**Review Article**

# Construction and Perception of Abstract Concepts: A Comparative Analysis in Western and Islamic Philosophy

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## A B S T R A C T

Concepts play a pivotal role in the epistemology of the humanities; consequently, the process of constructing and perceiving concepts—particularly purely abstract ones—constitutes a foundational topic in the humanities, engaging not only philosophy, logic, and the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) but also linguistics. The formation and perception of such non-objective concepts are based on mental and linguistic conceptualization, rooted in the discourse on the relationship between *language and mind*. Although conceptualization may appear to be originated in Western philosophy—with analytic philosophy and contemporary semantics (under the framework of *cognitive semantics*) now leading these discussions—its true roots, predating Western thought by centuries, must be traced to the Islamic philosophical and jurisprudential debates on *the relationship between words and meanings* (*al-lafẓ wa al-maʻnā*).These discussions have been primarily addressed in *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) and the philosophy of *iʻtibārīyāt* (conventional/constructive perceptions). In analytic philosophy, the process of conceptualization operates through *metaphorical perception*, where the sensible is mapped onto the tangible, whereas in Islamic philosophy, it functions through *iʻtibārī perception*, where objective concepts are transferred into mental constructs. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the semantic foundations underlying the formation and perception of purely abstract concepts in Western analytic philosophy and Islamic philosophy.

## Introduction

The technical terms and scientific terminology hold significant importance, because they serve as carriers conveying specific concepts to the human mind. Although concepts play a major role in epistemology of the humanities, the role and status of words are not less than that of concept itself. Therefore, the process of constructing and perceiving these concepts, which referred to as *conceptualization*, is considered a fundamental issue in the humanities. Here, conceptualization refers to the process of formulating a term to comprehend and perceive purely abstract

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concepts—those without external referents in the observable world—in a way that enables the transmission of a specific meaning to the audience. In the natural sciences, we primarily deal with *objective* (or *real*) concepts, which are easily understood; the human mind readily grasps them upon hearing the terms that convey them. However, in the humanities, we predominantly encounter *non-objective* (or *non-real/abstract*) concepts, meaning their construction and perception may vary across different intellectual systems. In other words, a single term may carry different meanings in different intellectual frameworks, or conversely, a single concept may be expressed through different terms. Numerous factors—cultural, economic, political, and religious—may influence this variation. This study seeks to examine the epistemological foundations of the process of constructing and perceiving non-real (purely abstract) concepts, addressing the following questions:

1) How does humanity conceptualize new concepts and essences that lack objective, external referents?

2) Why and how are *purely abstract concepts* constructed and perceived?

Answering these questions necessitates an exploration of the nature and relationship between words and their assigned meanings—an inquiry that falls under the broader discussion of language and mind. The origin of conceptualization lies at the intersection of *language and mind* (thought or perception). While it may appear to stem from Western philosophy (analytic philosophy), with contemporary semantics—under the framework of cognitive semantics—taking up these discussions, the true roots of this debate, predating Western thought by centuries, must be traced to Islamic philosophy and the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), particularly in discussions on the relationship between words and meanings (*al-lafẓ wa al-maʿnā*). These subjects have been primarily addressed in *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudential principles) and the philosophy of *iʿtibārīyāt* (conventional constructs). In other words, what cognitive semantics in Western analytic philosophy claims to discover—the meta-linguistic function of language—had already

been examined by Islamic scholars of philosophy and jurisprudence. To put it differently, the role of *language* in Western philosophy parallels that of *words* (*alfāẓ*) in Islamic philosophy.

## Theoretical Foundations and Origins of Conceptualization

When faced with new phenomena, sciences must either construct new concepts or reconstruct existing ones to facilitate the transmission of novel ideas. This process, known as *neologism* (the renewal of vocabulary or term formation), can be approached from two perspectives: lexical (renewal of terms) or conceptual (renewal of meanings). In other words, the emergence of a new concept may coincide with the coining of a specific term, where both the word and the concept are new. Alternatively, existing vocabulary may be repurposed to convey new meanings by expanding the semantic scope of established terms. The conceptualization process—whether through the creation of new terms or the expansion of existing ones—must account for linguistic, economic, philosophical, and social analyses [1]. This process can vary across different intellectual systems, which explains the lack of universal consensus in the understanding of terms. For instance, a single term may carry divergent meanings in different frameworks, or conversely, a single concept may be expressed through different terms. Cultural, economic, political, and religious factors often influence this variation, particularly in interdisciplinary contexts [2].

Conceptual and perceptual differences may exist from the inception of a term or emerge later due to shifts in its semantic trajectory. For example, rapid technological advancements have introduced new terms—some carrying entirely new meanings—while also redefining existing ones [3].

### *Definition and Nature of Purely Abstract Concepts*

In this study, a concept is distinguished from both *meaning* and *referent*. A concept may denote a meaning or signification derived from

a term (e.g., the literal meaning of "lion" or its metaphorical use for a brave man) or stand in contrast to a referent. In the latter case, a concept is a mental construct based on a referent, which may not align with the term's literal meaning [4]. Thus, a concept is a mental, universal representation of an objective referent, bridging the gap between subjective perception and external reality. As such, concepts—being mental and general—encompass and extend beyond both meanings and referents [5].

Philosophically, essences and concepts are divided into real (objective or authentic) and *non-real* (abstract or inauthentic). The former have tangible, externally verifiable referents, while the latter—termed purely abstract concepts, purely conventional concepts, or non-existent concepts—are mental constructs devoid of external counterparts [6].

Given this framework, purely abstract concepts are mental constructs lacking concrete referents, derived from the comparison of objective concepts. Terms encapsulating such concepts are called *non-existent terms* [7]. These concepts do not arise from sensory perception but require prior mental apprehension—either through imaginative or propositional knowledge—before their abstraction through comparison and analysis of existing mental constructs [8].

Purely abstract concepts fall under philosophical concepts, which emerge from comparing objective entities. Philosophical concepts lack individual external instances but possess referents; they are mentally constructed, yet grounded in reality. Their lack of direct external correspondence does not negate their objective basis, as their abstraction originates from external reality [9].

Although *non-existent concepts* lack objective reality, the mind ascribes existence to them, projecting them beyond the empirical world. Like existential concepts, they possess truth-value, even though they are hypothetically ascribed to external reality [7].

## *Why and How Conceptualization Occurs*

Conceptualization is defined as "human mental process of classifying abstract concepts and categories by subsuming a mental category under a general, objective concept" [10] It is the product of perceiving a mental existence (concept) based on a real existence (referent)—a meaning-making process that renders non-real phenomena intelligible [11]. Some scholars equate conceptualization with meaning construction, viewing it as a cognitive process that originates in the mind and is transmitted through language [12]. Notably, the formation and perception of non-real concepts involve both mental and linguistic origins, necessitating a dual analysis.

## The Mental (Cognitive) Process of Conceptualization

The concept of perception has broad dimensions and in modern psychology refers to the mental or psychological process that actively handles the selection and organization of sensory information, ultimately giving it meaning. In other words, perception is a mental process through which sensory experiences become meaningful, enabling humans to understand the relationships and meanings of things [11]. Although "non-existent concepts" lack external and real existence, the mind grants them existence—that is, the mind projects them beyond its immediate reality. Thus, like existential concepts, they possess external validity, with the difference that non-existent concepts are hypothetically attributed to the external world [7].

The primary origin of conceptualization lies in defining, transmitting, and perceiving purely abstract concepts—those without external referents—in a way that enables the transmission of specific meanings to the audience [13].

Conceptualization of purely abstract essences is based on the combination, selection, and analysis of real-world referents and concepts. This process first involves gathering concepts from external referents into our memory, then selecting and combining these concepts into new mental constructs, and finally assigning linguistic forms to these new concepts. In this way, the concept gains the possibility of realization in the external world as an artificial referent [7].

## The Linguistic (Linguistic-Cognitive) Process of Conceptualization

Before delving into this discussion, it is essential to understand the relationship between human thought and language. In other words, does language influence the process of thought and perception? This question aims to reveal the role of language in conceptualization. Therefore, it is first necessary to review the epistemological dimension of language (the relationship between language and meaning), which has been addressed in Islamic philosophy under the discussion of "words" (the relationship between words and meanings) by scholars of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh).

## The Epistemological Dimension of Language in Conceptualization

Although the issue of *meaning* has been a focus of thinkers since ancient times, and various disciplines have directly or indirectly addressed it, contemporary linguistics has played the most significant role in formulating issues related to meaning. In other words, meaning as the most important issue in linguistics has been analysed within the broader framework of contemporary semantics [14].

This new perspective on the nature and function of language in human reasoning emerged at the beginning of the 20th century and led to the development of a language-based approach in the social sciences. This growing attention to the role of language in the process of perception, referred as the linguistic turn, considers language the key axis of epistemological systems [15]. Accordingly, the perception of concepts and meanings (especially in abstract matters) is closely and directly tied to language, and the mind cannot achieve a correct understanding of the world without considering linguistic patterns [16]. The connection between *language* and *meaning* reveals the link between *linguistics* and *semantics*.

On the other hand, since semantics is a branch of linguistics, and linguistics itself falls under philosophy of language or analytic philosophy in the West, it is central to discussions of *conceptualization* and *theorization* [5]. Hermeneutic philosophers of language, who speak from a hermeneutic standpoint, discuss the meaning of sentences and speech in terms of human *understanding* and *perception* [17]. Simply put, the understanding and meaning of speech are what emerge after the speech is realized within its historical and social context. In describing certain concepts, pre-existing mental concepts are necessarily used [18].

It should be noted that the above discussion on the importance and role of language in the process of understanding meaning in Western analytic philosophy does not imply that Islamic sciences were unfamiliar with the relationship between language and meaning or its significance in the process of perception. On the contrary, this topic has a longer historical precedent in Islamic sciences (particularly philosophy, logic, and jurisprudence) under the discussion of *words*. It can be decisively stated that many issues in contemporary semantics were formulated in the 3rd and 4th centuries [14]. For example, the late Shahid Sadr referred to the discussions of words in jurisprudence as analytical linguistic discussions and examined them under the title "philosophy of language" [5].

## Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics is an approach to studying language that examines the relationship between human language, the mind, and social and physical experiences. In other words, in cognitive linguistics, the process of conceptualization is based on human experience and perception, and *language* is considered the model of conceptualization. This approach assumes that through linguistics, one can uncover the nature and structure of human thought [19]. Cognitive linguistics seek to study language based on our experiences of the world, our ways of understanding, and modes of conceptualization. Thus, from this perspective, studying language means studying patterns of conceptualization. By studying language, one can discern the nature and structure of human thoughts and ideas. In this view, language is regarded as part of the cognitive abilities of the human mind (such as

perception), which interacts with other cognitive abilities [19].

According to cognitive linguistics, language is a system of semantic signs and symbols. However, these semantic symbols are not fixed or predetermined, but are mental processes collectively termed *conceptualization* [17]. Cognitive linguists believe that both language and thought have systematic structures; thus, abstract concepts in the human mind are organized using concrete concepts. In cognitive linguistics, language is a system of signs that enables the mind to perceive and transmit concepts and ultimately engages in conceptualization through words [16].

The discipline that studies meaning in language is semantics, which generally examines the relationship between words and meanings. Semantics is a subfield of linguistics that analyses meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, and larger units (texts). Its primary focus includes the study of signs and the relationships between different linguistic units, such as homonyms, synonyms, antonyms, polysemy, connotations, and semantic fields. A central concern is how meaning is constructed in larger texts through the combination of smaller semantic units [20].

In this section, the semantic analysis of the relationship between purely abstract concepts and linguistic elements (words) will be examined. The discipline widely used in Western philosophy to understand the relationship between words and meanings is "cognitive semantics, a subfield of the philosophy of language (analytic philosophy). As previously mentioned, the topic of the relationship between words and meanings in jurisprudence (or Islamic philosophy) predates the cognitive semantic approach in Western philosophy. The analytical methods and approaches of cognitive semanticists in the West bear significant resemblance to the methods and perspectives of jurisprudential scholars in Islamic philosophy.

## Semantic Foundations of the Conceptualization

Conceptualization refers to how humans form, organize, and manipulate mental constructs (concepts) to interpret and interact with the world. The semantic foundations of conceptualization explore the underlying principles that govern meaning-making in language, cognition, and perception. This analysis examines key theories and frameworks that explain how meaning is structured in the mind and expressed through language.

## The Metaphorical Basis of Western Analytic Philosophy: Perceptual Metaphor

Metaphors reflect processes of thinking and, consequently, appear not just in language but in perception as well. That's why, metaphor and perception through metaphor—or simply *metaphorical perception*—have gained significant importance in the humanities and increasingly permeate all scientific research. The scope of metaphorical perception spans from religious and Quranic studies on conceptualizing abstract matters to theorizing in computer and electronic sciences, all employing metaphor in constructing meaning.

## Metaphor and Its Historical Role in Perception

Metaphor as a fundamental cognitive mechanism shapes human perception across civilizations. From Aristotle's *Poetics* to Ibn Sīnā's theory of mental representation, and from Lakoff's conceptual metaphors to Sufi symbolic exegesis, we trace how metaphor has served as: (1) an epistemological bridge between sensory and abstract domains, (2) a pedagogical tool for transmitting complex truths, and (3) a cultural artifact revealing worldview structures.

Etymologically, *metaphor* means borrowing or lending. Terminologically, as a literary and rhetorical device, it refers to using a word or phrase in place of another based on a shared resemblance . Thus, metaphor involves using a word in a non-literal sense, classified as *figurative usage*.

The role and function of metaphor in conceptualizing meanings have long been debated among scholars (both Islamic and Western). The core dispute revolves around whether metaphor is merely a

linguistic/literary device or whether it actively shapes understanding. Two divergent views exist:

*1) Metaphor as a Linguistic Construct:* In Western analytic philosophy until the late 1970s, metaphor was treated as a purely literary device. The advent of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* in linguistics revolutionized its role, redefining it as a *conceptual construct*—a tool for thinking and a framework for cognition in conceptualization. This aligns with the dominant Islamic philosophical view that metaphor is purely lexical, i.e., using a word outside its original meaning.

*2) Metaphor as a Conceptual Construct:* In modern linguistics, metaphor plays a new role in *semantics*, particularly in *cognitive linguistics*. Here, metaphor is central to human thought, operating as *perceptual metaphor*. Unlike literary metaphors (which are aesthetic), conceptual metaphors map one conceptual domain onto another via shared attributes, enabling abstract comprehension [16].

Today, metaphor is no longer confined to literature but is fundamental to human thought, shaping how we grasp *concepts* and *meanings* [21].

## Conceptualization via Perceptual Metaphor

In philosophy of language, metaphorical perception is framed as *mapping* [22]. Comprehension occurs when semantic features of a *source domain* (e.g., physical space) align with a *target domain* (e.g., time). For instance, time is money maps tangible attributes of money (scarcity, value) onto time. This *embodied cognition* theory posits that abstract concepts are understood through sensory experiences [23]. Rooted in American pragmatism, this approach treats metaphors as cognitive tools to render abstractions (e.g., justice as balance) physically graspable [24].

## The Conventional Basis of Islamic Philosophy: *Iʿtibārī* Perception

The concept of *iʿtibārī* perceptions—conventional or mentally constructed realities—plays a foundational role in Islamic philosophy, particularly in the works of later thinkers like Mullā Ṣadrā and Allama Ṭabāṭabāʾī.

What Western philosophy terms *conceptual metaphor* finds a parallel in Islamic philosophy under *iʿtibārīyāt*—conventional constructs. Here, *linguistic signification* functions similarly to "language" in the West, serving as a cognitive tool. However, *iʿtibārī* constructs are not about *discovery* but *stipulation*—mental projections to organize social realities.

## The Nature of Iʿtibārī Constructs

*Iʿtibārī* concepts lack external reality but are mentally posited to regulate social relations [25]. For example, ownership is a legal fiction (*iʿtibār*) addressing practical needs. Unlike innate truths (*ḥaqīqī*), these constructs are *instrumental*, evolving with societal complexity [26].

## Conceptualization via Iʿtibārīyāt

Language (*lafẓ*) is central to *iʿtibārī* processes. In *uṣūl al-fiqh*, the link between word and meaning is itself conventional [27]. For instance, legal terms (e.g., contract) are coined by custom (*ʿurf*) to address communal needs [28]. The steps in *iʿtibārī* conceptualization are:

1) Identifying a social need.
2) Creating a mental construct (*iʿtibār*).
3) Mapping it onto reality (e.g., treating "corporate personhood" as real).
4) Extending real-world rules to the construct.
5) Institutionalizing the construct alongside tangible entities.

## Comparative Analysis of Metaphorical Perception and Conventional (Iʿtibārī) Perception

The process of constructing and perceiving purely abstract concepts—termed *conceptualization*—has both linguistic and cognitive origins. While the *construction* of these concepts is analysed through a linguistic approach, their perception is examined through a cognitive lens. Thus, a semantic analysis of purely abstract concepts must address both their linguistic formation and mental apprehension. Although conceptualization

based on *metaphorical perception* in Western analytic philosophy and *iʿtibārī perception* in Islamic philosophy follow similar procedural frameworks, their inferential and perceptual mechanisms differ fundamentally.

## Similarity in Linguistic Construction

The linguistic process of conceptualization involves using a word in a non-literal (*majāzī*) sense—that is, employing a term to convey a new, abstract meaning. This mechanism is identical in both *metaphorical* and *iʿtibārī* perception. However, the *type* of figurative usage differs:

1) In metaphorical perception, the transfer is *lexical metaphor*, where a word is applied to a new meaning based on a perceived resemblance (e.g., time is money).

2) In iʿtibārī perception, the transfer is *rational metaphor*, where the connection is stipulated by reason or social utility (e.g., legal personhood for corporations).

The divergence in how these figurative usages lead to conceptual understanding lies in their *cognitive* processes.

## Difference in Cognitive Perception

As noted earlier, while metaphorical and iʿtibārī conceptualization share structural similarities, their perceptual foundations differ:

1) Metaphorical Perception: Relies on *real resemblance* between two domains. The resemblance exists independently of human cognition, and the mind merely *discovers* and exploits it.

2) Iʿtibārī Perception: Requires no pre-existing resemblance. Instead, the mind *creates* a connection (*iʿtibār*) between two domains to serve a rational purpose (e.g., money as a medium of exchange).

## Superiority of Iʿtibārī Conceptualization

Two key advantages elevate *iʿtibārī* perception over metaphorical perception:

1) Epistemological Robustness:

1.1) Metaphorical perception depends on *embodiment*, reducing abstract concepts to sensory experiences. This risks neglecting rational abstraction and oversimplifying reality.

1.2.) *Iʿtibārī* perception, by contrast, does not rely on physical analogs. It rationally stipulates concepts (*e.g.,* human dignity) based on intellectual or social needs, without requiring sensory correlates.

2) Comprehensiveness:

2.1) Metaphor fails to conceptualize purely abstract notions with *no* external analogs (*e.g.,* infinity or non-being).

2.2) *Iʿtibārī* perception can construct such concepts *ex nihilo* through rational or communal consensus (*e.g.,* "legal fictions" like *ḥaqq al-mīrāth* [inheritance rights]).

## Conclusion

The construction and perception of purely abstract concepts (conceptualization) involve both *Linguistic Process* (Using words figuratively(*majāzī*) to convey new meanings) *Cognitive Process* (Mapping non-real or mental concepts onto real or external ones. But this process is different in Islamic and Western philosophy. While Western philosophy accomplishes this through metaphorical perception (rooted in *analogy*), Islamic philosophy employs *iʿtibārī* perception (rooted in *rational stipulation*). The latter's reliance on intellectual and social utility—rather than sensory resemblance—grants it greater comprehensiveness and epistemological rigor. Thus, *iʿtibārī* conceptualization offers a more versatile and intellectually coherent framework for abstract thought. This analysis bridges classical Islamic epistemology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and modern cognitive science, demonstrating how premodern theories of *iʿtibārīyāt* anticipate contemporary debates about language and thought. The study demonstrates that while Western traditions largely treated metaphor as a rhetorical device until the cognitive turn, Islamic thought maintained an ontological view of metaphor (*majāz*) as integral to accessing higher realities.

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