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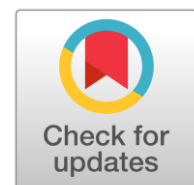


Language, Ideology, and Identity in the Arab Context: A Thematic Critical Review of Yasir Suleiman's The Arabic Language and National Identity and Arabic in the Fray

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This paper aims to examine Yasir Suleiman's contributions to the field of Arabic sociolinguistics, with a particular focus on the intersections of language, ideology, and identity. It seeks to highlight how his theoretical perspectives provide a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of Arabic language use.

Design/methodology/approach - The study employs a qualitative and descriptive-analytical approach, reviewing Suleiman's major works and contextualizing them within broader debates in sociolinguistics. By integrating textual analysis with thematic interpretation, the paper maps out his key ideas on language, nationalism, and belonging in the Arab world.

Findings/results - The analysis reveals that Suleiman's scholarship significantly advances the discussion of how Arabic functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of collective identity and political ideology. His works demonstrate that language practices in the Arab context are deeply tied to issues of authority, cultural heritage, and power relations.

Originality/value - This paper contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by synthesizing Yasir Suleiman's theoretical perspectives, offering both an overview and critical reflection on his influence. It underscores the originality of his approach in bridging linguistics with cultural and political studies, making his insights valuable for scholars of language, identity, and Middle Eastern studies.

Paper type - Conceptual paper



Keywords: *Arabic Sociolinguistics, Language and Ideology, Identity Construction, Yasir Suleiman, Arab Discourse.*

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Introduction

Language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a symbol of ideology, identity, and power within society (Joseph, 2004). In the Arab context, the Arabic language holds a unique position as it simultaneously serves as the language of religion, culture, and politics. It connects the spiritual dimension of Muslims through the Qur'an, acts as a symbol of nationalism in many Arab countries, and at the same time reflects the diversity of dialects that create complex socio-cultural dynamics (Suleiman, 2003). This renders the sociolinguistic study of Arabic essential for understanding how language operates in shaping collective identity, solidarity, and political discourse in the Arab world (Al-Azzawi & Falah, 2021).

For a long time, studies on Arabic sociolinguistics have primarily focused on issues of diglossia, language variation, and language policy (Ferguson, 1959; Owens, 2001). However, the dimensions of ideology and identity in the use of Arabic have increasingly gained attention, particularly when language is viewed as an instrument for constructing nationalism, articulating authority, and negotiating power (Haeri, 2003; Suleiman, 1994). Recent developments indicate that social media, education, and curriculum policy have also become significant arenas in the formation of linguistic ideology and identity, as seen, for instance, in the contexts of Saudi Arabia (Alharbi, 2022) and Palestine (Mousavi & Al-Masri, 2024). Within this framework, Yasir Suleiman's contribution becomes highly significant. Through works such as *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (2003) and *Arabic in the Fray* (2013), he emphasizes that the Arabic language cannot be understood in a neutral manner; rather, it is imbued with political, ideological, and symbolic meanings that are deeply embedded in the processes of identity construction.

Although several studies have examined the phenomenon of language and identity in the Arab world, there remains a knowledge gap concerning how Yasir Suleiman's theoretical insights can be comprehensively mapped as a contribution to the discipline of Arabic sociolinguistics. Most research has tended to address linguistic issues only partially, whereas Suleiman's perspective reveals multidimensional interconnections among language, ideology, and identity that have yet to be extensively explored in analytical terms (Albirini, 2016; Elimam, 2023).

Filling this knowledge gap is crucial, since Suleiman's ideas not only broaden the academic discourse on Arabic sociolinguistics but also bridge language studies with politics, culture, and nationalism. By engaging with his intellectual contributions, we can develop a critical perspective on how Arabic functions simultaneously as an ideological symbol and as an instrument of identity in contemporary Arab societies (Hafez, 2022).

While this study claims to offer an *original analytical framework*, this originality does not lie in proposing a new sociolinguistic theory that departs from Yasir Suleiman's scholarship. Rather, its novelty resides in **the way Suleiman's contributions are systematically re-mapped and analytically synthesized** to highlight the interlocking relationship between **nationalism, authority, and the sacred status of Arabic** as a coherent ideological configuration.

Previous studies tend to engage with Suleiman's work selectively—focusing either on diglossia, nationalism, or language ideology in isolation. In contrast, this article advances an original contribution by **integrating these dimensions into a single thematic analytical model**, demonstrating how Arabic simultaneously operates as (1) a symbol of national belonging, (2) a source of political and religious authority, and (3) a sacred language that legitimizes power and authenticity in the Arab context. This integrative reading reveals that Suleiman's originality lies not merely in his treatment of language ideology, but in his ability to conceptualize Arabic as a **multilayered ideological arena** where political, cultural, and religious meanings intersect.

Accordingly, the originality of this paper is twofold. First, it offers a **thematically structured critical review** of *The Arabic Language and National Identity* and *Arabic in the Fray*, positioning them as complementary rather than separate works within Suleiman's intellectual trajectory. Second, it proposes a **reconceptualization of Suleiman's contribution** by foregrounding the analytical triad of language–ideology–identity as a unified framework, which has not been explicitly articulated in prior sociolinguistic reviews. Through this approach, the article contributes to Arabic sociolinguistics by clarifying the distinctive analytical value of Suleiman's scholarship and by providing a refined lens for future studies on language, power, and identity in the Arab world.

Based on the above discussion and to operationalize the analytical focus of this study, the article is guided by the following research questions. First, what thematic configurations in Yasir Suleiman's major works most strongly articulate the interrelation between language, ideology, and identity in the Arab context? This question aims to identify and map the dominant ideological themes that structure Suleiman's sociolinguistic thought.

Second, how does Suleiman conceptualize diglossia not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as an ideological and political issue linked to authority, nationalism, and cultural legitimacy? Addressing this question allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of diglossia and toward a critical interpretation of its ideological implications.

Third, what critical insights and limitations can be identified in Suleiman's analytical framework when examined in light of contemporary sociolinguistic debates? This question opens space for reflection on the scope, constraints, and potential extensions of Suleiman's approach, particularly in relation to globalization, digital communication, and evolving identity practices in Arab societies.



The purpose of this paper is to systematically analyze Yasir Suleiman's contributions to Arabic sociolinguistics by emphasizing the interrelation between language, ideology, and identity. This article argues that Suleiman's ideas provide an original analytical framework for understanding the role of the Arabic language as a medium of power, ideology, and a symbol of collective identity. The proposed central argument is that Suleiman's approach opens new horizons in sociolinguistic studies by positioning Arabic not merely as a linguistic entity, but also as a dynamic ideological arena.

Method

This study employs a qualitative design with a descriptive-analytical and conceptual approach. This methodological choice is appropriate because the primary aim of the paper is not to analyze empirical discourse data, but to critically examine Yasir Suleiman's intellectual contributions to Arabic sociolinguistics through theoretical inquiry. As Creswell (2013) argues, qualitative research is particularly suitable for studies that seek to interpret ideas, concepts, and scholarly arguments in depth. Accordingly, the descriptive dimension of this approach is used to map Suleiman's central theoretical positions, while the analytical component situates these ideas within broader sociolinguistic debates on language, ideology, and identity.

The data for this study consist of primary texts drawn from Suleiman's major works, particularly *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (2003) and *Arabic in the Fray* (2013), which form the core corpus for understanding his perspectives on Arabic as an ideological and identity-forming resource. These primary sources are complemented by secondary literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical studies in Arabic sociolinguistics, such as Albirini (2016), Haeri (2003), and more recent scholarship addressing linguistic ideology, nationalism, and identity construction in the Arab world (Ahmed, 2023; Suleiman, 2023; Yuldasheva, 2023; Zakarneh & Mahmoud, 2025). Data collection was conducted through systematic library research, with sources selected based on thematic relevance and theoretical contribution. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, library-based research is particularly appropriate for conceptual and theory-driven studies, as it enables rigorous engagement with existing scholarly debates.

Data analysis was carried out through **interpretive textual analysis combined with thematic synthesis**. Interpretive textual analysis was used to examine Suleiman's arguments, conceptual frameworks, and key terminologies related to language, ideology, and identity. This was followed by thematic synthesis, which allowed the identification and organization of recurring analytical themes such as nationalism, authority, power, and the symbolic status of Arabic. Rather than uncovering hidden meanings in specific discursive events, this analytical strategy focuses on tracing

conceptual patterns, theoretical coherence, and intellectual continuity across Suleiman’s works. By integrating Suleiman’s ideas with contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship, the study situates his contributions within an evolving theoretical landscape, highlighting their relevance for understanding the political, cultural, and identity-related dimensions of Arabic in modern and contemporary contexts.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of Yasir Suleiman’s work demonstrates that his scholarship offers a profound contribution to the study of Arabic sociolinguistics by bridging the linguistic with the cultural and political. His writings consistently emphasize the multidimensionality of language, arguing that Arabic is both a communicative system and an ideological symbol deeply embedded in Arab societies (Suleiman, 2003, 2013).

One of the central findings is that Suleiman situates Arabic as a marker of collective identity. For him, Arabic is not merely a medium of interaction but a cultural emblem that binds communities through shared memory and tradition. This dual role of language—as both a practical tool and symbolic asset—resonates with contemporary debates on identity construction (Albirini, 2016; Joseph, 2004).

Suleiman’s work further highlights the tension between unity and fragmentation within the Arabic-speaking world. Classical or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is often celebrated as a unifying language, while dialectal diversity reflects local realities. This diglossic situation, first articulated by Ferguson (1959), takes on ideological weight in Suleiman’s analysis, where dialects are not only linguistic but also political markers (Haeri, 2003).

In exploring these dynamics, Suleiman underscores that language is not neutral. Arabic, as he demonstrates, is often mobilized in discourses of nationalism and resistance. For instance, the invocation of Arabic in anticolonial movements illustrates how language becomes a vehicle of both cultural pride and political legitimacy (Suleiman, 1994, 2003).

To substantiate the claim that this article “maps out his key ideas,” the findings are first presented in the form of a thematic-analytical matrix. This table demonstrates how Suleiman’s works consistently interrelate language with nationalism, authority, power, diglossia, and identity, while also indicating the broader theoretical implications of each theme.

Major Work	Theme	Key Concept	Analytical Implication
<i>The Arabic Language and National Identity</i> (2003)	Nationalism	Arabic as a symbol of collective belonging	Language functions as an ideological marker of nationhood rather than a neutral communicative tool



<i>The Arabic Language and National Identity</i> (2003)	Authority	Sacred status of Classical Arabic	Linguistic authority is legitimized through religious and historical narratives
<i>Arabic in the Fray</i> (2013)	Power	Language choice and exclusion	Linguistic practices reflect and reproduce social hierarchies
<i>Arabic in the Fray</i> (2013)	Diglossia	Ideological stratification of varieties	Diglossia operates as an arena of political and cultural contestation
Both works	Identity	Arabic as an identity resource	Identity is negotiated through competing ideologies of language authenticity

This mapping shows that Suleiman's contribution lies not in treating these themes separately, but in conceptualizing Arabic as a **multilayered ideological configuration** in which nationalism, authority, and identity are mutually reinforcing.

The discussion of nationalism is central to Suleiman's contributions. He argues that Arabic is deeply implicated in the ideological construction of nationhood in the Arab world. This perspective aligns with more recent scholarship that views language as an essential tool in the articulation of political authority and legitimacy.

Suleiman's seminal text, *The Arabic Language and National Identity* (2003), remains a touchstone for examining how language is employed to construct narratives of belonging. His work shows that the struggle over the role of Arabic in public life reflects broader tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as between local identities and pan-Arabism (Albirini, 2016).

His later book, *Arabic in the Fray* (2013), expands this argument by focusing on the contested nature of Arabic in contemporary politics. Suleiman demonstrates how debates around language reform, education policy, and dialect use illustrate larger ideological battles within Arab societies (Owens, 2001; Suleiman, 2013).

Another key contribution of Suleiman is his emphasis on authority. He shows how language is often tied to religious legitimacy, particularly because of Arabic's status as the language of the Qur'an. This sacred dimension elevates Arabic beyond a secular medium, embedding it within discourses of authenticity and divine authority (Haeri, 2003; Suleiman, 2003).

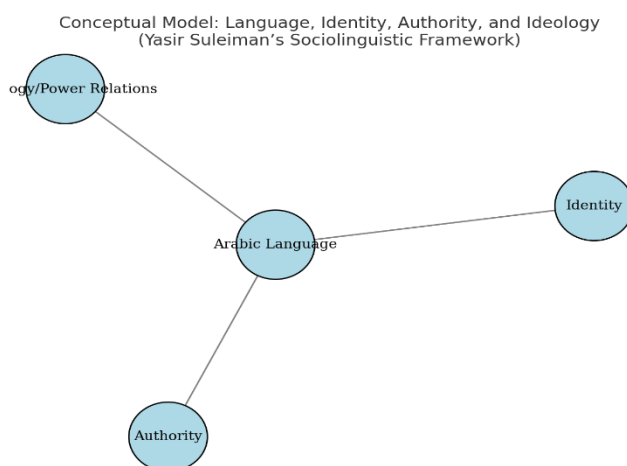
The sacred and political dimensions intersect in unique ways in the Arab world. For instance, disputes over Quranic interpretation, Arabic grammar, or the role of classical forms are not just linguistic debates but also contests over authority and authenticity. Suleiman's work carefully situates these debates within their sociopolitical contexts (Bassiouny & Soliman, 2022).

In addition, Suleiman illustrates that Arabic is a site of power relations. The politics of language choice—whether to use MSA, dialect, or foreign languages—often signals inclusion or exclusion. This dynamic reflects broader issues of class, gender, and social hierarchy, resonating with current scholarship on linguistic ideologies in the Arab world (Al Zidjaly, 2017; Suleiman, 2013).

His approach also resonates with postcolonial studies, where language is framed as both a site of oppression and resistance. Arabic, in Suleiman's view, embodies this paradox: it was suppressed under colonial regimes yet also mobilized as a symbol of decolonization and self-assertion (Abdelhay et al., 2016).

Another important finding is that Suleiman bridges disciplinary boundaries. His work cannot be confined to linguistics alone; it extends to cultural studies, political science, and history. This interdisciplinarity makes his scholarship particularly valuable for understanding the Arab world's sociolinguistic realities in relation to broader global trends (Bassiouney, 2020; Owens, 2001).

The analysis also reveals the continuing relevance of Suleiman's ideas for current sociolinguistic debates. Issues such as language policy in education, the spread of English, and digital communication practices in Arabic all echo the ideological themes Suleiman identified decades ago (Albirini, 2016).



Moreover, Suleiman's work provides a framework for examining emerging phenomena such as Arab youth identity, social media discourse, and linguistic hybridity. These new contexts illustrate that Arabic continues to function as a dynamic site of negotiation over identity and power (Bassiouney & Al Zidjaly, 2022).

The discussion confirms that Suleiman's scholarship significantly advances our understanding of how Arabic functions as more than a linguistic system. It is a site of ideology, authority, and identity negotiation that remains central to the cultural and political life of the Arab world. His insights continue to inspire contemporary



scholarship and provide a theoretical foundation for future studies in Arabic sociolinguistics.

Based on close textual analysis of Suleiman's arguments, this study formulates five core analytical propositions that capture the essence of his contribution. These propositions move beyond description and constitute the principal findings of the review.

Proposition 1: Arabic operates as an ideological symbol of nationalism rather than a purely linguistic system.

Suleiman consistently argues that Arabic is central to the imagination of the Arab nation. In *The Arabic Language and National Identity*, he demonstrates that attachment to Arabic is framed as loyalty to the nation itself, transforming language into a symbolic boundary between inclusion and exclusion. This shifts sociolinguistic analysis from structural description to ideological critique.

Proposition 2: Linguistic authority in the Arab world is inseparable from the sacred status of Arabic.

Suleiman shows that the authority of Classical and Modern Standard Arabic is sustained not only by institutional norms but also by its association with the Qur'an. As a result, debates over grammar, correctness, and reform are simultaneously debates over religious and moral legitimacy. Language, in this sense, becomes a site of epistemic and symbolic power.

Proposition 3: Diglossia functions as an ideological hierarchy rather than a neutral sociolinguistic condition.

While earlier studies treat diglossia primarily as a functional distribution of language varieties, Suleiman re-theorizes it as a mechanism of ideological stratification. High varieties are invested with prestige, authenticity, and authority, whereas low varieties are often stigmatized, reflecting broader social and political inequalities.

Proposition 4: Arabic is a terrain of political struggle and cultural contestation.

In *Arabic in the Fray*, Suleiman explicitly frames Arabic as being "in the fray" of political conflicts, educational reforms, and cultural debates. Language policy, media discourse, and public argumentation reveal how Arabic is mobilized to legitimize power or articulate resistance.

Proposition 5: Identity in the Arab context is continuously negotiated through competing language ideologies.

Suleiman's work demonstrates that Arab identity is neither fixed nor homogeneous. Instead, it is shaped through ongoing negotiations between classical norms, dialectal practices, global influences, and local affiliations. Language becomes the primary medium through which these identity tensions are expressed.

To avoid mere recapitulation, this study highlights how Suleiman's work adds conceptual value to each major theme.

1. Nationalism: From Symbol to Ideological Infrastructure

Suleiman does not simply state that Arabic symbolizes nationalism; he demonstrates how linguistic discourse actively constructs national belonging. Arabic becomes an ideological infrastructure through which the nation is imagined, narrated, and defended.

2. Authority: Language as a Source of Legitimacy

Unlike approaches that treat authority as external to language, Suleiman shows that authority is produced *through* language. The sacred framing of Arabic transforms linguistic norms into moral imperatives, granting certain speakers and institutions symbolic power.

3. Diglossia: From Linguistic Distribution to Ideological Arena

Suleiman's major theoretical shift lies in redefining diglossia. He relocates it from a technical linguistic phenomenon to a contested ideological space where authenticity, modernity, and power intersect. This reconceptualization significantly expands the analytical scope of Arabic sociolinguistics.

4. Power: Language Choice as Social Practice

Suleiman foregrounds how choices between MSA, dialect, and foreign languages index class, education, and political positioning. Power is thus embedded in everyday linguistic practices, not merely in formal policy.

5. Identity: Arabic as a Dynamic Identity Resource

Rather than treating identity as a stable outcome of language use, Suleiman conceptualizes Arabic as a dynamic resource through which identities are continually negotiated. This perspective aligns Arabic sociolinguistics with contemporary theories of identity as processual and relational.

Conclusion

Despite these contributions, this study is subject to several methodological limitations that need to be explicitly acknowledged. As a conceptual and descriptive-analytical study, the analysis relies on a limited corpus of Yasir Suleiman's works, focusing primarily on two major publications that are considered most representative of his arguments on language, ideology, and identity. While these works are seminal, this selective focus constrains the breadth of perspectives within Suleiman's broader intellectual output. Incorporating a wider range of his writings, including later works and less frequently cited essays, could provide a more nuanced account of the development and internal diversity of his ideas.

The selection of secondary literature is also necessarily selective and guided by thematic relevance rather than exhaustive coverage. Consequently, some critical engagements with Suleiman's scholarship—particularly those emerging from related fields such as anthropology, media studies, or comparative studies of nationalism—may not be fully captured. This limitation reflects the conceptual orientation of the study and shapes the interpretive scope of the analysis.



In addition, the absence of empirical data represents an inherent limitation of the methodological design. The study does not employ corpus-based analysis, ethnographic observation, policy document analysis, or interview data that could empirically operationalize or test Suleiman's theoretical propositions. As a result, the findings remain interpretive and analytical rather than explanatory. Future research may address this limitation by integrating Suleiman's framework with empirical methodologies, such as critical discourse analysis of media texts, sociolinguistic surveys, or language policy studies in both Arab and diaspora contexts.

The focus on Arabic sociolinguistics further limits the comparative reach of the study. Although Suleiman's framework offers strong analytical potential, this research does not systematically compare Arabic with other languages that occupy comparable ideological positions in relation to nationalism, authority, and identity. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparative studies would help assess the broader applicability and theoretical robustness of his ideas within global sociolinguistic scholarship.

By articulating these methodological constraints, the study positions itself as a conceptual synthesis rather than a comprehensive empirical investigation. Addressing these limitations in future research will strengthen the analytical depth and extend the relevance of Suleiman's intellectual contributions to contemporary sociolinguistics.

The implication of Finding

The findings of this study reaffirm that the study of the Arabic language cannot be limited merely to diglossia or linguistic variation, but must also extend to the realms of politics, ideology, and identity. Yasir Suleiman's scholarship demonstrates that language functions as an ideological symbol that shapes collective consciousness, structures of authority, and power relations. This theoretical implication enriches sociolinguistics by bridging linguistic analysis with cultural and political studies, thereby offering a multidimensional perspective on the role of Arabic in shaping national identity and collective solidarity.

From a practical standpoint, these findings hold significance for language policy, education, and diaspora communities. Arabic can be positioned not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of preserving identity and ensuring cultural continuity, particularly in the context of globalization. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive Arabic language curriculum that incorporates historical, cultural, and political dimensions. Moreover, Suleiman's insights carry interdisciplinary implications by connecting sociolinguistics with political studies, cultural studies, and Middle Eastern studies, thereby enriching academic discourse on identity, cultural heritage, and social transformation in both the Arab world and transnational communities.

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