

The Term and Terminology in Critical Discourse: An Inquiry into the Emergence of the Concept in Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract:

This study seeks to investigate the emergence of the concept of *terminology* in the works of both early and modern scholars. In parallel, it attempts to reveal the manner in which the science of terminology took shape in the 1930s through a number of schools, thanks to which both *term* and *terminology* came to occupy a distinctive position in the Western and Arab cultural landscapes alike. This is because what distinguishes a term from a general linguistic expression is its specificity. The coinage of a term by specialists is governed by a precise and well-defined theoretical framework that assigns a single linguistic sign to each concept, agreed upon by convention, thereby rendering it a specific linguistic marker tied to a particular field of knowledge. Moreover, specialists have confronted the terminological problem with considerable awareness, viewing it as one of the most controversial critical issues in transmission, translation, and usage. Consequently, recourse to the science of terminology (terminology studies) has become an inevitable necessity for addressing this problem, with due consideration of the term's specificity in its formulation and establishment. Arab scholarly efforts, in turn, have kept pace with terminological issues and have contributed proposals aimed at laying the foundations for an Arabic terminology grounded in scientific theories, drawing its epistemological resources from both heritage and modernity, and relying on approaches such as revival and innovation, as well as rooting and systematisation.

Keywords: term, terminology (science of terminology), critical discourse, heritage, modernity, terminological schools, Arabic terminology.

Introduction:

The contact between Arab and Western cultures has led to the emergence of numerous scientific and critical terms within the Arab cultural scene. The phenomenon of mutual influence has had a profound impact on shaping modern and contemporary Arab critical discourse, directing it toward engaging with imported terms through their translation and localization within the Arab critical context.

This procedure had already been adopted in earlier periods by Arab-Islamic thought in its engagement with terms transmitted from Greek culture, relying on the criteria established by Muslim scholars. At that time, the need to absorb such terms had become urgent as the Arab-Islamic caliphate expanded eastward and westward, and Arabs came into contact with non-Arab peoples. In this regard, our scholars placed great reliance on the Arabic language in generating and grounding numerous terms. What is striking in this respect is that, as researchers, “we do not find, in the history of Arab culture, a single written or oral complaint

about the difficulty scholars faced in deriving terms from their own language for their specialized fields, beginning with the Arabization of administrative registers carried out by Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the scribe of al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafī and head of the Iraqi diwans, and extending to the innovations of al-Khwārizmī, Jābir, and al-Kindī, and the discoveries of Ibn al-Haytham, ...” (Murtād, ʿAbd al-Malik, *Theory of the Literary Text*, 2007, p. 23).

In this context, we may acknowledge the extent to which the Arabic language has absorbed numerous lexical items and innovative meanings from Persian and Roman cultures, resulting in a flourishing of Arab thought. However, this situation also makes us aware of the difficulty Arab thinkers face in dealing with Western heritage, given that it constitutes a vast intellectual system characterized by rapid formation and continuous development. To the extent that “keeping up with what is produced by thought and its sources worldwide, including new terms, requires giant leaps; and more difficult still is that Western criticism is still in a state of emergence, since Western thought in general—which represents the source of many terms—continues to experience instability in many of its concepts and terminologies” (Mursilī ʿAbd al-Salām, 2006–2007, p. 24).

1. The Term: From Linguistic Meaning to Technical Usage

1.1. The Signification of the Term in Arab Heritage

The words *muṣṭalaḥ* (term) and *iṣṭilāḥ* (terminology/technical usage) are synonymous in the Arabic language. They are derived from the verb *iṣṭalaḥa*, whose root is *ṣ-l-ḥ*, meaning “to agree.” As recorded by Ibn Manẓūr in his lexicon, the root (*ṣ-l-ḥ*) generally denotes righteousness or soundness, that is, the opposite of corruption (see: Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 1997, p. 60). This is consistent with Ibn Fāris’s view in *Maqāyīs al-Luḡa*, where he states that “ṣād, lām, and ḥā’ constitute a single root indicating the opposite of corruption” (Ibn Fāris, Aḥmad, *Maqāyīs al-Luḡa*, n.d., p. 303).

The word *iṣṭilāḥ* appears in *al-Taʾrīfāt* as denoting an agreement among a group to name something by a specific designation, transferring it from its original meaning. In referring to one of the methods of term formation, al-Jurjānī states: “the transfer of a word from one meaning to another, due to an affinity between them” (al-Jurjānī, ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad, *al-Taʾrīfāt*, 1983, p. 28). Based on al-Jurjānī’s definition, one Algerian researcher argues that the author of *al-Taʾrīfāt* derives two fundamental characteristics of the term:

1. the agreement of specialists on a precise meaning;
2. the distinction of the term from other words in the general language (Moulay, ʿAlī Būkhātīm, 2005, p. 25).

As for Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1145–1205 AH), he defines *iṣṭilāḥ* as “the agreement of a specific group on a specific matter” (al-Zabīdī, Murtaḍā, *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, n.d., n.p.). This definition accords with that found in *al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ*, which defines *iṣṭilāḥ* as “the agreement of a group on a specific matter, and every discipline has its own terminology” (*al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ*, 1990, p. 520).

From all this, it becomes clear that the linguistic signification of the word *muṣṭalaḥ* in Arabic lexicons does not go beyond the notion of *ṣalāḥ* (soundness or rectitude), which denotes

whatever is beneficial to people in life. Thus, the concepts of *iṣṭilāḥ* and *muṣṭalah* in Arabic remain confined to agreement, convention, and reconciliation.

However, the word *muṣṭalah* does not appear in the old Arabic dictionaries as it is used today in its scientific sense. Rather, *al-Muʿjam al-Wajīz*, published in 1980, records the meanings of the two terms *iṣṭilāḥ* and *muṣṭalah* as follows (see: *al-Muʿjam al-Wajīz*, 1400 AH / 1980, p. 368).

2. Terminology as a Discipline: The Emergence of the Concept between Heritage and Modernity

A review of the historical development of the concept of the term and its evolution in Arabic scholarship reveals a multiplicity of designations for the discipline concerned with theorizing terms and examining the boundaries of their concepts. Among these designations are *terminological research*, *terminological inquiry*, *the science of the term*, *the science of terms*, *terminology* (*al-muṣṭalahiyya*), *terminological studies*, and *terminological systems*. These labels were proposed by Arab scholars as equivalents to what is known in Western scholarship as *Terminology / Terminologie* (see, for example: al-ḤājṢāliḥ et al., 1989, p. 144; al-Masʿadī, 1984, p. 22; Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1985, p. 109; Ben Mālik, 2000, p. 50; Ḥallām, 1997, p. 222; al-Dīdāwī, 2000, p. 47).

Perhaps the earliest heritage-based designation adopted by modern scholars is *ʿilm al-muṣṭalah* (the science of terminology), a term originally used by scholars of Hadith. These scholars, who inherited the principles and rules governing the transmission of Prophetic tradition from earlier generations, refined, systematized, and codified them into independent works that later came to be known as *ʿilm muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth*. This field is also referred to as *ʿilm al-ḥadīthdirāya*, *ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*, or *uṣūl al-ḥadīth* (al-Ṭahhān, n.d., pp. 30–40).

Within this framework, the *term* as a lexical item moved from general language usage to specialized usage. This transition is clearly illustrated in the terminology of linguists and Hadith scholars, as in the case of *al-rāwiya*. Originally, this word referred to a camel used to carry water. Because water symbolizes benefit, fertility, growth, and life, scholars drew an analogy between the bearer of water and the bearer of knowledge, establishing a semantic relationship that justified transferring the term to its new conceptual function (Murtād, *On Literary Text Theory*, p. 20). Thus, the term became a linguistic symbol that denotes a specific mental conception through convention and agreement.

Early Arab scholars, with remarkable insight, recognised the importance of the term and its role in the acquisition of knowledge. Indeed, for them, terms were the keys to the sciences. As al-Khwārizmī observed, understanding terminology constitutes half of knowledge, and the history of terms is essentially the history of the sciences themselves: every new science requires new terms, and every new conceptualization calls for the creation of corresponding terminological designations. Hence, the existence of terms is indispensable to scientific activity (al-Nuʿaymī, Winter 2008).

From this intrinsic relationship, it becomes evident that the term—as an idea and a concept—is as old as the sciences themselves. Its foundations were laid by earlier generations and transmitted across civilizations, revealing the enduring contributions of predecessors to successors. What distinguishes modern scholars lies in their formulation of the theoretical

foundations governing terminology as a discipline. In this respect, terminology resembles other branches of the human sciences: it is both the product of its past and the substance of its future. Nevertheless, although the term is ancient as a concept, it did not acquire its status as a scientific discipline until the early 1930s. This development is attributed to the Austrian engineer and scholar Eugen Wüster (1898–1977), who endeavored to establish the foundations of this new field through his work *International Standardisation of Engineering Terminology* (1931). This publication has been widely regarded by linguists and engineers alike as a seminal reference. Wüster adopted a philosophical approach that viewed terms as intrinsically linked to the nature of concepts themselves (see: al-Qāsimī, *Terminology: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications*, 2008).

From that point onward, terminology (*Terminology / Terminologie*) came to be recognised as a relatively modern concept within contemporary linguistics and as a branch of applied linguistics. Owing to its close relationship with linguistic sciences, it intersects with many of their domains. Wüster clarified this position by defining terminology as a field that connects linguistics with logic, ontology, information science, and various branches of scientific knowledge (Ḥijāzī, n.d., p. 17). Consequently, every scientific field requires a precisely defined set of terms, which collectively constitute its terminological system (Dubois et al., 1991, p. 486).

The unprecedented scientific progress of the modern era across all disciplines has been accompanied by an immense proliferation of terms, rendering their absence inconceivable. There is no science without terminology; the two are inseparable, like the two sides of a single coin. In this context, the task of terminology as a discipline is to study specialized lexical units, the relationships among them, the methods of their formation, and the systems governing their representation within scientific structures.

In order to clarify the nature of terminology and avoid conceptual confusion, Wüster later defined terminology as “the science that governs the system of specialized vocabulary within a given field of knowledge,” and he identified five defining characteristics of the discipline:

1. It investigates concepts in order to determine the terms that express them.
2. It adopts a descriptive methodological approach.
3. It aims at language planning and advocates standardisation and normalisation.
4. It is inherently multilingual.
5. It is primarily concerned with written language (al-Qāsimī, *Terminology: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications*, ATIDA).

Wüster’s engagement with terminology led to the establishment of a terminological school known as the Vienna School, where he translated his theoretical principles into practical research. After his death, his work was continued by his student Felber. Beyond the Vienna School, other contemporary schools emerged, most notably the Prague School, which adopted the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and emphasised the functional dimension of language. This school viewed terms as integral components of language and maintained that terminological research must employ linguistic and lexicographical tools.

The Russian School, founded by scholars such as Lotte (1898–1950) and Chaplygin (1869–1942), adopted a more object-oriented approach, focusing on concepts, their interrelations, and the assignment of precise terms to specific conceptual domains. Alongside these schools—

which functioned as genuine centers for research in general terminology—specialized institutions emerged in Canada, France, and the Arab world.

In France, the *Association Française de Terminologie* was established in 1975 under the auspices of the High French Committee. In the Arab world, responsibility for terminological development was entrusted to language academies, which undertook research into the principles governing the formation of scientific and technical terms in Arabic. To coordinate terminological efforts across the Arab region, the Arabization Coordination Bureau was established in Rabat. This institution promoted linguistic and lexicographical research and supported studies addressing scientific and technical terminology in Arabic, notably through its journal *Al-Lisān al-‘Arab* and through conferences dedicated to Arabization.

Similarly, the Arab Lexicographical Association in Tunis has been active in organizing national and international conferences on lexicography and terminology and publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Majallat Mu‘jamiyya*. In Rabat, the Moroccan Association for Lexicographical Studies publishes *Journal of Lexicographical Studies*, while in Cairo, the Egyptian Society for the Arabization of Sciences organizes annual conferences devoted to general and specialized terminology theory.

Despite this substantial body of scholarship, two issues remain particularly striking: the multiplicity of designations and the diversity of definitions of terminology as a discipline. This diversity may be attributed to the plurality of Western theoretical schools from which Arab researchers have drawn. Mahmoud Hijazi, for instance, catalogues numerous definitions of terminology (Hijāzī, n.d., pp. 10–14). From our perspective, the most comprehensive definition is that proposed by Fāḍil Thāmir, who defines terminology as “the discipline concerned with studying the relationships between scientific concepts and the linguistic terms that express them; it is the field-based study of the naming of concepts belonging to specialized domains of human activity, in view of their social function” (Thāmir, 1994, p. 171).

Accordingly, terminology focuses on the study of specialized lexical units, their relationship to concepts, and the network of relations among terms themselves, forming a coherent system that reveals key characteristics of specialized languages (ibid.).

The multiplicity of synonymous designations referring to the study and documentation of terms in Arabic scholarship—mentioned at the beginning of this section—has led many Arab researchers to use two expressions interchangeably: *the science of terminology* (*‘ilm al-muṣṭalaḥ*) and *terminology* (*al-muṣṭalaḥiyya*). In Western studies, however, and according to the distinction proposed by ‘Alī al-Qāsimī, a differentiation is made between *Terminology* (*Terminologie*), which examines the relationship between scientific concepts and their linguistic designations, and *Terminography* (*Terminographie*), whose primary concern lies in recording terms, documenting their sources and related information, and disseminating them in the form of specialized dictionaries, whether printed or digital.

On the basis of this distinction, al-Qāsimī concludes that *terminology* (*al-muṣṭalaḥiyya*) is the more comprehensive notion, as it encompasses two complementary dimensions: a theoretical dimension represented by the science of terminology, and a practical dimension represented by the practice of term formation and compilation (see: ‘Alī al-Qāsimī, *‘Ilm al-Muṣṭalaḥ*, ATIDA, 2006–2009).

This distinction, however, was later implicitly reconsidered by other scholars, who came to regard the two terms as synonymous, arguing that “what linguists usually engage in under one branch of the lexicographical tree falls equally under the science of terminology or terminology studies” (al-Mas‘adī, March 1993, p. 3; see also Moulay, ‘AlīBūkhātim, *Semiotic Arabic Critical Terminology*, 2005, p. 34).

The conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing is that the multiplicity of labels and definitions associated with terminology as a discipline should not lead us to overlook or undervalue Arab scholarly efforts in the field of terminology and terminological studies. Since the establishment of language academies in several Arab countries, alongside the Arabization Coordination Bureau and various scholarly associations and institutions, numerous voices—linguists, critics, and intellectuals—have called for the construction of an Arabic terminological framework possessing its own specificity and distinctiveness. What warrants particular attention in this regard is that some critics have sought, as far as possible, to reduce dependency in the terminological domain through strategies of revival and innovation. Their discourse has gradually moved beyond merely following Western priorities and precedents toward asserting the right to grounding and systematization. They view the terminological problem as one of the most pressing issues in contemporary critical thought, given that it is supported by scientific theories with their own conceptual apparatus and procedural frameworks, rather than remaining a set of vague critical notions. For this reason, they have sought to ground terminology by drawing on heritage while engaging with modernity (Moulay, ‘AlīBūkhātim, 2004, pp. 148–149).

Nevertheless, despite the quantitative and qualitative achievements realized in the fields of terminology and terminological studies, Arabic terminology has yet to reach a stage of full maturity. Despite the various methods employed by specialists to create terms—through activating and expanding the resources of the Arabic language—it continues to suffer from a shortage of scientific and technical terminology. According to ‘Alī al-Qāsimī, this shortfall can be attributed to historical, scientific, and civilizational factors (see: al-Qāsimī, 1987, pp. 62–63).

Accordingly, the terminological researcher in the Arab world remains engaged in the search for solid theoretical and practical foundations capable of elevating terminology to the status of a fully developed discipline. Such foundations are necessary for the establishment of an Arabic terminological school that remains firmly rooted in authentic heritage while remaining open to the demands of modernity.

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