

Language as a Social Phenomenon: The Foundations of Sociolinguistics and Its Historical Roots

A Critical Comparative Analysis between Arab Heritage and Western Modernity

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Received: 10/08/2025; Accepted: 20/02/2026; Published: 03/04/2026

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of the relationship between language and society from the perspective of sociolinguistics, which has become one of the most expansive and branched modern knowledge fields. It seeks to establish an integrated critical conception that elucidates the roots of this science in Arab-Islamic heritage—represented by Sibawayh, Al-Jahiz, Ibn Jinni, and Ibn Khaldun—before reviewing its modern Western trajectory from Durkheim and de Saussure to Labov and Ferguson. The paper is also built upon a central proposition: that language is not an isolated system existing by itself, but rather a thoroughly social phenomenon. It is shaped by social structures and shapes them in return, carrying within its phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels the imprints of class, gender, geographical region, and religious and cultural affiliation.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics – Language and Society – Linguistic Diversity – Dialects – Language Policy – Socialization.

Introduction to the Origin and Scope of the Inquiry and the Research Problem

The observer of the history of linguistic studies notices that the question of the relationship between language and society extends in its roots deeper than the emergence of modern sociolinguistics; it is a question as old as philosophical and social awareness of humanity itself. However, organized answers to it did not crystallize within a rigorous cognitive framework until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the gap between sociology and linguistic studies began to narrow gradually. As Pierre Paolo Giglioli describes this phase: "Since the beginning of this [twentieth] century, linguistics and sociology have developed in mutual isolation, for linguistics chose to disregard the analysis of the social aspects of language."¹

The most important factor that perpetuated this mutual isolation was the distinction made by de Saussure between langue and parole; for he made the former the proper subject of linguistic study, as a collective, stable system amenable to scientific description, while neglecting the latter because it is an individual, fluctuating activity. Giglioli pointed out that this distinction made it "unnecessary to be concerned with the study of speech in social interaction."²

Nothing changed this picture except the emergence of what came to be known as sociolinguistics; a branch of linguistics concerned with studying language in its social context and observing the close links that tie it to the social sciences.³ This science emerged to fill a dual methodological gap: a gap in

linguistics, which had neglected the social context, and a gap in sociology, which had neglected the study of language as a necessary requirement, not merely a factor with no influence on social behavior. Sociolinguistics aspires to discover the social foundations and norms governing linguistic behavior, aiming to rethink the categories and distinctions governing the rules of linguistic practice, and thus "clarify the position of language in social life."⁴In doing so, it does not study language from the inside only, but also studies it from the outside: in its relationship with class, gender, age, geographical region, and religious and political affiliation. This is precisely what has made it an intersecting field bringing together sociology, anthropology, and linguistics.⁵

Research Problem and Hypotheses:

This study departs from a central research problem: Can Arab-Islamic heritage be considered a foundational source for sociolinguistics, or do its contributions remain within the realm of mere "premonitions" lacking methodological completeness? The study hypothesizes that a critical contemporary rereading of Arab linguistic heritage can reveal authentic conceptions of the relationship between language and society, which may contribute to filling gaps in modern sociolinguistic theories, especially concerning the concepts of "faculty" (malakah) and "human social organization" ('umran). It also tests the hypothesis that Sibawayh, Al-Jahiz, and Ibn Khaldun established a "normative social" model of language that differs fundamentally from the "descriptive empirical" model later developed by Labov.

Research Methodology

To answer the stated research problem, this study adopted Qualitative Content Analysis, employing a Comparative Approach between heritage concepts and their modern counterparts. Heritage texts were selected according to the following criteria: (a) they must be from classical Arabic linguistic canon, specifically Sibawayh's Al-Kitab, Al-Jahiz's Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin, and Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah; (b) they must contain explicit statements about the relationship between language and society, or about dialectal diversity, or the linguistic faculty. Modern texts (de Saussure, Meillet, Labov, Durkheim) were chosen on the basis of their foundational role in concepts such as diglossia, class variation, and linguistic awareness.

Manual coding of the texts was performed to search for key concepts: "class," "dialect," "socialization," "language policy," "faculty" (malakah), and "human social organization" ('umran). A binary comparison was then conducted between each heritage concept and its modern counterpart, aiming to reveal points of similarity and difference, and to identify the potential contribution of heritage to the development of contemporary theories. The analysis deliberately avoided rhetorical or defensive language, focusing instead on analytical and critical description.

Third: Premonitions of Arab Heritage Before the Naming – Presentation and Critical Analysis

Even if Arab heritage did not know the term "sociolinguistics" by this modern Western terminological name, the follower of its intellectual trajectories finds deep and authentic premonitions of many of its essential concepts. Perhaps the most prominent figures embodying this precedence are three great scholars: Sibawayh in his social-functional grammar, Al-Jahiz in his communicative and diverse exposition, and Ibn Khaldun in his science of human 'Umran, which represents a foundation for sociology centuries before the West.

3.1 Sibawayh: The First Codifier of Sociolinguistics – A Comparative Analysis

Contemporary researchers agree that Sibawayh's book represents an eminently social-linguistic codification, for he did not limit himself to explaining nominative, accusative, and genitive case endings as Al-Shatibi pointed out, but went beyond that to discussing the purposes of the Arabs, their verbal behaviors, and their intentions therein.⁶ Sibawayh deals with language as a type of social behavior,

adopting the prevailing social norms of his era as a criterion for judging linguistic correctness at all levels of analysis.

The social awareness in Sibawayh is evident in his classification of speech based on two integrated criteria: the criterion of grammatical correctness and the criterion of communicative meaning. Regarding correctness, he divides speech into correct and good (e.g., "I came to you yesterday and will come to you tomorrow"), which combines grammatical and semantic soundness; correct but ugly; and correct but false. Regarding reference, he distinguishes between the impossible and the false lie.⁷ All these divisions are derived from the extent of the speech's acceptability and circulation within the linguistic community.

Critical Comparative Analysis:

From the above, it becomes clear that Sibawayh established a social classification of speech (correct / ugly / false) based on two criteria: structure and pragmatic meaning. However, unlike Labov in the 1960s, he did not link this classification to quantifiable social variables such as income, education, or housing. While Labov calculated the percentage of (r) pronunciation in New York City stores according to class,⁸ Sibawayh was satisfied with qualitative judgment (correctness/ugliness) based on the criterion of "what the Arabs say" without detailing internal differences within a single tribe. This does not diminish Sibawayh's value, but rather reveals a methodological difference: Sibawayh was concerned with establishing a normative standard for Classical Arabic, whereas Labov was concerned with describing actual variation for the purpose of understanding linguistic change. Accordingly, it can be argued that Sibawayh founded normative sociolinguistics, while Labov founded descriptive empirical sociolinguistics.

Sibawayh's social awareness does not stop at classification but extends to observing precise linguistic phenomena with profound social dimensions. He distinguishes with great precision between geographical speech regions in the Arabian Peninsula, observing the linguistic characteristics of each region: Hijaz, Tihamah, Najd, Yemen, and Al-'Aruḍ, and specifies tribal areas according to their precise linguistic division.⁹ In his observation of the dialects of Arab tribes—Tamim, Bakr ibn Wa'il, Asad, Kilab, Rabi'ah, and Qays—he establishes what is today called linguistic geography and dialectology. Researchers argue that linguistic geography, dialect, phonetic imprint, and all that pertains to sociolinguistics are not a product of the modern era; in Sibawayh's book we find the true origin and the first codification that has reached us as an authentic introduction to sociolinguistics.¹⁰

3.2 Al-Jahiz: Pioneer of Social Linguistic Diversity – Analysis of the Phonetic Imprint

Abu 'Uthman Al-Jahiz (d. 255 AH) is considered among the most prominent figures in Arab heritage who grasped the social character of language. He was not content with describing eloquent Arabic only, but observed its variations and social and geographical connections with the eye of an experienced researcher. In his works, he discussed the language of the eloquent, the rhetoricians, the Bedouins, the Muwalladun (newly settled non-Arab Muslims), the Nabataeans, the Khurasanians, the wise among philosophers and theologians, and the common people.¹¹

What distinguishes Al-Jahiz is his early attention to the phenomenon of the "phonetic imprint" in its modern sense. His famous saying: "The lock-keeper who grew up in the rural district of Kufa may speak Arabic, and his pronunciation may be chosen and splendid, and his meaning noble and generous, yet the listener to his speech and the articulation of his letters knows that he is Nabataean"¹² embodies an early awareness of what contemporary sociolinguistics calls "socio-phonetics": that social and geographical affiliation leaves its mark on sound articulation even among those proficient in the standard language.

Critical Comparative Analysis:

In this text, Al-Jahiz presents an early conception of the "phonetic imprint" that did not crystallize in the West until the works of Labov and Trudgill in the 1970s. However, Al-Jahiz goes beyond the descriptive concept to an ideological dimension; he does not merely state that pronunciation reveals origin, but adds that the speaker may have "splendid pronunciation and noble meaning" yet "the listener knows he is Nabataean." This indicates that socio-phonetic perception in Al-Jahiz depends not only on phonetic accuracy but also on prior knowledge of the speaker's region. That is, the listener does not merely analyze the sound but activates a pre-existing stereotype about the speaker's group. This vision predates by a millennium what is now called Accommodation Theory and Language Stereotyping.

Among the most famous examples cited in Arab heritage regarding the impact of linguistic variation on social communication—and which is referenced in Arabic sociolinguistics books—is the story of Abu 'Alqamah al-Thaqafi, renowned for his fondness for rare and obscure vocabulary. When he visited a physician complaining of pain, he used such rare words that only a specialized dictionary could decipher them, so the physician replied using words of the same kind. This anecdote offers a profound lesson in the impact of linguistic difference on communication and on the perception of the speaker's social status.

3.3 Ibn Khaldun: Founding the Science of 'Umran and the Linguistic Faculty

As for Ibn Khaldun, he is considered the foremost pioneer in founding sociology itself, through what he recorded in his immortal Muqaddimah when he explicitly affirmed that this science is independent in itself, with its own specific subject represented by human 'Umran and human society.¹³ He states in this regard: "Discussion of this purpose is an innovative craft, rare in its benefit... as if it were a newly derived science. By my life, I have not come across anyone among creation who pursued its approach." These explicit texts affirm the authenticity of this trend in Arab heritage, and that the word "social" in "sociolinguistics" is a pure Arabic formulation with Ibn Khaldun as its foremost pioneer.

Specifically within the framework of sociolinguistics, Ibn Khaldun defines language by saying: "Know that language in common parlance is the speaker's expression of his intent, and that expression is a linguistic act arising from the intent to convey speech. So it must become a firmly established faculty in the active organ responsible for it, which is the tongue, and it varies in every nation according to their conventions."¹⁴ In the phrase "and it varies in every nation according to their conventions" lies an explicit foundation for the principle of the sociality of language and its connection to collective custom, the very principle upon which all of sociolinguistics rests. Ibn Khaldun adds that language is "a faculty similar to a craft, as it is a faculty in the tongue for expressing meaning... and that is not with regard to individual words but with regard to structures,"¹⁵ revealing his awareness of the essence of the linguistic faculty as a social acquisition

Critical Comparative Analysis:

The comparison between Ibn Khaldun and de Saussure can be presented in the following table:

Concept	According to Ibn Khaldun	According to de Saussure	Comparative Analysis
Nature of language	"A faculty similar to a craft" (socially acquired, skill-based)	"A social product of the faculty of speech"	They agree on sociality, but Ibn Khaldun adds the skill dimension (craft) which is absent in Saussure
Relationship with the individual	Acquired through learning and interaction; an individual faculty arising from society	Imposed on the individual as an external social constraint	Ibn Khaldun emphasizes action and acquisition (faculty), Saussure emphasizes structure and system (language as a fixed entity)
Linguistic change	Occurs with changes in 'Umran, generations, and according to the "conventions" of the nation	Neglects it in favor of studying the stable system (language as a synchronic state)	Ibn Khaldun's approach is more dynamic and historical, but less precise in structural detail

Missing dimensions Offers no quantitative measurements or empirical method Offers a rigorous structural method but excludes change and speech Both are incomplete: Ibn Khaldun lacks procedural precision, Saussure lacks the dynamic dimension

Constructing the Field – de Saussure, Meillet, and Durkheim (Presentation and Analysis)

Although de Saussure sought the independence and objectivity of language through the structural method, he simultaneously laid down essential concepts that represent a fundamental starting point for sociolinguistics. His definition of language as "a social product of the faculty of speech, and a collection of necessary conventions adopted by a given society to enable its members to exercise this faculty"¹⁶ explicitly affirms the social character of language. De Saussure considered language a "social being" and a "social institution," meaning that individuals find it already constructed before them and cannot change it.¹⁷

However, there is an apparent contradiction in de Saussure's approach, as noted by Giglioli. On one hand, he affirms the sociality of language, but on the other hand, he excludes parole—the actual domain of social interaction—from the scope of rigorous linguistic study. This methodological shortcoming had a negative impact on delaying the emergence of sociolinguistics, as prevailing linguistic studies revolved around structural abstraction, far from the dynamic life of society.

Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) came to correct this shortcoming from within the linguistic field itself. Influenced by Durkheimian sociology, he insisted in his research on the close connection between language and society. Meillet demonstrated in his articles the interplay between language and linguistic variables with the facts of social classes, and clarified the facts by which linguistic, historical, and social facts operate in the change of word meanings.¹⁸

In a parallel context, Durkheim's French social school worked to enhance social-linguistic research and studies by demonstrating the impact of society, with its beliefs, norms, and civilizations, on linguistic phenomena. Durkheim viewed socialization as a process of replacing the biological aspect with social and cultural dimensions, making them the primary guides for the individual's behavior in society—a process in which language necessarily occupies a central position.

Labov's Turn and the Foundation of the Empirical Field

Sociolinguistics was not destined to transform into an empirical scientific field with measurable results except at the hands of William Labov in the 1960s. Labov moved from the realm of theoretical reflection to the actual field, demonstrating through his studies in New York that phonetic shifts in the pronunciation of the phoneme (r) are closely linked to the speaker's class affiliation.¹⁸ In doing so, Labov transformed linguistic diversity from a random phenomenon into a codified system with specific social rules.

Labov's results show that upper-class speakers pronounce (r) in its position within the word at a higher rate than lower-class speakers, and that this difference escalates in formal speech, with middle-class speakers attempting to surpass their class linguistically through "hypercorrection." This major field discovery proves what sociolinguistics calls "class linguistic awareness": that speakers unconsciously perceive the social value of different linguistic forms.

Labov's approach enshrines a fundamental principle in sociolinguistics: that the field study of natural speech in its actual social contexts is the only way to attain genuine knowledge of language and its variations. This principle contradicts the Saussurean structural approach, which operated on what it called the "ideal speaker-listener consistency," isolated from actual linguistic reality.

Linguistic Diversity – The Map of Society in the Structure of Speech

Linguistic diversity is considered the core concept in sociolinguistics, encompassing a wide spectrum of phenomena: class diversity observed by Labov, geographical dialectal diversity, gender diversity between men's and women's language, diversity among age groups, and diversity related to religious, professional, and educational institutions. Researchers have pointed out that these diversities do not merely reflect purely biological or geographical differences, but are in essence a map of social hierarchy. Among the most telling citations in this regard is the saying of one researcher: "In the same speech community, the language of the educated differs from the language of the illiterate, and the educated differ linguistically among themselves according to their level of education, their professions, and their degree of wealth. The language of fishermen differs from the language of carpenters and from the language of blacksmiths... Language is one of the constraints, or it is most akin to fingerprints or clothing".

This social map of linguistic diversity is also evident in another dimension observed by sociolinguistics: "restricted and elaborated linguistic codes," as formulated by Basil Bernstein. He argues that poor students use the "restricted code," a language characterized by simplicity and ease, lacking expressive precision, while wealthy students use the "elaborated code," a superior and precise language. The result is that wealthy students face no obstacles in their school learning, while poor students encounter difficulties, revealing that social variation has an impact on linguistic and educational variation.

Language Policy – Language as Power and a Project

Language policy is among the most sensitive and intricate topics in sociolinguistics, as it lies at the intersection of language, power, identity, and ideology. Louis-Jean Calvet defined language policy as follows: "We consider language policy to be the totality of conscious choices made in the field of the relationship between language and social life, and specifically between language, life, and the nation."¹⁹ Thus, it transcends being merely technical linguistic organization to become a political stance concerning collective identity and national sovereignty.

Saleh Blaid defines it as "an official position within principles, orientations, and decisions targeting the territory of the state, or the region subject to local, confederal governance, and it also falls under the category of linguistic rights."²⁰ This definition draws attention to the fact that language policy is not merely a technical, scholastic matter, but a rights issue touching on the dignity of linguistic groups and their right to existence and expression.

Language policy has a history of struggle in the Arab world that reveals the depth of its connection to identity. This was embodied in the stages of Western colonial campaigns on Arab lands with the background of obliterating the features of their religion and identity, manifested in imposing colonial languages, combating Arabic, and financially and morally punishing its teachers. In this context, language was not merely a means of communication but the most intense battlefield for identity and existence.

Language policy, as regulatory regulations and decisions issued by the authorities, aims to: determine the official language—as a symbol of sovereignty—and activate its use in institutions and administrations; effectively direct the language of the educational reality at all stages and levels; keep pace with scientific developments and modern global developments by spreading the language and imposing its value globally; and solve linguistic problems and all issues related to communication obstacles.

Socialization and the Construction of the Linguistic Being

Language plays an indispensable role in the process of socialization, the process through which the biological being transforms into a conscious social actor. Sociolinguistics is particularly concerned with this role, as it proves that language acquisition is not merely learning sounds and rules, but the

internalization of the entire social system into which the child is born. One comprehensive definition of socialization is: "The process of endowing the individual with the essential characteristics of the society in which he lives, represented in the values, attitudes, prevailing norms, and desirable standards of social behavior in that society. It is a continuous process over an unbroken period, beginning from the first moments of the individual's life until his death".

Sociolinguistics affirms that linguistic behavior in this regard is a manifestation of the mutual influence and interaction between society and language, a point Durkheim addressed concerning the individual's transfer from a biological to a sociological nature, starting from the family to the external environment in all its forms and levels, where language is learned phonetically, syntactically, and semantically. Among the definitions specific to family socialization—as the primary cell in the individual's formation—is that the methods parents follow in raising their children include linguistic behavior as one of the most important of these behaviors.

This truth reveals its deepest dimensions when we reflect that language performs its function in socialization beginning from the individual feeling related to family belonging to beyond that, where there is a sense of collective identity, sharing with others in their system, ideas, customs, and values.

Diglossia – A Quintessentially Social Phenomenon

Diglossia is among the topics that most reveal the depth of the connection between language and society in sociolinguistics. It describes a linguistic-social situation involving multiple linguistic levels within the same language, i.e., "the coexistence of two or two linguistic forms or levels within the same language... the difference between them being subvarietal, not radical."²¹

In Arab society, this diglossia is embodied in the coexistence of Classical Arabic and local vernaculars, a coexistence with deep historical roots. Dialectal diversity was a natural phenomenon and an unavoidable linguistic reality due to different historical circumstances and geographical environments. The vernaculars in our contemporary life are but an extension of the old Arabic dialects, which were as numerous as the Arab tribes, including, for example, Kashkasha (the language of Rabi‘ah and Mudar), ‘Aj‘ajah (in the language of Quḍa‘ah), and Al-Istanṭā’ (in the tribe of Bakr, Hudhayl, and Al-Azd).²²

Sociolinguistics adds to the structural analysis of diglossia an essential identity dimension. The choice between Classical Arabic and the vernacular in a given situation is not an automatic application of a functional distribution rule, but often an identity achievement that expresses a stance on power, hegemony, and belonging. For this reason, the study of diglossia within the framework of sociolinguistics represents a window for reading the social structure and its transformations more deeply than what the description of the linguistic structure alone can provide.

Directions of Sociolinguistics and Its Applied Fields

Sociolinguistics is divided into two complementary branches: theoretical and applied. The theoretical branch contains a set of terms and concepts that link language and society, such as the term 'language', the concept of 'speech' and 'speaker', the meaning of 'dialects', 'linguistic communication', and so on. The applied field branch seeks to discuss and analyze various theoretical issues in specific linguistic-social contexts.

Among the most prominent areas of interest in sociolinguistics, according to specialized studies,²³ are: language planning and language development; diglossia and dialectal multiplicity; phenomena of linguistic diversity; social dialectology, including non-standard varieties; descriptive study of linguistic situations; registers and speech repertoires and code-switching; social factors in phonetic and grammatical change; language, society, and civilizational communication; functional theory and the linguistic system; child language development; and the study of texts in their contexts.

The importance of these applied fields lies in making sociolinguistics a useful science for political and educational decision-makers, not merely a descriptive, theoretical science. Language planning may

determine the future of entire generations, and language policy may elevate a people to the ranks of developed nations or marginalize their identity and dissolve their belonging.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations

Limitations of the Study:

This research acknowledges several key limitations. First, its reliance on a limited sample of heritage texts (Sibawayh, Al-Jahiz, Ibn Khaldun) may not represent the full intellectual diversity of Arab-Islamic civilization; Ibn Jinni, for example, was excluded despite his importance. Second, the restriction to qualitative analysis without statistical processing (such as the frequency of the concepts of "class" or "dialect" in the book) limits the possibility of generalization and makes the results subject to subjective interpretation. Third, the study did not address contemporary applications of these heritage concepts in present-day Arab societies, nor did it test the validity of these concepts in explaining contemporary linguistic phenomena such as the conflict between Classical Arabic and vernaculars on social media.

Recommendations:

The study suggests for future research: (1) Expanding the sample to include other works such as Ibn Jinni's *Al-Khasa'is*, Ibn Fāris's *Al-Şāhibī*, and Al-Qālī's *Al-Amālī*; (2) Conducting a field study measuring the impact of Sibawayh's classifications on contemporary linguistic awareness among Arabic speakers, for example by testing listeners' perception of "correct," "ugly," and "false" speech patterns; (3) Constructing a hybrid theoretical model that combines Ibn Khaldun's 'Aşabiyyah (social solidarity) with Bourdieu's concept of the "Linguistic Marketplace" to explain linguistic change in modern Arab societies; (4) Employing computational text analysis tools (Corpus Linguistics) on heritage texts to quantitatively measure the frequency of social concepts

Conclusion – Summary of Critical Synthesis

This study concluded that sociolinguistics is not a purely Western invention, but has deep roots in Arab-Islamic heritage, represented in the contributions of Sibawayh and his geographical-linguistic codification, Al-Jahiz and his diversity-based vision of language, and Ibn Khaldun and his foundation of the science of human 'Umran. However, the study also revealed a fundamental methodological gap: the absence in heritage of the statistical and empirical tools developed by Labov and Bourdieu, and its limitation to qualitative normativity rather than quantitative description. Therefore, the heritage legacy remains rich in theoretical and conceptual frameworks, but it needs to be reconstructed using modern methodologies to become applicable in our contemporary research.

The study also concluded that the relationship between language and society is not unidirectional but dialectical and cyclical: society shapes language, and language shapes society and reproduces it in every communicative moment. Edward Sapir's precise formulation of this relationship remains among the most accurate summaries: "Language controls all our thinking about social problems and processes."²⁴ Language, in this sense, is not merely a tool for expressing society, but the mold in which social consciousness itself is formed, and the arena in which identities compete, groups negotiate, and generations reproduce themselves.

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