Article

Sociocultural Causes of Ambiguity in Arab Academic Writings

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Abstract: Although ambiguity in written, oral, and visual communication is inevitably present across all human societies and cultures, variation among these societies and cultures occurs in the sociocultural causes of its existence. This study helps formulate a conceptual framework that enables the enrichment of knowledge about this variation. It takes a first step by highlighting Arab-specific reasons behind ambiguity in academic writings in humanities and social sciences. The investigation entails thematically analysing the thoughts of 905 Arabs in academia. The findings point to a 'doing-the-minimum' mentality, whereby one may act hastily and impatiently and do just enough for one's manuscript to be published in any journal, thereby rushing into publication while skimping on quality and diminishing attention to manuscript clarity. Another finding is the ambition for rewards that Arab institutions assign to publication, whereby one may boost their publication records to reap these rewards, resulting in high quantity while sacrificing quality (e.g., clarity). Another reason discovered is the conceptualisation of writing as a formulaic and 'fill-in-the-blanks' task (templates to be completed and, thus, manuscripts to be constructed), instilling a focus on technicality instead of cognitive depth and clarity. An additional reason found is the passive application of foreign theories and conceptual frameworks without subjecting them to critical reflection, reapplying foreign surveys and mimicking survey-based articles, thereby making their articles culturally shallow, suffer from cultural irrelevance, and thus, ambiguity. This is along with the integration of poetry (wherein ambiguity is culturally viewed as desirable and showing poets to be sophisticated) into Arabs' daily social and educational lives and mindsets, encouraging the acceptability of ambiguity as a possible linguistic quality in scholarly writing as well. The social context lacks direct, explicit, and free articulation, encouraging one to resort to roundabout ways of composing their manuscripts, thus, making the manuscripts fall into ambiguity.

Keywords: Arab ambiguity; Arab vagueness; Arab obscurity; Arab writing; Arab research

1. Literature Review

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Humans cannot help but live 'in an ambiguous world' [1,2] insisted on 'the ambiguity of human existence and the paradoxes and necessary failures of action that this implies'. One component of human existence is communication, which (be it in written, oral, or visual form) can be said to be 'inherently ambiguous' [3,4] agreed that 'ambiguity is inherent to everyday human communication'. In the eyes of [5], 'ambiguity is a fundamental property

of human experience and plays a fundamental role in the constitution of (inter)subjective processes'. It is, arguably, natural that ambiguity is present in all human (and, possibly, non-human) communities, whether in low, medium, or high degrees [6]. It is practically infeasible for ambiguity in any society to go down (or to be brought down) to zero or for 'its pervasiveness in everyday life' to be eliminated [7]. Theoretically, it is impossible to create a utopian society devoid of ambiguity, with a degree of ambiguity being 'inherent in all acts of human communication' [8]. Arguably, the ambiguity of written, oral, and visual communication is a reflection of the inherent complexity and imperfection of human society [9]. Ambiguity is a congenital defect of human society and of the written word, a fact that humans must accept as part and parcel of their collective experience [10]. Echoing these theoretical arguments, it can be argued that to seek to prove the existence of such ambiguity in any given community is to seek to prove the obvious and the actual. Yet, what is worthy of academic investigation and open to enquiry is to single out the variation in the sociocultural reasons for such ambiguity in the world's various societies. Although ambiguity is prevalent across all human societies and cultures, variation among these societies and cultures can be said to take place in the sociocultural causes of its existence. This study is, accordingly, associated with this variation, helping to formulate a conceptual framework that enables the enrichment of knowledge about this variation by highlighting Arab-specific causes of written ambiguity.

It should be methodologically logical to study the sociocultural causes of ambiguity without the need to undertake the task of proving its inevitable existence [11]. The act of researching ambiguity does not have to be in chronological order; that is, one does not have to first prove its occurrence in order to study its causality [12]. Hence, the researchers' attention and efforts focus on the sociocultural reasons for ambiguity, not on the inspection of the extent to which this matter exists. The academic literature is rather quiet on the question of the influence of social cultures on written ambiguity, as investigated through sociological and anthropological lenses [13]. While ambiguity has been well-studied in such fields as linguistics, arts, humanities, law, politics, psychology, information technology, and management, it has not been well-studied in the fields of sociology or anthropology [14–16]. The academic literature has generously studied whether ambiguity is effective or not, the methods to measure and detect ambiguity in writing, the types of ambiguity, how people respond to ambiguity, and so forth [17]. However, what is missing in the literature (beyond personal poses in the media and on social media; see, for example, [18,19]) is the construction of a conceptual framework for exploring the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in academic writing. In other words, what makes the current study outstanding is its examination of ambiguity in academic writing as a matter of anthropology and sociology. To word it differently, this study is remarkable in providing insight into and helping promote the culturalization of enquiry into written ambiguity (in lieu of the plausibility of its presence). Thus, the current research sets out to discover the sociocultural factors of such ambiguity in academic writings with a focus on Arab culture.

1.2. Written Ambiguity in Arab Academia

Wholly lacking in the literature, are explicit academic reforms and efforts (for example, through perspective pieces, commentaries, and editorials) to problematise components of Arabs' publication activity (e.g., ambiguity in manuscripts). Arab academics are normally neither educated nor trained in composing problematising manuscripts. They may leave problematisation to Western scholars, whom they may culturally regard as the sole authority to perform the task. This further feeds into Arabs' difficulty in identifying their sociocultural problems, be they in academia or the wider culture, and in critically reflecting upon them [20]. Hence, the current manuscript aims to untangle the sociocultural reasons for the thorny problem of ambiguity in Arabic language academic writing, a problem previously singled out by [21–23]. Drawing upon a systematic review of Arab writings in the social sciences between 2011 and 2016, ref. [24] detected a high level of ambiguity and, moreover, pointed out that the content was incoherent and 'full of stuffing and boring repetition'.

In the Arab context, such ambiguity constitutes a pattern to such an extent that an entire, well-established domain of enquiry, called 'tafsir', is dedicated to the interpretation (that is, disambiguation) of existing texts [25]. Some have, albeit shallowly, touched on some sociocultural causes of such ambiguity. For example, ref. [26] indicated that, although academic writings are meant to transcend one particular culture and be ultimately directed to the international audience, some Arabs tend to write as if they direct their writings only to local readers, treating their works as if completely isolated from the rest of the world, thereby making their writings ambiguous to the international audience. Ref. [27] argued that the technical complexity of some Arabs' academic writings renders it difficult for the general reader to comprehend without the assistance of an interpreter. Ref. [28] hinted that Arab writings can be obscure and directed to a privileged audience, not the masses, contributing to their ambiguity.

Ref. [29] identified the lack of linguistic clarity in the curricular and reading materials of Arabic-language departments, which has been off-putting to potential students. Ref. [30] pointed out that complexity in Arab culture (which has manifested itself in such forms as ornaments, clothing, furniture, and motifs) has impacted their writing style, thereby making their texts complicated, ambiguous, and hard to interpret. Ref. [31] took an extreme stance, asserting that the Arabic language is not well-suited for academic writing, resulting in ambiguity and confusion if it is used for this purpose. Ref. [32] refuted the notion that the Arabic language is at fault for ambiguity, arguing instead that it is the usage of poetic and rhetorical styles by Arab academic authors that contributes to the noticed ambiguity. It should be remarked that although ambiguity is documented in the literature to be rife in Arab writings, it may not be an all-encompassing phenomenon that may pertain to every domain of its historical particularities, societal, and cultural norms and language use. This partiality implies that ambiguity may not apply to every member of the Arab population. The concentration of the current investigation is not to quantify the presence of ambiguity and measure and determine the extent to which it exists. Rather, the concentration is on the sociocultural causes and impetus behind ambiguity, regardless of whether its presence is strong, medium, or rather weak. That is, although the above writings [33–35] are to be rightfully lauded for detecting ambiguity in Arab scholarly texts, they merit critique for failing to proceed with exploring why it exists. Therefore, this research delves deeper to examine the root causes of this ambiguity and how wider social culture contributes to this ambiguity. In other words, this study examines the sociocultural reasons for the reported ambiguity.

2. Methodology

This article seeks to identify the socially and culturally driven sources of ambiguity in academic writing in Arab culture. One may find fault in the term 'Arab culture' for being ambiguous and sounding biased and abstract. The authors thought that such concern could be partly allayed through the formation of an operative definition to clarify its scope and the basis of its usage. This definition was seen to have the potential to help readers realise the limitations of the phrase and what the authors have relied on to tailor the study and design its parameters accordingly. Arab culture is operationally defined in this study to refer to a social and cultural mosaic, collective identity, and cultural entity that is an amalgamation of inherited values, linguistic systems, expressions, religious beliefs, morals, lifestyles, history, topics of conversation, traditions, and formal and informal customs (e.g., music, art, literature, poetry, philosophy, psychology, cuisine, calligraphy, and dress) that bind together people who identify themselves and are identified by others as Arabs [36,37]. This entity plays a central role in connecting many geographical domains in the Middle East and North Africa, to the extent that this connection is normally referred to as 'the Arab world' [38].

The idea for this article came to the authors during their involvement with various translation projects from Arabic into English and German. Translation requires one to look with eyes wide open at the meaning of each word. As if examining Arabic writings under a microscope, the authors saw, and could not unsee, how ambiguous such writings are. This realisation

(an 'aha!' transformational moment) was only reaffirmed during the authors' tenure as journal editors and culminated in their decision to undertake an investigation into the problem. The present publication is expected to be negatively perceived by Arabs as offensive since it criticises Arabs in their use of their own language; that is to say, the authors are directing a language-based criticism at the so-called 'ahl al luqah' ('the people of language', as Arabs love to identify themselves). The Arabic language, coupled with religiosity, is the bedrock of Arab society, around which Arabs' identity, politics, culture, ideologies, geographies, and heritage orbit. Notwithstanding, or owing to, their linguistic pride, Arabs denyingly struggle with linguistically articulating themselves, especially in written form.

This article is structured around the following research question: what are the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in academic writing in Arab culture? This question is addressed through various data collection methods, which are unpacked in Table 1. The authors sought to draw insights from holding informal conversations with colleagues. This was in addition to focus groups, which discussed various topics, of which the ambiguity of Arab academic writing was one. The input from conversations and focus groups was analysed thematically, as detailed in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1. The findings report, which was the outcome of this analytical process, was written in Arabic and sent to four well-known critics (one from Egypt, one from Jordan, and two from Saudi Arabia) for their feedback on the report and on, notably, its clarity. Indeed, their criticism underlined the report's high ambiguity, yet this did not come as a surprise to the researchers, who are Arabs, and who did not expect that they would be able to fully disengage from the culture in which they were raised, where ambiguity is common. To prevail over the noticed ambiguity in the findings report, one of the critics suggested translating the report into another language and then translating it back into Arabic. This act of reverse translation proved fruitful, with the same critics admiring the report's clarity and brevity [39]. One critic made the following remark: 'I have actually found it rather strange to read such a piece in Arabic that is well-structured and direct. It is obvious to me the influence of the back translation on the clarity of the report. It has the linguistic spirit and structurality of a foreign language.' The reversely translated Arabic version of the report was, once again, translated into English, though this time to be shared with two non-Arabic-speaking critics, namely native speakers of English and German, for their thoughts on its clarity (the reason for choosing German here was to have feedback from someone from neither an English nor Arabic language background). These seemingly laborious steps were taken because the authors, understandably, apprehensive about publishing an article on ambiguity that itself suffered from ambiguity.

Table 1. The study map card.

Study Title	Sociocultural Causes of Ambiguity in Arab Academic Writings
Study Objective	To explore the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab academic writings
Research Question	What are the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab academic writings?
Studied Ethnicity	Arabs
Operational Definitions	■ Ambiguity in Academic Writings: It is operationally defined in this study as an attribute in a written work that prevents a reader from forming a developed understanding of what is written. It can manifest itself in research titles, abstracts, introductions, research objectives, manuscript structures, terminologies, methodologies, findings, interpretations, discussions, recommendations, and conclusions, as well as at the sentence level. ■ Arab Culture: It is operationally defined in this study as a social and cultural mosaic, collective identity, and cultural entity that is an amalgamation of inherited values, linguistic systems, expressions, religious beliefs, morals, lifestyles, history, topics of conversation, traditions, and formal and informal customs (e.g., music, art, literature, poetry, philosophy, psychology, cuisine, calligraphy, and dress) that bind together people who identify themselves and are identified by others as Arabs.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Studied Group	PhD holders
Group Characteristics	Arab graduates of Arab universities
Studied Topic	Academic writings in Arabic
Studied Disciplines	Humanities and social sciences
Related Fields of Enquiry	Anthropology, sociology and linguistics
Study Duration	2021–2022
Research Methodology	Qualitative research
Data Collection Methods	■ Informal conversations: Academics were asked for their thoughts on the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab writings. ■ Focus groups: Academics were asked in focus groups for their thoughts on the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab writings. ■ Critics: Academics were invited to engage in two rounds of critically reading the findings report.
What Data Collected	■ Informal conversations: Views were collected on the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab academic writings. ■ Focus groups: Views were collected on the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab academic writings. ■ Critics: Views were collected on the findings report that showed the sociocultural causes of ambiguity in Arab academic writings.
Questions for Participants	■ Informal conversations: Unstructured conversations starting with the following question: 'We are interested in exploring the reasons why some Arab academic writings may be ambiguous, what is your input?' A follow-up question was, 'Do you think Arab culture may have contributed to this ambiguity?' ■ Focus groups: Unstructured conversations starting with the following question: 'We are interested in exploring the reasons why some Arab academic writings may be ambiguous—what is your input?' A follow-up question was, 'Do you think Arab culture may have contributed to this ambiguity?' ■ Critics: Critics were asked, 'Could you share your thoughts on the findings report and highlight the areas in the report that you find ambiguous?'
Participation Duration	■ Informal conversations: An average of 10 min per participant. ■ Focus groups: Six hours, although merely two hours spent on ambiguity and the rest on other issues. ■ Critics: Two hours of reading for the first round, and 30 min for the second round.
Participation Means	Participating in written, oral (over the phone) or visual (face to face or via the internet) forms.
Number of Participants	■ Informal conversations: 603 participants. ■ Focus groups: 12 groups of 302 participants. ■ Critics: Four participants who criticised the Arabic version of the findings report and two participants who criticised the English version.
Demographic Details	■ Gender: 55% men and 45% women. ■ Academic Ranking: 15% Full Professors, 30% Associate Professors, and 55% Assistant Professors. ■ Countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Sampling Methods	▪ Convenience Sampling: People within the social network of the authors were invited to participate in the study. ▪ Snowball Sampling: People within the social network of the authors were invited to suggest potential study participants they thought would be willing to participate or were known for being critically reflective on academia.
How Many Data Were Collected	More and more conversations were held (and, thus, more and more data were collected) until no more new views were discovered and the repetition of views was noticed.
Data Analysis Approach	Thematic Analysis
Data Analysis Process	▪ Generating Numbers: An Arabic numeral is designated to each meaningful and relevant sentence from the conversations, focus groups and critics. ▪ Generating Letters: Each numeral was followed by a letter distinguishing and corresponding to the data collection method: 'CO' for the conversations, 'FG' for the focus groups and 'CR' for the critics. ▪ Generating Numbered Letters: A total of 1599 numbered letters were generated for the conversations (CO1, CO2, CO3, etc.), 832 numbered letters for the focus groups (FG1, FG2, FG3, etc.), and 41 numbered letters for the critics (CR1, CR2, CR3, etc.). ▪ Generating Marks: Each numbered letter was subsequently marked with one or two words that represented their essential meaning. ▪ Generating Micro Visions: Marks of the same genre were grouped into 'micro visions', constructing initial conceptualisations and taking the early steps towards the comprehension of the data. ▪ Generating Macro Visions: The micro visions were assembled to generate coherent 'macro visions', constituting the final step in the data comprehension process. ▪ Reporting: The outcome of the analytical process was placed in the Findings section, meaning that each finding sentence was accompanied by its respective numbered letter. These numbers were removed from the final version of the manuscript.
Analytical Notes	▪ Not all the interviews were transcribed; instead, sentences that were reasoned by the authors to be meaningful and relevant were written down and noted from each conversation. Then, the themes evolved from the noted sentences. ▪ There were no interim themes, and no themes were dropped. ▪ Those themes that were added were reported in the manuscript. ▪ Those themes that were merged were reported in the manuscript. For example, themed micro visions that had to be merged formed macro visions. ▪ The decision over the themes was performed through a series of sessions in which the authors sought to make sense of the data. In other words, the themes came from and emerged from the data (i.e., from the noted sentences) through these sessions.
Analytical Auditor	One was employed to function as an auditor, thoroughly going through the entire analytical process so as to ensure the absence of unintentional bias on the part of the authors in selecting data to support a thesis rather than selecting representative data.

The participants in this study are drawn from the fields of humanities and social sciences, whose opinions are reflective of the issues faced in these academic disciplines. To gain an understanding of how the same problem may be perceived differently, an identical study should be conducted among scientists. That is, a study to compare the thoughts of academics from the humanities and social sciences to those from the sciences regarding the examined subject would provide further insight into the problem. That said, it should be remarked that a large number of Arabs' articles from scientific fields are normally written in non-Arabic languages.
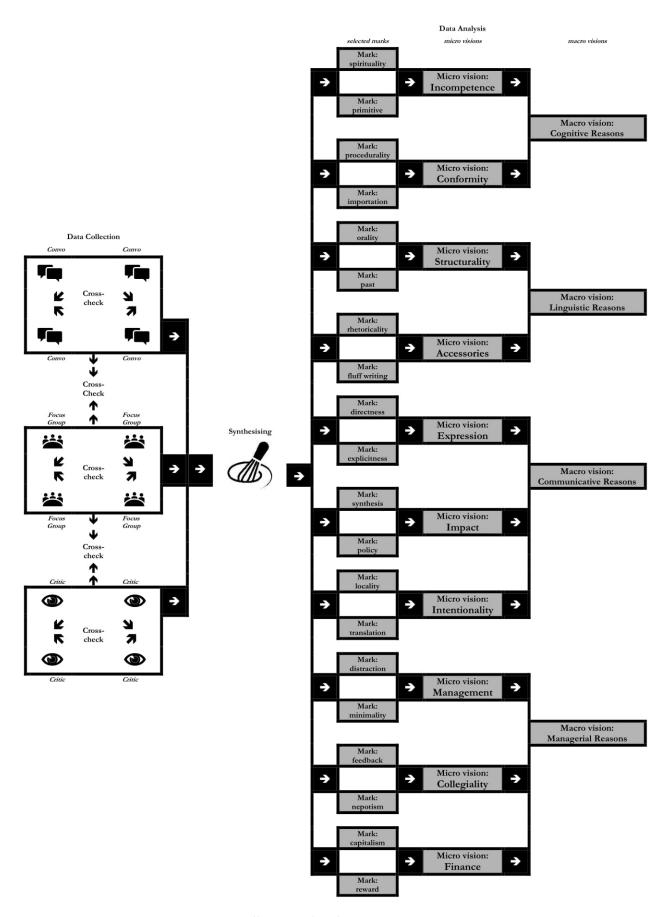
Figure 1. Data collection and analysis.

3. Findings

3.1. Macro Vision: Cognitive Reasons

3.1.1. Micro Vision: Incompetence

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from nine marks: 'spirituality', 'primitive', 'manual', 'activity', 'deskilling', 'superficiality', 'growth', 'historical regression' and 'depth'. These marks are conceptualised as Arab society's disregard for writing as a skill to be obtained systematically through education and training. Mark: spirituality. Arabs are not normally trained in academic writing for the same reason they are not trained in other skills; Arab society is 'a society of spirituality and morality, not a society of skills' (participant), wherein underlying education, upbringing, and training are spiritual and moral teachings, not soft skills (e.g., the skill of writing with clarity). Mark: primitive. In the Arab worldview, writing may be culturally seen as a primitive behaviour, which needs only observation to be acquired. Arab academics may even feel offended to be subjected to training in Arabic, including Arabic writing, as the prevailing view is that non-Arabs, are the subjects of such training. Mark: manual. Arabic publications, manuals, and guidelines dedicated to academic writing are rare. Some participants even question the existence of 'Arab academic writing' since there are no formal, established guidelines for academic writing in the Arabic language. Arab universities concern themselves more with teaching and less with research, and so research (including academic writing) as a phenomenon in the Arab context remains in the early stages of development. In short, 'Arab society is not developed enough to give research any priority' (participant). Mark: activity. Communal academic writing-related activities and events, such as writing clubs and creative writing sessions, are also rare or non-existent. Mark: deskilling. The lack of support for the writing skill can be understood as part of a cultural and political project of filtering out; citizens gifted with the pen are conceived by the reinforcers of Arab culture as a political threat, whose way with words can be used to destabilise and even destruct the culture.

Mark: superficiality. Even when academic writing is taught, it is delivered in a superficial and theoretical manner without relation to the higher aspiration of developing critically informed and thinking authors. This is judged to be the case as academic writing is, in all likelihood, taught by academics who never became successful authors themselves. Mark: growth. Arabs are not normally good at continuously improving their soft skills, one of them being academic writing, especially after obtaining their doctorates. Once Arabs become PhD holders, in the view of some participants, they tend to terminate, no longer caring about the development of their soft skills, whether because they now conceive of themselves as authorities and, therefore, no longer need to bother themselves with cognitive growth or because they have become distracted by the many tasks that Arab society assigns to PhD holders. Worthy of note, also, is that PhD holders are (as are Arabs in general) normally preoccupied with their familial and social lives to an extent incomprehensible to non-Arabs. Taken together, these 'distractions' take Arab academics away from conducting high-quality research (including writing with clarity) and deplete their 'research battery' (participant). Distractions aside, though, it is also Arab academics' interests that are skewed (and often very much so) towards their personal life, undermining their academic productivity and focus. This skew is not only due to the pull factors mentioned above but also related to push factors, including Arab academics' often meagre loyalty to, belonging in, and passion for their career. Mark: historical regression. Written ambiguity in the Arab context is a relatively recent phenomenon; by turning back the pages of Arab history, we find that earlier generations of Arabs were gravely concerned about clarity. Yet, this attitude would not last, with a multigenerational deterioration in Arabs' Arabic skills. Mark: depth. Interpretation and discussion sections are not common in Arab articles, and their absence means that only a shallow (and, hence, ambiguous) understanding of the phenomenon is conveyed to readers. Arab academic writing can be said to suffer from 'coupled ambiguity' (participant): ambiguity in interpreting and discussing phenomena and ambiguity in writing about phenomena.

3.1.2. Micro Vision: Conformity

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from seven marks: 'procedurality', 'non-innovation', 'importation', 'solidity', 'old tools', 'technicality', and 'outsourcing'. These marks are conceptualised as Arab academics' view that writing is templates to be completed and manuscripts to be constructed. Mark: procedurality. What is especially worth noting is that Arab writers at times view writing not as a set of skills or as an interactive means of communication but as certain procedural techniques to be followed [21]. Mark: non-innovation. What is worse is that these procedural techniques are crafted by Western methodologists and then passively applied by Arabs. Arabs have no methodologists who develop methodologies of Arab origins. This task is viewed as Western-specific, and aspiring Arab methodologists are in some ways crushed by their fellow Arab reviewers. Mark: importation. Arab academics view writing as templates (imported from the West) to be completed (consumed by the East). This practice is followed with no sensitivity to the variation between Eastern and Western sociocultural contexts. Arab issues are studied using Western tools, which have not undergone any process of cultural adjustment or consideration, adding to the ambiguity of Arab publications. As one participant elegantly put it, 'the Arab mind is an importing mind, not exporting mind, and writing is an exporting act'. This can be attributed to Arabs' culturally implanted habits of conformity, obedience, and passive consumption. In addition, Arabs customarily do not access and generate knowledge independently but rather depend on others (e.g., English literature) to access and generate knowledge, and this indirectness generates a sense of confusion, misunderstanding, and ambiguity [40].

Mark: solidity. Many of the templates used for writing in Arab academia were not only imported from the West but were done so during the last century and, since then, have solidified, frozen in time by the Arab academics who have elevated them out of reach of human intervention as divine and unquestionable black boxes. Mark: old tools. Arabs normally use methodologies, approaches, techniques, ways of thinking, and references from previous centuries, and their application to contemporary phenomena inevitably produces ambiguity. Even though some of these tools appear on their face to be new, their roots run deep into the past. Mark: technicality. Arabs tend to be prone to forget something's ultimate objective and the initial reason why it was founded, focusing instead, almost exclusively, on its technical components. In this way, Arab academics undertake their work not to enhance knowledge (academia's ultimate objective and the reason why it was founded) but to construct templated research articles (a technical component of academia). For Arabs, doing research is a matter of following procedures leading to the production of manuscripts, and, by stressing the procedural aspect of academic writing, they discard its essence, or its soul, thereby creating ambiguity. This practice can arguably be traced back to wider Islamic culture, in light of which Muslims are criticised for having forgotten the initial reason for and ultimate objective of Islam (to 'make humans ethically perfect', as their Prophet said), concentrating solely on the technicality and procedurality of Islamic practices [41]. Mark: outsourcing. In a strategy resorted to by many Arab academics, research activity is broken down into separate smaller tasks (e.g., literature reviews, data collection, data analysis, programming, and writing up) and outsourced, according to the particular task, to different services and freelancers. The academic assembles the tasks once completed and, 'manufactures' a manuscript in a factory-like way. This fragmentation can hardly be expected to give rise to high-quality (and non-ambiguous) manuscripts.

3.2. Macro Vision: Linguistic Reasons

3.2.1. Micro Vision: Linguistic Structure

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from five marks: 'orality', 'poetry', 'the past', 'punctuation', and 'multi meaning', conceptualised as the structural nature of the Arabic language [42]. Mark: orality. According to [43], the written form of the Arabic language was primarily invented by non-Arabs. Considering that it is not mostly their invention, Arabs cannot be expected to be inherently fluent or native in mastering it,

including writing with clarity. Mark: poetry. In the words of one participant, 'Arabic is a language of arts, but not of knowledge'. Arabs are talented in the composition of poems but normally struggle with academic manuscripts [28]. Their historically outstanding ability to craft poetic pieces seemingly has come at the cost of their composition of academic manuscripts. For Arabs, the beauty of poetic writing is in its ambiguity [44]; the two cannot be disentangled, so the integration of poetry into daily life has ingrained ambiguation into the mentality of Arabs, including academic writers.

Mark: past. The Arabic language can be said to be 'the language of the past, failing to be the language of the present or future' (participant). While this language can bear the weight of the past and its cultural heritage, contemporality and futurism fall by the wayside. Mark: punctuation. Sentences in Arab writing are normally long, and Arabs struggle to place commas and full stops appropriately, which contributes to the ambiguity of Arab academic writing, only worsened by an unfamiliarity with the concept of transition words and phrases. Mark: multi-meaning. The Arabic language itself, not only those using it, can be a source of ambiguity, as Arabic words and phrases tend to carry various (and, at times, conflicting) meanings.

3.2.2. Micro Vision: Linguistic Accessories

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from four marks: 'rhetoricality', 'dramatic articulation', 'fluff writing', and 'linguistic complication'. These marks are conceptualised as Arabs' incorporation of a large number of linguistic 'accessories' (e.g., creative, rhetorical, figurative, and metaphorical expressions) into their writings, distracting readers from the core message. Mark: rhetoricality. Just as they do with poetry, Arabs may arguably provide more weight to how academic manuscripts look (through decorative expressions and rhetorical improvements) and less importance to what they carry (through meaning, substance, structure, flow, and clarity). For Arab academics, a sense of grandeur, splendour and prestige, it is believed, can be granted to their manuscripts through linguistic accessories, mirroring how they may seek to make their home grand through elaborate decorative patterns, additions, carvings, gold colours, and cut-outs on the front door [45,46]. Mark: dramatic articulation. Arab academics write using 'dramatic wording' as if they are writing poetry, endeavouring to 'astakbarha walaw qanat ajerah' (Arabic maxim: 'make it sound big even if it is just a tick'). This exaggeration contributes to the ambiguation of manuscripts, conveying to readers an impression of the subject matter detached from reality.

Mark: fluff writing. Many Arabs cannot help but engage in 'hashu' (Arabic term: 'fluff writing'), as one participant explains: they tend to 'write something without writing about anything'. In the eyes of those who practise hashu, though, fluff writing has the power to grant manuscripts a sense of grandeur and magnificence. Such grandeur and magnificence contribute to Arab manuscripts being exceptionally long, owing to fluff writing, the concept of word limits is not part of Arab academic culture. Mark: linguistic complication. For many Arabs, writing non-ambiguously shows simplicity, and simplicity is perceived negatively [47]. Simplified writing is regarded as lacking depth and, hence, as less academic [23]. Academic writing ought to be complicated, to be structurally complicated and carry ambiguity, giving rise to the upside-down belief that 'writing with clarity shows writers not to know the style of academic writing' (participant).

3.3. Macro Vision: Communicative Reasons
3.3.1. Micro Vision: Expression

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from four marks: 'directness', 'explicitness', 'freedom', and 'divinity'. These marks are conceptualised as the preconditions (directness, explicitness, and freedom) for writing non-ambiguously in light of Arabs' dislike (and fear) of addressing matters directly, explicitly, and freely. Mark: directness. Non-ambiguous writing is direct writing, which has no place in Arab culture, a culture that frowns upon addressing issues directly. Mark: explicitness. Disambiguation

requires explicitness, courage, and boldness, and Arabs tend to avoid addressing matters explicitly, courageously, and bravely, as such behaviour is considered socially in a negative light. They, for instance, do not like to be explicit when talking about their culture. Mark: freedom. Openness and freedom are preconditions for clear writing; how clear can writing be in an environment where academic freedom is criminalised? Arab writers are forced into a corner and must write about culturally unacceptable matters in roundabout ways. In an environment where clarity is feared, ambiguity becomes 'a defence tactic and an exit strategy' (participant), allowing writers, when their writings are questioned, to defend themselves by saying, 'this is actually not what I meant' or 'you got me wrong' [48]. Mark: divinity. Certain types of texts in the Arab context are taken as provided and considered beyond criticism, despite their ambiguity. The first type is texts from the past: the older a text is, the diviner it becomes [49]. Apparently, Arabs deeply respect the past, including its texts. The second type is texts by important figures: individuals are idolised and then sanctified, and then even their writings teeter on the edge of becoming divine [50]. Followers of such figures defensively cite their writings in their own publications, even if the original texts contain ambiguity, thereby passing them (along with their ambiguity) on to the next generation.

3.3.2. Micro Vision: Impact

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from three marks: 'synthesis', 'policy', and 'quantity', conceptualised as Arabs' frequent disbelief in the value of research. Mark: synthesis. Arabs' academic writing relies intensively on 'the art of cutting and pasting' (participant) from an assortment of publications to compose their own publications. For them, the literature is comparable to a treasure trove of Lego bricks, from which they selectively pick up pieces to build their own toys. Seen in this light, so-called 'Arab writers' would be better described as synthesisers, or 'Lego builders'. Due to this synthesisation, Arab writings tend to be fragmented, contributing to their ambiguity. Such synthesisation (or, as Westerners call it, 'plagiarism') is not only not seen as negative in the Arab context but regarded as a skill. The strong presence of synthesisation in Arabs' academic writing can be attributed to the influence of Islamic culture, wherein synthesisation is the norm. Individuals in Islamic culture write to impress with their talent in recalling information, not in reasoning, argumentation, and critical thinking.

Mark: policy. Many participants lament that research has no influence over Arab society and ascribe this as a cause for the dearth of high-quality (and, hence, non-ambiguous) articles in academia. There is simply no motivation for Arab academics to write well. By way of example, Arabs are well aware that the thread connecting academic publications to public policies is very thin and that their publications will end up 'untouched and dusted on shelves' (participant). This is in addition to the lack of formal or friendly competition among Arab academics to produce high-quality articles. At the end of the day, writing is meant to be read, and Arabs are discouraged from composing high-quality publications because their fellow Arabs 'normally do not do reading; so why bother writing something good' (participant). It can be described as a vicious cycle, whereby 'writers do not write good because there are no readers, and readers do not read because there are no good writers' (participant). Mark: quantity. A select few Arabs produce great quantities of writings. Their motivation for doing so does not lie in the social impact of their work, but rather, for them, research productivity has become a target in itself and a source of pride; yet, what they sacrifice in order to flood the market with their publications is quality (and, hence, clarity), so much so that they are willing to repeat themselves extensively across their publications. Academics' pride in research productivity is similar to Arabs' pride in child productivity, by which the Arab world is turned into a world of children at the cost of upbringing [51].

3.3.3. Micro Vision: Internationality

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from six marks: 'locality', 'metaphoricality', 'cultural intensity', 'translation', 'mistranslation', and 'mimicking'. These marks are conceptualised as Arabs' lack of education and training in how to communicate their Arabic writings with international audiences, namely Arabic non-native speakers. Mark: locality. Arabs structure their enquiries around local towns, poets, figures, books, and so on and write about them in ways that can be understood only by locals. Similarly, Arab academics write with local authorities in mind, such as promotion council members. Put more bluntly, for many Arab academics, the main motivation to write is to be promoted; predictably then, once they are promoted and become full professors, their research activity terminates, their writing comes to a full stop. Moreover, Arab writers' parochialism, evident in such phrases as 'peace upon him', 'God may bless him', or 'God may forgive him' used when referring to important figures, makes Arabs' academic writing difficult for international readers to comprehend. Mark: metaphoricality. The Arabic language is 'the language of metaphorical phrases' (participant) such that it is difficult for an Arab to articulate a few sentences without subconsciously resorting to a metaphor. The unthinking application of these phrases throughout academic writings makes it troublesome for non-Arabic native speakers to understand the meanings.

Mark: cultural intensity. Arabic writings (including their linguistic styles, wording, terminologies and ideas) can be said to drown in the past. The cultural intensity of Arab writing makes it challenging for anyone without an intimate understanding of Arab culture, heritage, and history to read. Mark: translation. Many terms coined in the West are brought to Arab literature but are often translated poorly, be it the fault of the translator or the untranslatability of Arabic itself, making it difficult for Arab readers to understand [52]. In the former case, some composers of translated publications depend on neural machine translation tools or outsource the task of translation to services and freelancers, not specialised in their academic fields, resulting in ambiguous translated texts. Germane to this, the translation of terms and phrases can vary from one Arab region to another. This problem is worsened by the predilection of Arabs to suffocate their manuscripts with Western translated terms [53]. Incorporating a plethora of Western theories and terms, and in so doing, displaying familiarity with Western literature, supposedly shows authors to be culturally developed and brilliant. Mark: mistranslation. It is noticeable that some translators purposefully mistranslate foreign texts to align them with Arab culture, with the predictable result of engendering ambiguity and gaps between the original and translated texts. Mark: mimicking. It is also a common practice for Arabs to read Western literature, fishing for appealing articles and mimicking them in Arabic, publishing them as if they were the author of the piece (not a plagiariser or, at best, a translator). What is worse is that, in most cases, they do not completely comprehend the plagiarised article or its ideas, resulting in a reproduction that is ambiguous.

3.4. Macro Vision: Managerial Reasons

3.4.1. Micro Vision: Management

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from four marks: 'distraction', 'rush', 'disorganisation', and 'minimality'. These marks are conceptualised as the non-institutionalisation of the concept of quality into Arab culture; although Arabs appear to theoretically converse about quality, it has not been put into practice, including into publishing practice. Mark: distraction. Many Arab academics have had their path to research thwarted by their employers, whose obsession with 'quality assurance', that is, to score better in international rankings, has clogged up academics' timetables with paperwork. Among the participants, there was little doubt that paperwork in Arab academics' professional life is out of control; Arab academia has become a 'bureaucratic misery' (participant) of unending meetings, minutes, reports, statistics, and more. This is in addition to the high teaching load that comes with universities orientating towards being an educational institution and away from being a research establishment as well as

the habitual distractions of institutional, social, and familial activities, events, gatherings, and formalities, all of which colonise academics' schedules and interfere with the clearness of their mind. Mark: rush. Arabs have the tendency to behave as if they are in a permanent hurry. Many Arab academics are impatient, rushing into carrying out research and, when conducting research, normally 'run out of breath easily' (participant), becoming bored and easily distracted and, therefore, rushing into finishing the research project, sparing no time to read and reread (and reread again) their manuscripts. They intensively resort to 'wasta' or 'kusah' (Arabic term: 'nepotism'), through their connections and contacts, to pressure editors-in-chief to process their manuscripts with senseless urgency, intentionally distracting journals from rigorously evaluating the quality of their manuscripts. Hence, most Arab articles are published despite being 'under-developed' (participant) and, thus, ambiguous. Arabs, in the words of one participant, are not 'people of research, with the culture of genuinely performed research not integrated into their education system or their daily academic life'.

Mark: disorganisation. Arabs can hardly be expected to write with organisation and clarity with chaos and ambivalent disorganisation prevailing around them. The organisational structure of Arab society can be eloquently encapsulated in 'kul hajah wa aqsaha' (Arabic maxim: 'everything contradicts everything'). Mark: minimality. 'Tamshyat hal' (Arabic maxim: 'doing the minimum') is a deep-rooted mentality that dominates the mindset of Arab academics. When writing, Arabs may arguably do the minimum to have their manuscripts published, even if this means publishing in low-quality journals. 'Doing the minimum' is pervasive in academia because there are minimum requirements to be promoted, and most Arab academics are not in the profession because of their passion for research but rather simply because it is a 'job'. As 'employees', therefore, Arab academics' ambitions end at promotion; once they are promoted, they have, in a sense, fulfilled their job description. If one has no passion for one's career, one cannot be expected to provide high-quality (and, thus, non-ambiguous) work. In Arab regions, it is rare to encounter 'academics'. Phrased another way, although many Arabs claim to be 'academics', there are actually very few true 'academics', that is, those who are passionate about academia, whose entire lives revolve around their research, and who have the necessary skills for their role. Some of the participants argued that not only do Arab academics lack passion but that they also tend to be weak in their academic fields; even if trained in soft skills, they struggle with the 'hard skills' (i.e., knowledge in their field). Ambiguity in Arab writings is then not merely due to a lack of soft skills but hard skills as well.

3.4.2. Micro Vision: Collegiality

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from five marks: 'feedback', 'ride-sharing', 'nepotism', 'editorial', and 'reviewing'. These marks are conceptualised as academia's heavy reliance on collegiality for quality, which, in the Arab context, is compromised. Mark: feedback. The trust relationships among Arab academics have been sabotaged owing to the pervasive practice of plagiarism. Aware of the risk that others may steal their ideas or even their entire manuscripts, Arab academics tend not to share their unpublished work. They, ergo, avoid discussing thoughts in seminars, do not send drafts of manuscripts to colleagues for feedback, and do not submit their writings to proofreading and editing services. Without another pair of eyes to reflect upon the structure and clarity of their manuscripts, they nonetheless submit them for publication. Mark: ride-sharing. A common practice, which depends on the collective nature of Arab society, is to ask others to put one's name on their publication notwithstanding one's non-contribution, for which one puts their name on one's publications in return. This stratagem is applied by many Arabs to inflate their research portfolio or hide their inability to spare time to conduct research. This free ride means that one accepts that one's name is even on publications outside of one's academic field. Mark: nepotism. Manuscripts are accepted in journals not necessarily because of their academic merit but instead because the act of exchanging courtesies and favours dominates Arab society. Reviewers are 'nice to authors in the hope that these

authors become nice to them when acting as reviewers of their work' (participant), and editors accept not only the manuscripts of their immediate colleagues and friends but, moreover, the manuscripts of their colleagues' friends, colleagues' friends' friends, etc.

Mark: editorial. Ambiguity in Arab academic writing can be partly attributed to how Arab journals are governed. In Arab regions, editors-in-chief and editorial boards of journals usually make no explicit effort to improve the scholarly component of their journals or to direct submissions towards a shared editorial vision. Hence, the act of composing 'editorials' (where an editor-in-chief shares their vision and directs authors towards the composition of improved manuscripts) is absent in the Arab domain. Actually, the editor-in-chief position is honorary, being granted to powerful figures who leave the actual work in the hands of technicians who operate journals blindly and deafly with corporation-like efficiency. Arab journals cannot be described as scholarly endeavours; rather, they function more like 'factories', carrying out a number of predefined administrative procedures with hardly any professional interest in scholarly quality and reforms. Submitted manuscripts are processed in an almost 'autonomous production line' (participant). It does not occur to Arab journals' policymakers, editors, and editorial boards to engage in fundamental reforms, as they submissively wait until the outside world initiates reforms, which they can then transfer; yet, by the time of completion, decades have passed. In a state of submission to foreign journals, Arab journals are characterised by neither initiative, leadership, nor entrepreneurship. Mark: reviewing. Arab peer-reviewing has become trivial and superficial, a mere matter of formality, and its primary objective of helping authors to contribute to their society's worldview and knowledge economy, or its soul, has been discarded or lost. It does not even cross the minds of Arab reviewers to question the ambiguity of manuscripts; rather, the task of Arab reviewers is limited to simply criticising authors for simple linguistic mistakes and for departing from existing academic conventions, even if such departure is small or justifiable. Put simply, it is rare to find Arab 'reviewers', and those few magnificent Arab reviewers that do the hard work accept reviewing requests only from respected non-Arab journals, leaving Arab journals in the less-than-capable hands of Arab 'reviewers'.

3.4.3. Micro Vision: Finance

In this micro vision, ambiguity in Arab academic writing stems from two marks: 'capitalism' and 'reward'. These marks are conceptualised as the impact of capitalism on editors (who maximise accepted manuscripts to increase their profit through publication fees) and on authors (who optimise publications to gain the rewards that Arab institutions assign to publication). Mark: capitalism. Often overlooked is how severely capitalism has impacted Arab journals, perverting the attitudes of both editors-in-chief and authors towards research quality. The former have applied desperate measures to enhance the income of their journals through increasing publication fees at the expense of the quality of manuscripts, while the latter have come to the realisation that they can now be published 'with their own money' (participant), given that journals are in desperate need of publication fees.

Mark: reward. A customary practice in the Arab context is for institutions to grant rewards to academics if they publish, which has also perverted academic writing. Arabs have intensified their efforts to produce the largest quantity of articles, thereby maximising their rewards while putting at risk the quality (and, thus, clarity) of their writing. This behaviour of Arab academics has deep roots in a Bedouin life defined by the ceaseless search for water, now the search is, at least for Arab academics, as explained by one participant, for 'rewards'. From time to time, institutions, with political motives, choose to direct rewards towards certain topics of research. Arab researchers responsively redirect their research interests to these topics. With research interests beholden to 'the market demand' (participant), Arab academics do not develop an interrelated web of research interests; this fragmentation undermines their ability to write as an authority and to express their ideas without falling into ambiguity.

4. Concluding Remarks

This article sheds light on key multifaceted sociocultural explanations for ambiguity in Arabs' academic writing. What lies at the heart of the data is that, at times, Arabs innocently fall into ambiguity in their academic writings with no intention of doing so simply because they are under the influence of Arab culture, wherein ambiguity is common; it never occurs to them to interrogate how clear their writings are and to actively seek to clarify ambiguities. However, at other times, Arabs choose to write ambiguously for political reasons or out of social considerations, thereby going of their own free will into ambiguity [54]. One such reason is to avoid detection by the sociocultural radar of Arab culture, which acts defensively and severely against criticisms directed at its configurations and even impugns the very concept of freedom of speech. Another reason is that writing ambiguously helps one to conceal one's weaknesses, be they in one's writing or specialisation. This ambiguity is not resolved by reviewers, who actually perceive such ambiguity as an indicator of quality; the thinking is that the manuscript must be good since they cannot understand it. In these ways, ambiguity is applied as a tactic in the game of life.

Other Arabs endeavour to overcome the ambiguity of their academic writings but fail in their attempt. As a deeply rooted cultural practice, ambiguity is common practice for Arabs, who, like all their fellow humans, cannot be entirely independent of their cultural influences, which makes them permanent victims of ambiguity. For many Arabs, though, their immersion in such ambiguity prevents them from even 'seeing' it. Unresisted, ambiguity arguably comes 'naturally' to Arab writers. Arabs' cultural heritage, into whose sociocultural fabric ambiguity has been woven, weighs heavily on writers as a subconscious burden, an ever-present yet ever-unwelcome companion. If Arab researchers work diligently to improve their writing skills and, through doing so, manage to write without ambiguity, they are at risk of being crushed by defenders of ambiguity; many Arab editors and reviewers defensively support ambiguity as a prescriptive matter and part of their cultural heritage. Supervisors employ ambiguity as a precondition for supervisees to pass their oral examination, thereby ensuring the continuity of ambiguity in academic writing. Many Arabs are not only advocates and defenders of ambiguity but carriers of it, passing it on from one generation to the next.

The most alarming finding in the data is that ambiguity in Arab academic writing has grown into a 'power' that controls the policies and regulations of research activity, forming an authoritarian 'kingdom of ambiguity'. Some Arabs have, understandably, chosen not to fight it and to, instead, escape this kingdom and its misery by publishing in non-Arab venues. Articulate writers cognitively immigrate from the Arab publishing domain, leaving this domain to those who write with ambiguity, thereby strengthening the domination of ambiguity in the Arab context. These cognitive immigrants struggle, however, to transition from an ambiguity-afflicted mentality, with which they were raised, to a new ambiguity-averse mentality. More often than not, Arab authors fail to make this transition, resulting in considerable frustration, disappointment and, ultimately, withdrawal from academic writing altogether. In the rare cases where an Arab editor engages in reforms, accepting only non-ambiguous manuscripts, their efforts do not bear fruit, with rejection rates of up to 95%. Consequently, these editors are obligated to lower their standards so as to keep their journals running.

It is instructive to conclude with the note that, although this article provides a conceptual framework for the sociocultural sources of ambiguity in Arabs' academic writing, it purposefully avoids providing a 'recipe' for the elimination of ambiguity; to simplify such a problem would be naïve in an ethnographical sense. This ambiguity has a fundamental cultural dimension, which complicates any scholarly attempt to study the problem and any managerial reform to end it. In the same line of reasoning, the article, intentionally, shuns making recommendations about how to remedy this problem or avoid its pitfalls. To take on the task of eradicating ambiguity in Arab writing is also to accept the well-nigh impossible undertaking of eradicating the historically rooted problem of ambiguity in Arab culture. Ambiguity in Arab writing does not exist in a vacuum but is rather driven by

Arab culture, wherein ambiguity is common. What further complicates the matter is that the tolerance of this ambiguity is fundamentally rooted in the configuration of 'the Arab mind'. That is to say, Arabs think in overlapping circles, whose intersections form mazes that shelter the mind from having to face sequential logical organisation and thinking. Arab norms and values tend to be ambiguous, unable to stand up to critical thinking and reasoning. Ambiguity is common in Arab society, wherein Arabs do not like to expose themselves to one another, whether the reason is concerns over female privacy, social surveillance, the evil eye, or restrictions over freedom. Ambiguity in Arab culture is also materialised as the high non-see-through walls that surround houses and as the traditional attires for men and women that cover most of their bodies; such enclosures and coverings are meant to create a solidified sense of ambiguity.

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