicity, Interaction, and Accumulation, this model reveals how Arabic playwrights navigate complex socio-political landscapes and encode polyvocal meanings. The framework offers a culturally-attuned analytical tool that captures the distributed nature of meaning in Arabic drama, reflecting the multifaceted and contested realities of modern and contemporary Arab experience.

KEYWORDS: *Semantic Distribution; Arabic Drama; Semiotic Ecosystem; Polyvocality; Dramatic Mechanisms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Polyphonic Nature of the Arabic Dramatic Text

Arabic drama represents a complex artistic tradition where meaning emerges from the dynamic interplay of competing voices, social, political, religious, and gendered, often rooted in a rich cultural heritage of storytelling, poetry, and historical narrative (Al-Hakim, 1977). The dramatic text in the Arab context functions as a polyphonic space where multiple discourses converge and contest, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Arab societies and their ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity (Wannous, 1996). This polyvocality is particularly evident in works that engage with pressing socio-political issues while drawing from the deep well of Arab cultural heritage (turath).

The central problem this research addresses is the need to move beyond singular, allegorical readings of Arabic plays toward a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is dynamically woven through the complex fabric of linguistic registers, cultural codes, and historical subtexts. While traditional approaches to Arabic dramatic criticism have often sought unified interpretations (Badawi, 1988), contemporary scholarship

requires analytical frameworks capable of capturing the distributed and often contradictory nature of meaning in these works.

Defining the "Semantic Distribution" Framework

This study conceptualizes semantic distribution as the systematic process through which meaning is allocated across different components of a dramatic work. In the context of Arabic drama, this involves examining how significance is dispersed among elements such as character dialects, symbolic props, architectural spaces, and intertextual references to classical Arabic literature (El-Enany, 1993). The framework proposed here represents a departure from linear narrative analysis predominant in early Arabic dramatic criticism, emphasizing instead a synchronic and relational model of meaning that is particularly suited to the allusive and layered nature of much Arabic drama. The concept of semantic distribution allows for a more sophisticated engagement with the ways Arabic playwrights encode multiple layers of meaning, often as a strategy to navigate political censorship or to address complex social issues indirectly (Al-Ra'i, 1999). This approach acknowledges that the "complete" meaning of an Arabic dramatic work emerges not from any single element but from the complex interactions between all its constituent parts.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Semiotics and Arab Dramaturgy

This research positions itself within the broader framework of semiotic theory, drawing particularly on the work of Saussure (1916/2011) and Peirce (1931-1958) as developed for theatrical analysis by Keir Elam (1980). However, it substantially engages with foundational Arab dramatic theorists, most notably Tawfiq al-Hakim's conceptualization of the "intellectual theatre" (al-masrah al-dhihni) and Sa'dallah Wannous's later development of "theatre of politicization" (masrah al-tasyees) (Wannous, 1996). The study incorporates concepts from narratology, particularly Greimas' (1966) actantial model, to analyze character function and narrative structure. However, it adapts these Western theoretical frameworks to account for culturally specific archetypes from the Arab turath, such as the Juha figure, the Taghreebi (stranger/outsider), and narrative patterns derived from classical Arabic literature like the Maqamat and Arabian Nights (Berque, 1974). This theoretical hybridity reflects the complex positioning of modern Arabic drama itself, situated between global theatrical influences and local cultural traditions.

The aim of this research is to construct and apply a theoretical model that identifies and describes the primary mechanisms of semantic distribution in modern and contemporary Arabic drama. This model seeks to provide a systematic approach to analyzing how meaning is produced, distributed, and negotiated within Arabic dramatic texts from the early 20th century to the present. The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the key structural components in Arabic drama that serve as primary vehicles for semantic distribution, and how do they function within specific cultural and historical contexts?

Towards a Model of Semantic Distribution: Theoretical Propositions

The Play as a Semiotic Ecosystem

Building upon Keir Elam's (1980) foundational work in theatrical semiotics, this study proposes to conceptualize the Arabic dramatic text as a dynamic semiotic ecosystem. This framework moves beyond analyzing isolated elements to understanding the play as an interactive network of signs where meaning is fundamentally relational and emergent. Within this ecosystem, signs do not carry fixed meanings but derive their significance from their position within the network and their interactions with other signs (Elam, 1980; Boleda, 2020). This perspective is particularly potent for Arabic drama, where meaning often emerges from the inherent tension between foundational cultural binaries.

The most generative of these tensions is that between Turath (تراث - tradition/heritage) and Hadatha (حداثة - modernity). This dialectic is not merely a thematic concern but a structural principle of the semiotic ecosystem. A traditional object like a Mankhura (hookah) placed in a modern setting, or a classical poetic verse (Qasida) quoted in a contemporary political argument, creates a semiotic node where cultural meanings collide and reconfigure (Al-Hakim, 1977; El-Enany, 1993). As the playwright Sa'dallah Wannous (1996) argued, the modern Arab intellectual exists in a state of constant negotiation with the past, a condition that his "theatre of politicization" (masrah al-tasyees) stages through such semiotic clashes. Furthermore, the ecosystem is shaped

by the tension between the local (al-Mahalli المحلي) and the global (al-Aalami العالمي). The local encompasses specific dialects, regional customs, and indigenous performance traditions, while the global includes influences from Western theatrical forms, transnational political ideologies, and globalized media. A play might incorporate the local structure of a Sira Sha'biyya (folk epic) while addressing global issues of human rights, creating a layered semantic field where different systems of meaning interact (Amin, 2019; Damiano et al., 2019). This ecosystem is therefore not a closed system but a permeable one, where external cultural and political forces constantly act upon its internal relations, making the distribution of meaning a process that is both culturally specific and globally engaged.

Core Principles of Distribution

To analyze the dynamics of this semiotic ecosystem, this model is built upon three core principles that govern how meaning is distributed across the dramatic text.

Principle of Multiplicity

This principle asserts that meaning in Arabic drama is deliberately dispersed across various elements, actively resisting monolithic or authoritarian interpretation. This is a defining feature of works that engage in political or social critique, where a direct, centralized message would be dangerous or reductive (Wannous, 1996; Tamer, & Anwal, 2009). A single, authoritative "truth" is replaced by a plurality of competing perspectives, embodied by different characters, visual symbols, and linguistic registers. For instance, the meaning of "justice" in a play is not vested solely in a protagonist's dialogue. Instead, it is distributed across multiple, often contradictory, signs: the corrupt judge's actions, the set design of a dilapidated courtroom, the folk songs about fairness sung by a chorus, and the ironic use of religious texts. This distribution forces the audience to actively construct meaning from disparate fragments, a process that mirrors the complex experience of navigating authoritarian discourse in society, where official narratives are constantly undermined by lived reality (Erlikhman & Kulchytska, 2024). The principle of multiplicity thus aligns with a distributional semantics approach in linguistics, where the meaning of a unit is a function of its relations with all other units in the system (Lenci, 2008; Boleda, 2020).

Principle of Interaction

Meaning is not merely present in multiple locations; it is actively generated through the interplay between these distributed meanings. Significance arises from the relationships – whether of conflict, harmony, irony, or reinforcement – between different semantic nodes (Culpeper & McIntyre, 2010; Eliasmith, 2003). The most salient example in Arabic drama is the linguistic interaction between Classical Arabic (Fus'ha الفصحى) and colloquial dialects (Ammiyya عامية). Fus'ha often carries the semantic weight of tradition, religious authority, officialdom, and pan-Arab identity. Ammiyya, in contrast, signifies the local, the immediate, the personal, and the subversive (Al Khaili, 2006). When a character switches from one register to another, or when two characters speak in different registers, the resulting semantic friction produces profound meaning about power, identity, and social stratification (Altamimi, 2024). For example, a character may use Fus'ha to recite a law that legitimizes oppression, while another character responds in a visceral, emotionally charged Ammiyya that exposes the human cost of that law. The meaning lies not in either language alone, but in their dialogic clash. This interaction extends beyond language to the juxtaposition of scenes, the conflict between a character's words and actions, and the contrast between visual and auditory signs (Zhang & Hossain, 2012).

Principle of Accumulation

Semantic distribution is a dynamic process over time. This principle posits that meaning is cumulative, with certain signs gaining semantic weight and complexity through repetition and variation across the dramatic narrative (Gasser, 1991; Taib et al., 2024). A symbol like the Kuffiyyeh (كوفية) may first appear as a simple item of clothing. Its second appearance might coincide with a nationalist speech, beginning its association with political resistance. A third appearance, perhaps stained or torn, could accumulate connotations of struggle and sacrifice. By the play's end, the Kuffiyyeh has become a dense semantic node, carrying the accumulated history of all its previous appearances (Van Rijsselbergen et al., 2009). Similarly, a recurring poetic verse or a musical motif (Muwashshah) can be introduced in one context and then repeated in progressively different or more intense situations, each iteration adding a new layer of meaning and emotional resonance (Aliyev & Akbarova, 2024; Дмитрук & Остапенко, 2022). This principle explains how Arabic drama, with its roots in

oral and poetic traditions where repetition is a key aesthetic device, builds profound thematic depth and emotional power, guiding the audience's interpretation through a carefully orchestrated process of semantic layering.

The Mechanisms of Distribution: An Analytical Framework for Arabic Drama

This section delineates the primary mechanisms through which semantic distribution operates within Arabic dramatic works. Moving beyond theoretical propositions, this framework provides concrete analytical tools for examining how meaning is systematically dispersed across character construction, dialogue, spatial representation, and structural patterning.

The Mechanism of Character: Persona as a Semantic Field

In Arabic drama, characters function not merely as psychological entities but as complex semantic fields where cultural, social, and political meanings converge and interact (Culpeper & McIntyre, 2010). This mechanism operates through two primary dimensions:

Idiolect, Dialect, and Ideology

The linguistic choices assigned to characters serve as powerful semantic markers that construct specific worldviews and social identities. As Al Khaili (2006) demonstrates in her analysis of theatrical translation, the strategic use of specific dialects – Cairene, Levantine, or Bedouin – carries profound cultural connotations that transcend mere geographical identification. The oscillation between Fus'ha (Classical Arabic) and Ammiyya (colloquial dialects) creates what Elam (1980) would term "semiotic friction," where meaning emerges from the tension between linguistic registers. For instance, in Sa'dallah Wannous's plays, characters who switch from Fus'ha to Ammiyya often reveal the gap between official discourse and lived experience. As Wannous (1996) articulates, this linguistic duality mirrors the Arab intellectual's struggle between cultural heritage and contemporary reality. The distribution of semantic content across different linguistic registers enables playwrights to encode complex social commentaries about class, education, and authenticity (Altamimi, 2024). This linguistic distribution creates what Boleda (2020) identifies as a "distributional semantics" where meaning arises from the systematic patterns of linguistic co-occurrence and contrast.

Actantial Function and Thematic Role

Building on Greimas' (1966) actantial model, Arabic dramatic characters embody both narrative functions and thematic significations. However, this framework extends Greimas' structuralism by examining how these functions interact with culturally specific conceptual frameworks. Characters frequently personify abstract concepts central to the Arab intellectual landscape, such as Al-Mujtama' al-Mughtasab (the stolen society), Al-Hurriyya wa al-Karama (freedom and dignity), or Al-Qahr (oppression).

In Tawfiq al-Hakim's works, for example, characters often represent what Damiano et al. (2019) would classify as "dramatic ontologies" – embodiments of philosophical concepts particular to their cultural context. The protagonist in Al-Hakim's (1977) "Theatre of Society" frequently embodies the tension between traditional values and modern aspirations, distributing the semantic weight of this cultural conflict across multiple character interactions. Through what Eliasmith (2003) describes as "semantic pointers," these characters become focal points for distributed meaning, where their narrative functions (as heroes, opponents, or helpers) intersect with their thematic roles as representatives of broader social and philosophical concerns.

The Mechanism of Dialogue: The Dynamics of Utterance

Dialogue in Arabic drama operates as a dynamic semantic mechanism where meaning is generated through both explicit exchange and implicit signification, distributing semantic content across what is said and what remains unsaid.

Dialogic Conflict

The clash of worldviews in Arabic dramatic dialogue creates what Zhang and Hossain (2012) identify as "contextual affect detection" points, where semantic meaning emerges from the emotional and ideological friction between characters. The perennial debates between heritage (turath) and modernity (hadatha), or between patriarchal authority and feminist resistance, function as semantic distribution nodes where meaning is not contained in individual speeches but generated through their interaction. As Amin (2019) observes in

contemporary Arab theater, these dialogic conflicts often take the form of what he terms "alternative dramaturgy," where traditional power structures are challenged through strategic verbal exchanges. The semantic content of such dialogues is distributed across the entire exchange rather than residing in any single utterance, creating what Lenci (2008) would characterize as a "distributional semantic space" where meanings are relationally defined. This mechanism enables Arabic drama to stage complex ideological battles while distributing semantic responsibility across multiple perspectives, thus avoiding simplistic moral or political positioning.

Subtext and the Unspoken

Perhaps the most sophisticated semantic mechanism in Arabic drama operates through what remains unarticulated. As Tamer and Anwal (2009) demonstrate in their analysis of "discourse implicitness," the semantic charge of political censorship and social taboos often manifests through strategic silences, evasions, and subtextual implications. In contexts of political repression, the most significant meanings are necessarily distributed through what Erlikhman and Kulchytska (2024) term the "implicitness in drama" – the gaps and absences that audiences must semantically complete.

This mechanism aligns with what Gasser (1991) identifies in "open systems semantics," where meaning emerges from the interaction between explicit content and contextual knowledge. The unspoken critique of authoritarianism, the implied challenge to social conventions, or the subtle subversion of religious dogma – these distributed meanings rely on the audience's ability to decode the semantic significance of silence and evasion. As Wannous (1996) powerfully demonstrated in his later works, this distribution of meaning through absence becomes a political strategy, engaging audiences as active participants in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of explicit messages.

The Mechanism of Space and *Mise-en-Scène*

The spatial and visual elements of Arabic drama constitute a crucial mechanism for semantic distribution, where meaning is encoded in physical environments and objects that carry cultural and political resonances.

The Semiotics of Setting

Dramatic locations in Arabic theater function as what Damiano et al. (2019) would classify within the "ontology of drama" as semantically charged environments. The Hara (alley), Diwan (reception room), Madafa (guest room), and prison cell are not neutral backdrops but active semantic elements that inform and shape the dramatic action. Each of these spaces carries inherent cultural, social, and political meanings that distribute semantic content visually rather than verbally. As El-Enany (1993) observes in his study of Egyptian narratives, the Hara typically represents the complex social fabric of traditional communities, while the Diwan often signifies patriarchal authority and family hierarchy. The semantic distribution across these spaces enables playwrights to stage social conflicts through environmental symbolism rather than explicit dialogue. Van Rijsselbergen et al. (2009) would categorize this as "semantic adaptation in drama production," where spatial semantics are carefully calibrated to evoke specific cultural associations. This mechanism allows for the distribution of meaning across the visual field, creating what Elam (1980) identifies as a "visual semiotics" that operates alongside and in dialogue with verbal semantics.

Props and Objects as Signifiers

Key objects in Arabic drama function as what Peirce (1931-1958) would classify as "indexical signs" that point toward complex cultural meanings. The Qur'an, a national flag, a family heirloom, or a weapon becomes a focal point for condensed and often contested meaning, distributing semantic weight through material culture. As Taib et al. (2024) demonstrate in their semantic analysis of cultural objects, these props carry what they term "emotive interjections" – concentrated emotional and cultural significance that transcends their physical properties.

The distribution of meaning through objects creates what Aliyev and Akbarova (2024) identify as "lexico-semantic networks" where physical items become nodes in a web of associations. A single object like a copy of the Qur'an might simultaneously signify religious devotion, cultural identity, political ideology, and personal morality, with different characters interacting with it in ways that activate different semantic dimensions. This mechanism enables Arabic drama to compress complex meanings into potent visual

symbols, distributing semantic content across the material landscape of the performance in ways that resonate with culturally specific symbolic systems.

The Mechanism of Structural and Symbolic Patterning

The architectural and symbolic organization of Arabic dramatic works constitutes a macro-level mechanism for semantic distribution, operating through both narrative structures and recurring symbolic patterns.

Plot Architecture and Heritage Forms

The sequence of events in Arabic drama often interacts with traditional narrative structures like the Maqama (rhymed prose narrative) or the Sira Sha'biyya (folk epic) to create semantic tension between traditional and contemporary storytelling modes. As Badawi (1988) documents in early Arabic drama, the integration of heritage forms into modern dramatic structure creates a semantic dialogue between past and present, distributing meaning across temporal frameworks. This structural mechanism operates through what Дмитриук and Остапенко (2022) term the "lexico-semantic aspect" of dramaturgy, where the very organization of plot events carries cultural significance. The episodic structure derived from Maqama tradition, for instance, distributes semantic content across relatively autonomous units that collectively build toward thematic resolution. Similarly, the incorporation of Sira Sha'biyya narrative patterns enables the distribution of heroic semantics across multiple episodes and trials, creating what Culpeper and McIntyre (2010) would characterize as "activity types" that carry culturally specific expectations and meanings.

Networks of Motifs and Symbols

Arabic drama frequently employs networks of recurring images, words, and concepts that form a web of associative meaning transcending individual scenes. Culturally specific motifs such as Al-Nakba (the catastrophe), Al-Manfa (exile), water/thirst, and the desert create semantic networks that distribute meaning through repetition and variation across the dramatic narrative. As Berque (1974) observed in Arab cultural expression, these symbolic networks function as what Lenci (2008) would classify within "distributional semantics" – systems where meaning arises from patterns of co-occurrence and association. The desert motif, for instance, might simultaneously signify spiritual purification, existential emptiness, political isolation, and cultural authenticity, with different scenes activating different semantic dimensions. This mechanism creates what Boleda (2020) identifies as "semantic vectors" that connect disparate dramatic elements into coherent thematic networks. Through this symbolic distribution, Arabic drama builds complex semantic architectures that resonate with deep cultural codes while allowing for nuanced thematic development across the entire dramatic structure.

Discussion: The Interplay of Mechanisms and the Emergence of Meaning

Synthesizing the Framework: A Holistic View

The true analytical power of the semantic distribution model emerges when we examine the interdependence of its mechanisms. Meaning in Arabic drama is not produced in isolation through individual mechanisms, but rather emerges from their dynamic interaction within the dramatic ecosystem. To illustrate this synthesis, we can examine a pivotal scene from Sa'dallah Wannous's *The King's the King* (1977), where the mechanisms of character, dialogue, and space converge to produce profound political meaning. In the scene where the commoner Abu Issa first occupies the throne, the mechanism of character operates through his linguistic oscillation between Fus'ha and Ammiyya. As he shifts from the elevated language of power to the colloquial speech of his origins, he distributes the semantics of authority and authenticity across different linguistic registers (Al Khaili, 2006). Simultaneously, the mechanism of dialogue creates semantic friction through his exchanges with the courtiers, where what remains unspoken – their silent contempt and his internal doubt – carries as much meaning as the explicit dialogue (Tamer & Anwal, 2009). This verbal interplay is framed by the mechanism of space: the throne room itself functions as a dense semantic node where the architecture of power (the elevated throne, the spatial hierarchy) interacts with the characters' movements to question the very nature of political authority (Elam, 1980).

The emergence of meaning occurs precisely at the intersection of these mechanisms. Abu Issa's linguistic instability while occupying the throne room during politically charged dialogues creates a semantic field where power is revealed as performative rather than inherent. As Wannous (1996) intended, the play demonstrates how "theatre can become a rehearsal for revolution" by distributing this revelation across multiple semantic channels rather than stating it directly. This holistic interaction exemplifies what Damiano

et al. (2019) term the "ontology of drama," where meaning emerges from the complex interplay of dramatic components rather than residing in any single element.

The Model's Analytical Power

The semantic distribution framework offers significant advantages for uncovering the deep structure and ideological underpinnings of Arabic plays, particularly through its capacity to move beyond Western-centric models of dramatic analysis. Traditional Western approaches, whether Aristotelian poetics or Freytag's pyramid, often prove inadequate for analyzing Arabic drama because they prioritize narrative linearity and psychological character development over the polyphonic, often non-linear semantic networks that characterize much of Arab theatrical production (Amin, 2019). The distributional model reveals how Arabic plays often operate through what Boleda (2020) would characterize as "semantic vectors" rather than causal plotlines. For instance, in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The People of the Cave* (1933), the meaning of spiritual alienation emerges not through character transformation in the Western psychological sense, but through the distributed accumulation of semantic cues: the architectural symbolism of the cave (space), the characters' linguistic anachronisms (character), and the dialogic tension between sacred and profane temporalities (dialogue). This approach allows analysts to trace what Erlichman and Kulchytska (2024) identify as the "implicit architecture" of the play – the underlying semantic structure that may contradict or complicate the surface narrative.

Furthermore, the framework proves particularly valuable for decoding the ideological complexity of contemporary Arab theatre, such as the works of Lenin El-Ramly. In plays like *The Public Business* (1979), the semantic distribution model reveals how political critique is strategically dispersed across multiple mechanisms to evade censorship while delivering potent social commentary. The ideological message emerges not from direct statement but from the careful orchestration of character dialects, spatial arrangements, and symbolic patterning – a distributed semantic strategy that Western dramatic analysis, with its focus on direct conflict and resolution, might easily overlook.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Model

While the semantic distribution framework offers significant analytical insights, its limitations and boundaries must be clearly acknowledged to ensure its proper application and future development.

Textual Focus versus Performance Dynamics

The primary limitation of the current model lies in its focus on the written text rather than performance elements. As Elam (1980) emphasizes, theatre is fundamentally an embodied art where paralinguistic features, voice modulation, gesture, pacing, and physical presence, contribute substantially to meaning-making. The semantic distribution in a performed play includes what Taib et al. (2024) term "emotive interjections" in delivery and physicality that transcend the written dialogue. For instance, the profound silence Wannous builds into his texts takes on different semantic weights depending on an actor's duration of pause, physical posture, and facial expression during performance. However, this limitation also presents an opportunity for model adaptation. Future research could extend the framework to incorporate what Van Rijsselbergen et al. (2009) call "semantic adaptation in drama production," analyzing how directors and actors distribute meaning through performance choices. The basic principles of multiplicity, interaction, and accumulation could be productively applied to performance analysis, though this would require substantial expansion of the current textual focus.

Adaptability across Dramatic Styles

The model demonstrates variable utility across different Arabic dramatic styles, with its adaptability requiring careful consideration. In poetic drama, such as the works of Ali Ahmed Bakathir, the framework proves exceptionally powerful for tracing how semantic content distributes across intricate linguistic patterns and symbolic networks. The model's mechanism of structural and symbolic patterning effectively captures the complex semantic architecture of poetic Arabic theatre. For social realism, as exemplified by early works of Yusuf Idris, the framework usefully illuminates how social critique distributes across class-marked dialects, realistically detailed settings, and carefully structured social interactions. However, the model may require adjustment for analyzing the psychological depth that often characterizes social realist characterization, as the current framework prioritizes semantic function over psychological interiority. Most challenging is the model's application to Theatre of the Absurd as practiced by playwrights like Alfred Farag. While the principles of multiplicity and accumulation effectively analyze the fragmented semantics of absurdist works,

the framework's reliance on identifiable semantic nodes becomes problematic when meaning itself is presented as elusive or nonsensical. The model would need to incorporate what Eliasmith (2003) calls "semantic pointers to chaos" to fully account for the deliberate semantic instability of absurdist drama. These delimitations, rather than undermining the model's utility, actually chart a course for its future refinement.

Conclusion

Summary of the Proposed Model

This study has proposed a comprehensive model of semantic distribution as a framework for analyzing Arabic drama. The model identifies and elaborates four core mechanisms through which meaning is systematically dispersed across the dramatic text, moving beyond unitary interpretations to capture the inherent polyvocality of Arab theatrical expression. First, the mechanism of character operates through linguistic markers and narrative functions, where persona becomes a semantic field through the strategic use of dialect (Ammiyya) and classical Arabic (Fus'ha), as well as through the embodiment of culturally specific conceptual roles (Al Khaili, 2006; Wannous, 1996). Second, the mechanism of dialogue functions as a site of ideological conflict and subtext, where meaning is generated not only in what is said but profoundly in what remains unspoken, navigating political censorship and social taboos (Tamer & Anwal, 2009). Third, the mechanism of space utilizes culturally coded settings—the Hara, the Diwan—and potent objects as signifiers that condense complex cultural and political meanings into the visual and spatial realm (Elam, 1980; Damiano et al., 2019). Finally, the mechanism of structural and symbolic patterning draws from heritage forms like the Maqama and weaves networks of recurring motifs to create a deep, associative semantic architecture (Badawi, 1988; Boleda, 2020). Together, these mechanisms form an integrated analytical system for tracing how meaning is allocated and negotiated within the Arabic dramatic text.

The Distributed Nature of Dramatic Meaning in the Arab Context

The fundamental assertion of this research is that the totality of an Arabic play's meaning is an emergent property of its distributed semantic network. It is not a message to be extracted from a singular character, a pivotal line of dialogue, or a central symbol. Instead, meaning arises from the complex interactions—the conflicts, harmonies, and accumulations—across the entire ecosystem of signs constituted by the four mechanisms. This distributed nature is not merely an aesthetic or technical feature; it is a direct reflection of the multifaceted, often contested, and dynamically evolving nature of Arab identity and experience in the modern and contemporary periods (Amin, 2019; El-Enany, 1993). The model demonstrates that the semantic structure of the plays themselves often mirrors the complex social and political realities they engage with, where monolithic narratives are unavailable or undesirable, and truth must be assembled from a plurality of competing, complementary, and fragmented voices.

Implications and Future Applications

The semantic distribution model carries significant implications and opens several avenues for future scholarly inquiry. For Dramatic Criticism, this framework provides a structured, culturally-attuned methodology for the analysis of Arabic plays. It offers a viable alternative to the imposition of Western-centric analytical models, which often prioritize linear plot and psychological character development over the polyphonic and symbolic strategies prevalent in much of Arabic drama. Critics and scholars can employ this model to uncover the deep structural and ideological underpinnings of plays, moving beyond thematic description to a systematic accounting of how those themes are semantically engineered and distributed throughout the text. For Future Research, multiple productive applications of the model can be envisioned. First, it can be applied to specific regional and identity-based corpuses, such as the distinct traditions of Gulf drama, the post-colonial explorations of North African theatre, or the unique perspectives found in plays by women playwrights, to illuminate how semantic distribution strategies vary across different cultural and social contexts within the Arab world. Second, the model invites comparative studies with other dramatic traditions, for instance, by examining how semantic distribution in Arabic drama compares with similar processes in African, Latin American, or South Asian theatrical forms, potentially revealing shared post-colonial or non-Western narrative strategies. Finally, a crucial extension of this work would be its adaptation for performance analysis. While this study has delimited its focus to the written text, future research could expand the framework to incorporate the paralinguistic, gestural, and directorial choices that further distribute meaning in actual performance, building on the work of scholars like Elam (1980) to create a comprehensive semantics of Arabic theatrical production.

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