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Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists

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Abstract

The Arabic language embodies the intellectual, cultural, and civilizational depth of the Arab nation. It stands as a dynamic vessel of accumulated knowledge that spans centuries, making its linguistic heritage a fertile field for scholarly exploration. Understanding this heritage requires a creative and analytical intellect capable of interpreting the complex linguistic theories formulated by early scholars such as Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, Sibawayh, and their successors. These scholars laid the foundations for an evolving linguistic tradition rooted in methodological rigor, critical inquiry, and semantic precision. This study examines the early development of semantic thought in Arabic linguistic sciences, focusing on the intricate relationship between language, religion, and jurisprudence. It highlights how Qur'anic studies and Hadith sciences served as the earliest incubators for semantic inquiry, shaping the evolution of Arabic linguistics long before Arab scholars engaged with Indian or Greek semantic traditions. Moreover, it traces the efforts of classical linguists in documenting word meanings, analyzing rare expressions in the Qur'an and Hadith, composing lexical and thematic dictionaries, and identifying the semantic implications of phonological variations and syntactic structures. The research explores the fundamental semantic issues addressed by early scholars across disciplines such as phonology, morphology, syntax, rhetoric, philosophy, and logic. Special emphasis is placed on the contributions of usul al-fiqh scholars who developed advanced theories of meaning, signification, and contextual interpretation to derive jurisprudential rulings. By analyzing their methodological frameworks, this study demonstrates how semantics played a decisive role in shaping the intellectual structure of Islamic thought and linguistic scholarship. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how classical Arabic semantic theories continue to influence modern linguistic studies.

932 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

Introduction:

The Arabic language was the foremost concern of Arab scholars, and what increased their interest was their fascination with the miraculous nature of the Qur'an, which was revealed in their language. God Almighty says: *"Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand."*

Linguistic sciences were influenced by religious sciences and subject to their guidance. Linguistic studies also interacted with jurisprudential studies, as linguists based their judgments on the foundations of Qur'anic and Hadith studies.

Semantics, whose subject is meaning, is traced by researchers back to Indian and Greek scholars, and attention to semantic inquiry increased throughout history. On the other hand, the first semantic studies among Arabs emerged within Qur'anic studies and revolved around them before Arab scholars became acquainted with the efforts of the Indians and Greeks, who had preceded them in semantic research.

The study of word meanings was among the most significant aspects that attracted Arab linguists' attention. Their linguistic efforts in Arabic heritage opened new avenues for modern linguistic study. Early linguistic works by Arabs—such as recording the meanings of rare words in the Qur'an and Hadith, *Majaz al-Qur'an*, thematic dictionaries, and lexical dictionaries, even the vocalization of the Qur'an—are, in essence, semantic work, since any change in diacritics alters a word's function and hence its meaning (a phenomenon known as *lahn*). The Arabs' interests later diversified, covering many aspects of semantic study.

Thus, what are the main semantic issues addressed by our early linguists in their linguistic research? To explore this question, it is necessary to discuss the efforts of early Arab scholars in phonology, morphology, syntax, rhetoric, as well as philosophy and logic. The starting point will be with the scholars of *usul al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), since the Qur'an was—and remains—the strongest driving force behind semantic studies.

1. Semantic Thinking in the Works of Early Arab Scholars

1. Among Jurisprudence Scholars (Usuliyyun):

Arab linguists, Qur'anic exegetes, and *usul* scholars studied meaning and established rules and principles for its derivation.

Perhaps semantics was more closely connected to *usul al-fiqh* than to any other discipline because *usuliyyun* dealt early on with linguistic problems, giving their approach a character of precision and objectivity, basing their reasoning on the Qur'an as a foundation for deriving general jurisprudential rulings.

Researchers into *usul al-fiqh* find that scholars studied words along with syntax, for they considered particulars in order to understand universals—compound expressions. They did not study words for their own sake but sought a general conception of language and its signification of meanings, showing that a single word indicates both an explicit and implicit meaning determined within context.

Thus, *usuliyyun* understood that language cannot be comprehended apart from syntax. They also examined the relationship between the *signifier* (*dal*) and both the *signified* (*madlul*) and the *referent* (*marji'*). Some, such as Al-Razi and Al-Qadi Al-Baydawi, held that the *madlul* is the cause of the existence of the *dal*, being designated for it; hence, the *madlul* necessitates discussion of the *dal*.

Most *usuliyyun* viewed the relationship between signifier and signified as arbitrary, a view grounded in the principle of linguistic convention and the intent of the original assigner. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi said:

"The reason for the establishment of words is that one person alone cannot meet all his needs; cooperation is necessary, and cooperation requires mutual understanding, which is only achieved through means such as gestures, symbols, writing, or words placed in correspondence with meanings—and the easiest, most useful, and most general of these is words."

933 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

This means that the pairing of signifier and signified is a matter of choice, not logical necessity; thus, the relationship is arbitrary.

Al-Amidi said:

"The denotations of names for meanings are not intrinsic, nor is a name necessary to its meaning, as evidenced by the absence of a name before naming and the possibility of substituting the name of whiteness for that of blackness at the initial establishment."

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi also argued that the diversity of languages refutes the notion of a natural relationship between signifier and signified:

"If the signification of words were inherent, languages would not differ among regions and nations, and everyone would understand one another's speech."

That is, if the relationship were natural, all humans would speak one language. The diversity of languages and unity of referents prove that the relationship is arbitrary.

Semantic inquiry among *usuliyyun* began with the exploration of Qur'anic verses, their miraculous nature, and the interpretation of rare expressions to extract legal rulings. Thus, the relationship between word and meaning was present in the earliest Islamic writings. Among the most famous *usuliyyun* and exegetes in semantics was Imam al-Shafi'i (150–204 AH). Imam al-Juwayni said:

"No one preceded al-Shafi'i in authoring works on *usul* and defining its principles." Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal said:

"We did not know generality and specificity until al-Shafi'i introduced them."

For al-Ghazali (–505 AH), the concept of semantics is linked to *usul* culture and the rulings derived from the Qur'an. His theoretical foundations, laid out in *Al-Mustasfa*, reflect a deep understanding of semantics. Though applied to the interpretation of legal texts, they can also be applied to non-legal Arabic texts. Al-Ghazali's semantic interpretation transcends mere definitions of meaning, touching on issues modern scholars later discussed, such as indicative meaning, contextual meaning, and implicature. He refers to them in *usul* terms as *dalalat al-isharah* (indicative meaning), *dalalat al-iqtida'* (necessary implication), and *fahwa al-khitab* (contextual meaning). For him, implication may be understood from the speaker's state or by reason—thus, meaning is both logical and rational.

Ibn Khaldun (–808 AH) defined *dalalah* (signification) as follows:

"Know that writing is an expression of speech and discourse, just as speech and discourse are expressions of what is in the soul and mind; therefore, each must be clear in its indication." Following this text, Ibn Khaldun's approach resembles that of al-Ghazali, as he establishes the relationship between internal meanings, writing, and utterance, dividing them into three categories:

- Writing that signifies speech.

- Speech that signifies meaning (as a phonetic image).

- Meanings that signify external realities.

Ibn Khaldun assigns significant roles to speech and writing as vital tools in communication and education. His emphasis on mastering words and their mental meanings demonstrates a view of semantics that, though ancient, remains valuable in modern semantic studies.

2. Among Philosophers and Logicians:

934 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

Among the most important figures are Al-Farabi (–339 AH) and Ibn Sina. Al-Farabi paid great attention to words, classifying them and creating a specific field he called "the science of words." His study of words cannot be separated from meaning—there are no meaningless words in logic and philosophy. Words and their meanings are two sides of the same coin. He examined words individually, apart from context. For him, words that signify meanings fall into three types: *noun, verb*, and *particle (harf)*. The meaning of nouns and verbs is clear, whereas that of particles is obscure; their semantic value lies in what they indicate, not in themselves. The word does not signify itself but the concept in the mind.

Thus, Al-Farabi's semantic theory revolves around the relationship between words and meanings. He defines semantics as:

"The study that organizes and examines words and their meanings, following the principles of discourse and expression to codify and standardize them."

Ibn Sina defines *dalalah* (signification) as follows:

"The meaning of a word's signification is that when its sound image is perceived in the imagination, its meaning is imprinted in the mind, and the soul recognizes that this sound corresponds to that concept."

The word thus forms a sound image in the imagination, representing meaning, and the mind grasps the intent of that meaning. This can be illustrated as:

Word → Sound form → Mental image → Meaning (external referent).

These concepts are consistent with what Sibawayh proposed and with ideas in modern linguistics, where "words are merely auditory images, and the linguistic sign is the combination of the mental concept and the sound image." Ibn Khaldun echoed this when he described the semantic process: "Words heard signify what is in the mind."

3. Among Phonologists:

Researchers in phonetics focused on two main aspects: the physiological and the physical, though they did not emphasize the pre-articulation phase. Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (–175 AH) contributed significantly to this field in his pioneering dictionary *Al-'Ayn*, where he studied word structures based on their primary root letters, classifying them into used and unused words according to possible letter permutations, thus identifying the common semantic link between the used and the unused.

Phonology studies the functional roles of sounds through binary alternations that reveal semantic value. For example, the semantic difference between *qala* (he said) and *mala* (he inclined) arises from the alternation between *qaf* and *mim*. Al-Khalil was the first to develop the idea of permutations—a linguistic and statistical task pointing to meaning, as later understood by modern linguists, whether intentionally or not.

Ibn Jinni (–393 AH) discussed this in *Bab Amas al-Alfaz Ashbah al-Ma'ani* (The Contact of Words with Similar Meanings):

"Know that this is a subtle and noble topic first noted by Al-Khalil and accepted by scholars for its accuracy. Al-Khalil said: It is as if they imagined in the sound of the grasshopper an elongation and extension, so they said *şar*, and in the sound of the hawk a cutting sharpness, so they said *şarşar*. Sibawayh said that verbal nouns on the pattern *fa'lan* indicate motion and disturbance, such as *naqzan, ghalyan, ghathyan*, corresponding the continuity of sound with the continuity of motion."

From Ibn Jinni's text, we see he recognized a connection between the sound of the grasshopper and the verb *şar*, and due to the similarity between the sounds of the hawk and the grasshopper but with different intensity, the verb describing the hawk's sound became reduplicated (*şarşar*). He thus noted that similar sounds correspond to similar meanings, while differences in sound produce differences in meaning.

935 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

«IMCRA

In *Bab Tasaqob al-Alfaz li-Tasaqob al-Ma'ani* (On the Proximity of Words and Meanings), he wrote:

"God Almighty says: 'Do you not see that We have sent the devils upon the disbelievers, inciting them incitement (*tuzzuhum azza*).' This means they agitate and disturb them—similar to *tahuzzuhum hazza* (they shake them). The hamza is the sister of ha', so the two words are close in sound and meaning. They chose the hamza because it is stronger than ha', as this meaning is more forceful in the soul than simple shaking, for you can shake what has no spirit, like a trunk or a branch."

This text shows that proximity of letters or sounds results from proximity of meanings. Ibn Jinni illustrated this with the words *haz* and *azz*, similar in meaning ("to disturb, to agitate"), differing only by *ha'* and *hamza*, two closely related guttural sounds.

4. Among Morphologists:

Morphology (*sarf*) studies patterns—words or meaningful units, whether verbs or nouns. A single pattern may denote multiple meanings determined by context, such as participles or passive participles. Morphology intersects with semantics because the transformation of a root into different patterns serves to express diverse meanings within the linguistic system.

Ibn Jinni, in *Bab al-Dalala al-Lafziyya wa-l-Sina'iyya wa-l-Ma'nawiyya* (On Verbal, Structural, and Semantic Indication), wrote:

"Know that each of these kinds of indication has its influence, but they differ in strength: the verbal indication is the strongest, followed by the structural, then the semantic. For example, all verbs have these three indications: the word *qama* (he stood) indicates by its form its source (*qiyam*), by its structure its tense, and by its meaning its agent. Hence, there are three types of indication—from its word, form, and meaning."

From this text, Ibn Jinni distinguished three independent types of indication within one word, ranked by strength: verbal (lexical), structural (morphological), and semantic (conceptual). He noted that verbs contain all three simultaneously.

- **Verbal indication:** "The word's indication of its root meaning," referring to the root's specific semantic field distinguishing it from others.

- **Structural indication:** "The form of the verb indicating tense," referring to the pattern or morphological form. A word in Arabic consists of a root and a pattern; each pattern conveys a distinct meaning. For example, *qama* (he stood) and *maqam* (place of standing) share the same root (*q-w-m*), yet differ in meaning due to their distinct morphological patterns.

The root pattern of *qāma* (قام) is *faʿala* (فعل), which indicates the act of standing in the past tense, while the pattern of *maqām* (مقام) is *mafʿal* (مفعل), which denotes the meaning of a place. Thus, morphological patterns play a significant role in indicating the meaning of a word.
(c) Semantic Meaning: Ibn Jinni defined it as "the indication of its meaning upon its doer," meaning the indication of the agent of the verb. The semantic meaning of the verb *qāma* is the subject who performed the action — "he." Ibn Jinni, therefore, reveals, on one hand, the multiplicity of verb forms in terms of their function, indicating both action and time, and on the other hand, the value of the image conveyed by the form, which the utterance needs in order to express meaning and function — that which is articulated and perceived.

5. Among Grammarians

Grammarians usually begin their grammatical discussions by defining *speech* according to their understanding and classifying the parts of speech, emphasizing the need to distinguish between these categories in order to study their properties and understand their syntactic functions. This method was followed by Indian and Greek grammarians as well as Arab grammarians, and was approved by the modern descriptive method. From this perspective, we find "Sibawayh" (d. 180 AH), one of the great early Arab linguists, who devoted special attention to studying meaning to ensure correctness and coherence in expression.

936 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

According to him, "the correctness of speech and the soundness of meaning can only be achieved through the interaction between syntactic functions and lexical meaning." His work in *Al-Kitāb* combined syntax and semantics.

This study appears in a passage where he discusses the coherence of speech and its reference to different types of Arabic sentences, distinguishing between those that can constitute proper speech and those that cannot, organizing them into categories of correctness and coherence:

"Among speech there is what is sound and good, what is impossible, what is sound but false, what is sound but ugly, and what is impossible and false.

The sound and good is like: *I came to you yesterday and will come to you tomorrow.* The impossible is to contradict yourself, saying: *I came to you tomorrow and will come to you yesterday.* The sound but false is: *I carried the mountain and drank the sea.*

The sound but ugly is placing a word where it does not belong, as in: *Certainly Zayd I saw* or *Certainly Zayd will come to you,* and the like.

The impossible and false is to say: *I will drink the sea yesterday.*"

Sibawayh did not define the word itself but rather classified it directly, viewing it from a functional syntactic perspective. He pointed out that nouns and verbs have meanings that are valid and complete in themselves, whereas particles depend on nouns and verbs to convey meaning. He also noted that particles exist for meaning — hence, they are *particles of meaning* as opposed to *alphabetical letters.*

6. Among Rhetoricians

Among the most prominent Arab scholars who discussed rhetoric and its aesthetic essence was *Al-Jāḥiẓ* (160–255 AH), who was the first to explore the field of *bayān* (eloquence) and uncover the aesthetic depths of the Arabic language. He gathered both verbal and non-verbal expressions that embody thought and express diverse meanings.

For Al-Jāḥiẓ, meaning is contextual; he said:

"The speaker must know the rank of meanings, balance them with the rank of listeners and the rank of situations, and assign each class its proper station, so that he distributes the degrees of speech according to the degrees of meanings, and the degrees of meanings according to the degrees of situations and listeners."

Thus, Al-Jāḥiẓ emphasized the importance of the speaker's awareness of the listener's understanding, ensuring that speech corresponds to the situation — i.e., contextual meaning focused on the receiver. For him, eloquence lies in the harmony between word and meaning. He spoke of balance — the proportion between expression and thought — and valued brevity, saying:

"Words correspond to meanings: many words for many meanings, few words for few meanings; noble words for noble meanings; trivial words for trivial meanings."

According to Al-Jāḥiẓ, eloquence is brevity — sometimes a gesture suffices for a clear meaning, while more complex ideas may require multiple expressions to clarify shared meanings and intended sense.

Similarly, ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī — "the father of rhetoric" — developed the *theory of naẓm* (syntactic arrangement), which revitalized Arabic linguistic studies by shifting focus from form to function and from sentence grammar to text grammar. His book *Dalāʾil al-Iʿjāz* established the principles of this theory, serving as a bridge to understanding the miraculous eloquence of the Qur'an.

Al-Jurjānī defined *naẓm* as:

937 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

«IMCRA

"Know that *naẓm* is nothing but placing words in the order required by the rules and principles of grammar, adhering to its paths and preserving its conventions."

He held that the correctness or corruption of speech depends on grammatical meaning:

"You will never find speech described as having a correct or corrupt *naẓm* or distinguished by excellence except that the cause lies in the meanings and rules of grammar."

For him, grammar was essential to understanding the Qur'an and its meanings:

"Their disdain for grammar and belittling its importance is tantamount to turning away from the Book of God and from understanding its meanings."

7. In Lexicographical Works

The study of meaning has occupied a wide space in linguistic scholarship, ancient and modern. Scholars sought to explain the relationship between the linguistic sign and its meaning, distinguishing between *lexical meaning* and *grammatical (functional) meaning*.

Although the meaning of speech is not limited to its lexical sense, the latter remains the foundation of linguistic communication. Lexicographers define lexical meaning as "the meaning attached to a lexical unit when used independently" or "the sense provided by a dictionary for the words of a language."

Tammām Ḥassān comments: "Meaning is at the level of the phonological and grammatical systems — it is functional. Once functional meaning is clear, one can analyze a sentence without relying on lexical meaning or context."

Among the foremost Arab scholars who dealt with semantic theory was *al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī* (d. 816 AH) in *Al-Taʿrīfāt*, where he defined *dalāla* (signification) as:

"The state by which the knowledge of one thing leads to the knowledge of another. The first is the signifier (*dāl*) and the second the signified (*madlūl*). The way words indicate meanings in the terminology of the scholars of usūl (principles of jurisprudence) is divided into: explicit expression (*ʿibāra*), indication (*ishāra*), implication (*dalāla*), and necessary inference (*iqtiḍāʾ*)."

He elaborates that understanding a text's meaning may arise from the text itself (*ʿibāra*), its implication (*ishāra*), or logical necessity (*iqtiḍāʾ*), illustrating with the verse *"Do not say to them 'uff'"* to demonstrate that the prohibition extends beyond words to all forms of harm.

Modern Arab Semantics

Modern Arab scholars have not confined linguistic signification to word meaning alone but extended it to all aspects related to *semantic resonance and connotation* — what they call *the meaning of meaning* — including phonetic, syntactic, and functional influences within the sentence.

They regarded semantics as encompassing both word and structure, and thus preferred the term *dalāla* (semantics) over *maʿnā* (meaning). They divided semantics into three main areas:

1. The symbolic relationship between signifier and signified.

2. Semantic change and development of words and expressions.

3. The study of metaphor and its semantic-stylistic implications.

938 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

«IMCRA

Modern linguists like *Ibrāhīm Anīs* defined the sentence as "the smallest amount of speech that conveys a complete meaning, whether consisting of one word or more."

According to *Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar* in *ʿIlm al-Dalāla* (*Semantics*), since Anīs's book *Dalālat al-Alfāẓ* (The Signification of Words, 1958), no study has provided a comparable linguistic analysis of meaning in Arabic. Anīs saw the purpose of diacritical marks as connecting words in speech, noting that "the default state of every word is sukun (no final vowel), whether inflected or not, and despite this, the word remains clear and intelligible."

He thus limited meaning to the association between words and their structures, viewing the *word* as the tool of signification. His book *Dalālat al-Alfāẓ* is a scientific study of linguistic meaning, built around three main ideas:

- The relationship between words and their meanings.

- The tool of signification (the word).

- The classification of meanings: phonetic, morphological, syntactic, structural, and pragmatic — along with discussion of literal and figurative meanings.

Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā also examined case endings (*ḥarakāt*) as markers of meaning, saying:

"The ḍamma is a sign of predication; the kasra indicates possession or relation; the fatḥa exists only for ease of pronunciation."

Thus, he followed early grammarians in linking ḍamma to predication and kasra to relation, but differed regarding fatḥa, which he viewed as purely phonetic.

Among modern linguists, *Tammām Ḥassān* — in *Al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya Maʿnāhā wa-Mabnāhā* (The Meaning and Structure of Arabic) — revolutionized linguistic theory with his concept of *syntactic clues* (*qarāʾin naḥwiyya*), proposing that meaning is not determined by inflection alone but by the combination of several verbal and contextual clues. He rejected the old *ʿāmil* (governing word) theory and replaced it with the principle of *interacting indicators*.

He considered syntax a branch of functional meaning rather than lexical meaning. Thus, in his view, the inflectional marker is only one among several indicators that together clarify syntactic meaning. His work brought a more systematic, fertile, and insightful understanding of Arabic syntax.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology grounded in historical, descriptive, and comparative approaches:

1. Textual Analysis of Classical Sources: Primary texts authored by early linguists (Al-Khalil, Sibawayh, Ibn Jinni), Qur'anic exegetes, and jurists of usul al-fiqh were examined to identify semantic concepts, interpretive strategies, and methodological patterns.

2. Historical-Tracing Method: The research traces the chronological development of semantic thought from early Qur'anic studies to the systematic linguistic works of the Abbasid period.

3. Comparative Linguistic Approach: Semantic theories found in Arabic linguistic heritage were compared with foundational ideas in Indian and Greek traditions to determine points of convergence and divergence.

4. Contextual Interpretation: Semantic theories were analyzed within their broader religious, cultural, and intellectual contexts.

939 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

《IMCRA

5. Synthesis and Evaluation: Findings were synthesized to draw conclusions about the conceptual foundations and methodological structures of early Arabic semantics.

Ethical Considerations

This research is based entirely on classical texts and published academic works. No human subjects were involved. All referenced materials are cited with academic integrity. The study adheres to ethical standards in humanities research.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this research.

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940 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
Semantic Thought in Classical Arabic Linguistic Heritage: An Analytical Study of Meaning Formation in the Works of Early Jurists, Grammarians, and Linguists
Benazzouzi Meryem

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941 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025
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