

Toward an Arabic Theory of Discourse Analysis: A Critical Examination of Conceptual Importation

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Abstract

Discourse analysis has become a central field in contemporary linguistic and humanities research, offering powerful tools for examining language as a socially embedded practice. In Arab scholarship, discourse analysis has gained increasing prominence through engagement with Western theoretical models, particularly structuralist, post-structuralist, and critical approaches. However, this engagement has often relied on the uncritical importation of concepts developed within different epistemological, cultural, and historical contexts. This situation has generated persistent problems of conceptual ambiguity, terminological inconsistency, and methodological misapplication in the analysis of Arabic discourse.

The present study addresses this problem by critically examining the phenomenon of conceptual importation in Arab discourse studies and by exploring the theoretical conditions necessary for developing an Arabic theory of discourse analysis. The study aims to highlight the epistemological tensions arising from the direct transplantation of foreign concepts and to demonstrate the importance of grounding discourse analysis in Arabic linguistic and intellectual traditions. Methodologically, the research adopts a theoretical–analytical and qualitative non-empirical approach, based on conceptual analysis, comparative reading of Western and Arab discourse scholarship, and critical examination of epistemological compatibility.

The study concludes that while imported discourse models have contributed to methodological renewal, their limitations restrict their explanatory power when applied without contextual mediation. It argues that an Arabic theory of discourse analysis, rooted in linguistic heritage, contextual pragmatics, and the conception of discourse as social practice, offers a viable path beyond imitation toward meaningful theorisation.

Keywords:

Discourse Analysis, Conceptual Borrowing, Arabic Linguistics, Epistemology, Critical Theory

1. Introduction

Discourse analysis has emerged as a central field within linguistics and the human sciences, concerned with the study of language beyond the level of isolated sentences and focused on meaning as it is produced within social, cultural, and ideological contexts. Over the past decades, it has developed through multiple theoretical traditions, including structuralism, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and critical theory, positioning discourse as a dynamic social practice rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon. This evolution has expanded the scope of linguistic inquiry, allowing scholars to explore the relationships between language, power, identity, and knowledge across diverse communicative settings.

Within Arab scholarship, discourse analysis began to gain prominence in the late twentieth century, largely through engagement with Western theoretical models such as French discourse analysis, Anglo-American pragmatics, and Critical Discourse Analysis. Arab researchers have employed these frameworks to analyse literary, political, media, and religious texts, contributing to the diversification of linguistic and critical studies in the Arab intellectual context. However, this engagement has often taken the form of direct adoption or translation of foreign concepts, sometimes without sufficient consideration of the epistemological, cultural, and linguistic specificities of the Arabic language and its rich rhetorical and intellectual heritage.

This situation has generated a growing concern regarding the problem of conceptual importation, where analytical concepts are transferred from their original theoretical environments and applied uncritically to Arabic discourse. Such practices have led to terminological instability, methodological inconsistency, and, in some cases, a reductionist understanding of discourse. Despite the increasing volume of studies in this area, there remains a noticeable gap in research that critically examines the epistemological foundations of imported discourse theories and proposes an alternative theoretical framework grounded in Arabic linguistic and intellectual traditions. Accordingly, the present study aims to critically examine the mechanisms and implications of conceptual importation in Arab discourse analysis and to outline foundational principles for developing an Arabic theory of discourse analysis. The article is structured as follows: it first reviews the theoretical foundations of discourse analysis and its reception in Arab scholarship, then critically analyses the challenges of conceptual borrowing, and finally proposes a conceptual and theoretical framework toward an indigenous Arabic approach to discourse analysis.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Discourse Analysis: Origins and Major Schools

Structuralist roots:

The origins of discourse analysis are closely linked to structuralist linguistics, particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceptualised language as a structured system of signs governed by internal relations rather than by reference to external reality (Saussure, 1916/1983). Structuralism redirected linguistic inquiry toward underlying systems (*langue*) rather than individual utterances (*parole*), providing the conceptual basis for later analyses of extended language units. Building on this foundation, early discourse-oriented

approaches in anthropology and linguistics—such as Jakobson’s functional model of language—emphasised the patterned organisation of texts and communicative functions (Jakobson, 1960). Although structuralism did not yet theorise discourse as social practice, it established the analytical tools (structure, system, opposition) that enabled scholars to move beyond sentence-level analysis.

Post-structuralist developments:

Post-structuralism marked a decisive shift by challenging the stability of meaning and the autonomy of linguistic structures. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault reconceptualised discourse as a historically situated practice that produces knowledge and regulates what can be said, by whom, and under what conditions (Foucault, 1972). In this view, discourse is inseparable from power relations and institutional contexts. Similarly, Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and emphasis on *différance* undermined fixed meanings and foregrounded the interpretive openness of texts (Derrida, 1976). These developments expanded discourse analysis into philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies, emphasising intertextuality, subjectivity, and the contingency of meaning. Consequently, discourse analysis became less about formal structures and more about the socio-historical conditions that shape language use.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged as a coherent school in the late twentieth century, integrating linguistic analysis with critical social theory. Scholars such as Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1998), and Wodak (2001) positioned discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces power, ideology, and inequality. CDA is characterised by its explicit normative stance: it seeks not only to describe discourse but also to critique and challenge dominant ideologies embedded in language. Methodologically, CDA combines textual analysis with contextual interpretation, linking micro-level linguistic features to macro-level social structures. While CDA has been widely adopted across disciplines and cultural contexts, critics have noted the risks of methodological eclecticism and the uncritical transfer of its concepts into contexts with different linguistic and epistemological traditions (Blommaert, 2005).

2.2. Conceptual Importation in the Humanities

Definition of conceptual borrowing:

Conceptual importation—also referred to as conceptual borrowing—denotes the transfer of theoretical concepts from one intellectual or cultural context to another. In the humanities, this process often accompanies the global circulation of theories produced in dominant academic centres (Said, 1983). While borrowing can enrich local scholarship, it also raises epistemological concerns when concepts are detached from their original historical, cultural, and philosophical foundations. Bourdieu (2002) warns that concepts travel with implicit assumptions that may not be visible to their adopters, leading to partial or distorted applications.

Mechanisms of transfer:

The transfer of concepts typically occurs through academic translation, education, and institutionalisation. Translation of key texts plays a central role, as it mediates access to foreign theories but also introduces interpretive choices that shape meaning (Venuti, 1995). Academic training and curricula further normalise imported concepts by embedding them within local research practices. However, as Alatas (2006) argues, such transfers are often asymmetrical, reflecting global power relations in knowledge production, where theories from the Global North are treated as universal while local intellectual traditions are marginalised.

Translation vs. transplantation of concepts:

A crucial distinction in debates on conceptual importation is between translation and transplantation. Translation implies a critical, adaptive process in which concepts are reinterpreted in light of local epistemologies and linguistic traditions. Transplantation, by contrast, involves the direct insertion of concepts into a new context with minimal adaptation, often resulting in conceptual mismatch or terminological instability (Hountondji, 1997). In discourse studies, this distinction is particularly significant, as analytical concepts are deeply embedded in specific philosophies of language and society. The literature increasingly calls for reflective engagement that moves beyond imitation toward contextualised theorisation, enabling local traditions to contribute actively to global knowledge production (Connell, 2007).

3. Methodology:

3.1. Research Design:

This study adopts a theoretical–analytical research design, which is appropriate for examining abstract concepts, theoretical models, and epistemological assumptions within discourse analysis. Rather than seeking empirical validation, the research focuses on critical reflection and conceptual clarification, aiming to interrogate the foundations upon which discourse theories are constructed and applied. This design allows for an in-depth engagement with discourse analysis as a field of knowledge, emphasising interpretation, critique, and theoretical synthesis.

The study is qualitative and non-empirical in nature, as it does not rely on primary data collection such as experiments, surveys, or interviews. Instead, it draws on established theoretical texts and scholarly works in both Western and Arab traditions of discourse analysis. By privileging qualitative reasoning, the research seeks to uncover implicit assumptions, conceptual tensions, and methodological orientations that shape the adoption and application of discourse-analytic frameworks across different intellectual contexts.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure is based on conceptual analysis, through which key notions related to discourse, discourse analysis, and conceptual borrowing are examined in terms of their definitions, theoretical origins, and underlying philosophical premises. This process involves identifying how concepts are framed, operationalised, and recontextualised when they move from one scholarly tradition to another.

In addition, the study employs a comparative reading of Western and Arab discourse studies, aiming to highlight similarities, divergences, and points of tension between the two bodies of literature. This comparative perspective enables a critical assessment of how imported theories are received, adapted, or reproduced within Arab scholarship. Finally, the research undertakes a critical examination of epistemological compatibility, evaluating the extent to which Western discourse-analytic concepts align with the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual foundations of Arabic scholarly traditions. Through this multilayered analytical process, the study seeks to illuminate the limits of conceptual importation and to contribute to the development of a more context-sensitive theoretical framework for discourse analysis.

4. Discourse Analysis in Arab Scholarship:

4.1. Historical Overview:

Early engagement with Western discourse theories:

The engagement of Arab scholarship with discourse analysis began to take shape in the late twentieth century, largely as a result of the translation and circulation of Western linguistic, philosophical, and critical theories. Early encounters were primarily mediated through French structuralism and post-structuralism, particularly the works of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, as well as later developments in Anglo-American pragmatics and Critical Discourse Analysis. These approaches entered Arab academic contexts through translated texts, university curricula, and interdisciplinary research in linguistics, literary criticism, and the social sciences. At this stage, discourse analysis was often viewed as a modern analytical tool capable of renewing textual studies and moving beyond traditional sentence-based or purely stylistic approaches (Al-Sadd, 2007).

During this formative period, discourse analysis was frequently conflated with text linguistics and stylistics, reflecting a lack of clear conceptual differentiation between “text” (nass) and “discourse” (khitāb). This conceptual overlap illustrates the early developmental stage of discourse studies in Arab scholarship, where theoretical boundaries remained fluid and heavily dependent on Western classifications (Taha Abderrahmane, 2000).

Key Arab scholars and works:

A number of Arab scholars played a crucial role in introducing and shaping discourse analysis within Arabic studies. Among the most influential figures is Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, whose epistemological critique of Arab reason examined discursive formations within Arab intellectual history, even though his work was not always explicitly framed as discourse analysis (Al-Jabri, 1986). In linguistics, Abdel Salam Al-Masdi made significant contributions to theorising discourse within Arabic linguistic traditions, emphasising the necessity of reconciling modern linguistic theories with Arabic rhetorical and grammatical heritage (Al-Masdi, 1996).

In literary and cultural criticism, scholars such as Salah Fadl and Abdullah Al-Ghadhami adopted discourse-oriented perspectives to analyse literature as a site of cultural, ideological, and power relations, thereby expanding the scope of discourse analysis beyond purely linguistic concerns (Fadl, 1998; Al-Ghadhami, 2000). Additionally, linguists such as Ahmed Al-

Mutawakkil integrated pragmatic and discourse-based approaches into Arabic linguistics, highlighting the role of context, usage, and communicative intention in meaning construction (Al-Mutawakkil, 2010). Together, these contributions reflect a gradual institutionalisation of discourse analysis in Arab academia, albeit with varying degrees of theoretical depth and critical reflexivity.

4.2. Modes of Reception:

Literal adoption:

One prominent mode of reception in Arab discourse studies is literal adoption, whereby Western theories and concepts are transferred with minimal modification. This approach is often characterised by direct translation of terminology and analytical models without sufficient engagement with their philosophical and epistemological foundations. As a result, conceptual ambiguity and terminological inconsistency frequently arise, especially when imported frameworks are applied to Arabic texts without regard for linguistic and cultural specificity (Al-Sadd, 2007). Literal adoption reflects an implicit assumption of the universality of Western discourse theories.

Selective adaptation:

A more reflective mode of reception is selective adaptation, in which Arab scholars appropriate certain analytical tools while attempting to align them with local contexts. This approach is evident in studies that combine discourse analysis with elements of Arabic rhetoric (*balāgha*) or pragmatic principles rooted in classical Arabic linguistic thought. Selective adaptation occupies an intermediate position between imitation and innovation, allowing for partial contextualization while still relying heavily on imported theoretical models (Al-Masdi, 1996). However, critics note that such adaptations often remain methodological rather than epistemological, leaving foundational assumptions largely unchallenged.

Critical resistance:

The third mode of reception can be described as critical resistance, where scholars explicitly question the uncritical importation of foreign concepts and call for epistemological grounding rooted in Arabic intellectual traditions. This position is strongly articulated in the philosophical work of **Taha Abderrahmane**, who emphasises the need for epistemological rooting and warns against the unexamined transplantation of concepts across cultural and ethical contexts (Taha Abderrahmane, 2000). Critical resistance does not reject engagement with Western theories; rather, it advocates a dialogical approach that treats Arabic intellectual heritage as an active source of theorisation rather than a passive recipient. This mode of reception represents a promising pathway toward developing an Arabic theory of discourse analysis that is both locally grounded and globally engaged.

5. Critical Examination of Conceptual Importation:

5.1. Epistemological Tensions:

Differences in linguistic philosophy:

One of the central issues arising from conceptual importation in discourse analysis concerns epistemological tension between differing philosophies of language. Many Western discourse theories are grounded in intellectual traditions shaped by modernity, secular rationalism, and specific trajectories in European philosophy and social theory. These frameworks often conceptualise language as a social construct embedded in power relations, institutions, and ideological formations. By contrast, Arabic linguistic thought historically developed within a different epistemological horizon, where language was closely tied to rhetoric (balāgha), logic, jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh), and ethical considerations. When discourse-analytic concepts are imported without critical mediation, these divergent philosophical foundations can lead to theoretical dissonance, resulting in partial or distorted interpretations of discourse phenomena in Arabic contexts.

Cultural and historical contexts:

Concepts in discourse analysis are not culturally neutral; they emerge from specific historical and social conditions. Western discourse theories were formulated in response to particular political, institutional, and intellectual challenges, such as colonialism, modern state power, and capitalist media systems. Applying these concepts directly to Arabic discourse without accounting for different historical trajectories—such as the role of classical scholarship, religious authority, and colonial and postcolonial experiences—risks overlooking locally grounded modes of meaning production. This contextual mismatch reinforces epistemological tension by treating concepts as universally transferable while neglecting the socio-historical conditions that originally shaped them.

5.2. Terminological Challenges:

Conceptual ambiguity:

A major consequence of conceptual importation is the emergence of conceptual ambiguity, especially at the level of key terms such as “discourse,” “ideology,” “power,” and “context.” In many Arab studies, these concepts are employed with shifting or overlapping meanings, reflecting uncertainty about their theoretical scope and analytical function. This ambiguity often results from adopting terminology without fully engaging with the conceptual debates that surround it in its original theoretical environment. As a result, the same term may be used to refer alternately to text, speech, ideology, or social practice, weakening analytical precision.

Translation inconsistency:

Translation plays a decisive role in the transfer of discourse-analytic concepts, yet it also represents a major source of difficulty. Multiple Arabic equivalents are frequently used for a single Western term, leading to inconsistency across studies and scholarly traditions. Moreover, some translated terms carry semantic connotations rooted in classical Arabic usage

that do not fully correspond to the intended meaning of the original concept. This lack of terminological standardisation not only complicates scholarly communication but also obscures the theoretical assumptions embedded in the imported concepts, further reinforcing conceptual instability.

5.3. Methodological Consequences:

Misapplication of analytical tools:

Epistemological and terminological issues inevitably affect methodology. Imported discourse-analytic tools are sometimes applied mechanically, without sufficient consideration of their underlying assumptions or their suitability for analysing Arabic discourse. This misapplication may result in forcing texts into predefined analytical categories, rather than allowing analytical frameworks to emerge from the internal logic of the discourse itself. Consequently, discourse analysis risks becoming a formal exercise in terminology rather than a critical investigation of meaning, power, and context.

Reduction of discourse to text:

Another significant methodological consequence is the reduction of discourse to text. In many applications, discourse analysis is confined to the examination of linguistic or stylistic features, neglecting broader social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Such reductionism contradicts the core premise of discourse analysis as a study of language in use and as social practice. By equating discourse with textual structure alone, researchers overlook the interactive, institutional, and ideological processes through which discourse operates, thereby limiting the explanatory power of their analyses.

In sum, the uncritical importation of discourse-analytic concepts generates epistemological tensions, terminological instability, and methodological shortcomings. Addressing these challenges requires a reflective approach that critically evaluates conceptual compatibility and seeks to ground discourse analysis in the intellectual and cultural specificities of the Arabic context, rather than relying on direct transplantation of external theoretical models.

6. Toward an Arabic Theory of Discourse Analysis:

6.1. Foundations of an Arabic Discourse Theory:

Any attempt to formulate an Arabic theory of discourse analysis must begin by engaging seriously with the rich linguistic and intellectual heritage of Arabic scholarship. Classical disciplines such as *balāgha* (rhetoric), Arabic rhetoric, and *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) offer sophisticated frameworks for understanding meaning, intention, persuasion, and context. These traditions did not treat language as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a purposeful and context-sensitive practice shaped by speaker intention, audience reception, and situational conditions. Concepts such as *maqām* (context), *dalāla* (signification), and *qaṣd* (intentionality) reveal an early awareness of discourse as a dynamic interaction between language, meaning, and social reality, anticipating many concerns of modern discourse analysis.

In addition to its theoretical depth, Arabic linguistic heritage places strong emphasis on contextual and pragmatic dimensions of language use. Classical scholars systematically analysed how meaning shifts according to situation, audience, and communicative purpose, thereby foregrounding pragmatic principles long before their formalisation in modern linguistics. Reintegrating these insights into contemporary discourse analysis enables the development of a theoretical foundation that is historically grounded yet analytically productive, allowing Arabic discourse theory to emerge from within its own epistemological framework rather than being constructed solely through imported models.

6.2. Principles and Conceptual Framework:

A central principle of an Arabic theory of discourse analysis is the understanding of discourse as a social practice. Discourse should be viewed not merely as a textual or linguistic phenomenon, but as a form of social action through which meanings are negotiated, identities are constructed, and power relations are enacted. This perspective aligns with both classical Arabic thought—where language was inseparable from ethical and communal considerations—and contemporary critical approaches that emphasise the social embeddedness of discourse.

Another foundational principle concerns the language–power–identity nexus. In Arab societies, discourse has historically played a key role in shaping religious, political, and cultural identities. An Arabic discourse theory must therefore account for how language operates within structures of authority, legitimacy, and symbolic power. Rather than importing these notions uncritically from Western critical theory, such a framework should reinterpret them through Arabic intellectual traditions, where concepts of authority, persuasion, and legitimacy are articulated through distinct historical and cultural lenses. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how discourse functions within Arab social and cultural contexts.

6.3. Theoretical Implications:

The development of an Arabic theory of discourse analysis carries significant theoretical implications, foremost among them the re-centring of Arabic epistemology. By grounding discourse analysis in Arabic intellectual traditions, scholars can challenge the dominance of externally produced theories and assert the legitimacy of local epistemic frameworks. This re-centring does not entail isolationism or rejection of global scholarship; rather, it promotes a dialogical engagement in which Arabic theory contributes actively to international discourse studies.

Moving beyond imitation toward theorisation represents the ultimate goal of this endeavour. Instead of reproducing imported concepts and methods, an Arabic discourse theory seeks to generate original analytical categories and explanatory models rooted in local linguistic, cultural, and historical realities. Such a shift from consumption to production of theory not only enriches discourse analysis as a field but also enhances the intellectual autonomy of Arab scholarship, positioning it as a meaningful participant in global knowledge production rather than a peripheral adopter of external paradigms.

7. Discussion:

This study has demonstrated that the widespread adoption of discourse analysis in Arab scholarship has been largely shaped by the importation of Western theoretical models, often without sufficient epistemological mediation. The analytical findings reveal that while these models have contributed valuable analytical tools, their uncritical application has generated tensions at conceptual, terminological, and methodological levels. Differences in linguistic philosophy and historical experience have led to partial alignments between imported theories and Arabic intellectual traditions, resulting in conceptual ambiguity and, at times, a reductionist treatment of discourse. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for a more reflective engagement with discourse analysis that accounts for the specificity of Arabic linguistic and cultural contexts.

In terms of contribution to discourse studies, the present research advances the field by foregrounding the epistemological dimension of discourse analysis, which is often overlooked in favour of methodological concerns. By critically examining conceptual importation, the study highlights the importance of situating discourse theories within their original intellectual environments and evaluating their compatibility with new contexts of application. Moreover, the proposed orientation toward an Arabic theory of discourse analysis contributes to ongoing debates about knowledge production, theoretical pluralism, and the decolonisation of the humanities, offering a framework that emphasises contextualization, reflexivity, and theoretical innovation.

The analysis also exposes the limitations of imported discourse-analytic models when applied mechanically to Arabic discourse. These limitations include the assumption of conceptual universality, the instability of translated terminology, and the misapplication of analytical tools designed for different socio-historical conditions. Such constraints restrict the explanatory power of discourse analysis and risk transforming it into a descriptive or technical exercise detached from its critical and interpretive potential. Recognising these limitations does not entail rejecting Western theories altogether but calls for a more selective, critical, and dialogical mode of engagement.

Finally, the study holds significant relevance for contemporary Arabic scholarship. It responds to an increasing awareness of the need to move beyond theoretical dependence toward intellectual autonomy and creativity. By advocating for an Arabic discourse theory grounded in local epistemological resources and open to global dialogue, the research offers a pathway for renewing discourse studies in the Arab world. This approach encourages scholars to engage critically with both inherited and imported knowledge, fostering a research culture that values theorisation, contextual sensitivity, and meaningful contribution to global discourse studies.

8. Conclusion:

This study set out to critically examine the role of conceptual importation in the development of discourse analysis within Arab scholarship and to explore the possibility of formulating an Arabic theory of discourse analysis. The analysis has shown that while Western discourse theories have played a significant role in expanding analytical perspectives and

renewing linguistic and critical studies, their uncritical adoption has generated epistemological tensions, terminological instability, and methodological limitations. By tracing the historical reception of discourse analysis in Arab scholarship and evaluating its conceptual foundations, the study has highlighted the need for a more reflective and context-sensitive approach to theorisation.

In response to the research questions, the study has demonstrated that discourse analysis in Arab scholarship has largely evolved through processes of literal adoption, selective adaptation, and, to a lesser extent, critical resistance. It has also shown that the challenges associated with conceptual importation stem from differences in linguistic philosophy, cultural and historical contexts, and translation practices. These findings confirm that the direct transplantation of discourse-analytic concepts often leads to partial or distorted interpretations of Arabic discourse, thereby limiting the explanatory scope of imported models.

Theoretical contributions of this study lie in its emphasis on epistemological grounding as a prerequisite for effective discourse analysis. By proposing foundational elements for an Arabic theory of discourse analysis—drawing on Arabic linguistic heritage, contextual pragmatics, and the conception of discourse as social practice—the research offers a conceptual framework that moves beyond imitation toward theoretical production. This contribution enriches discourse studies by introducing a pluralistic perspective that recognises the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies in theory-building.

Finally, the study opens several directions for future theoretical research. Further work is needed to systematically re-examine classical Arabic linguistic and rhetorical concepts through the lens of contemporary discourse studies, to develop coherent analytical categories. Comparative theoretical research between Arabic and other non-Western discourse traditions may also contribute to a more inclusive global discourse theory.

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