

Representation of Europe's Attitude Toward the Arab Spring in Cartoons on the Artpictures Website: A Semiotic Analysis Based on Ferdinand de Saussure

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received : 27/06/2026 Revised : 25/10/2026 Accepted : 25/10/2026 Published : 25/10/2026 *Corresponding Author: Name : Ahmad Danial Isybil Phone/WA : +6281359563253	The Arab Spring was a significant sociopolitical phenomenon that raised hopes for change across the Arab world while eliciting complex international responses, particularly from Europe. This study examines the representation of European attitudes toward the Arab Spring in cartoons published on the Artpictures website using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. Employing a qualitative method, the research uses documentation and visual content analysis to identify signifiers, signifieds, and oppositions of meaning within the selected cartoons. The findings reveal that Europe is portrayed as an ambivalent and protective entity through symbols such as the "European Winter", walls, and barbed wire. These visual elements suggest Europe's reluctance to accept the consequences of the Arab Spring, particularly those associated with political change and migration. The study concludes that this representation exposes a discrepancy between Europe's image as a defender of democracy and its attitudes toward political developments in the Arab world. Further research should examine broader datasets using more comprehensive analytical approaches.
Keyword	Arab Spring; Binary Opposition; European Attitudes; Ferdinand de Saussure; Semiotics.

Introduction

The Arab Spring was a wave of social and political movements that emerged in various countries across the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s. These events marked the emergence of collective hope among Arab societies for political change, social justice, and freedom of expression. As it unfolded, the Arab Spring became not only a regional issue but also

attracted global attention, including from Europe, which often positions itself as a guardian of democratic values and human rights (Affan, 2018).

However, various media representations—such as on social media platforms like Facebook (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) reveal tensions between the hopes born of the Arab Spring and Europe's response to its impact. One such form of representation is the political cartoon, which condenses sociopolitical realities into visual symbols. It is important to study political cartoons because they not only convey messages through humor but also contain hidden ideological criticism (Effendi, 2024).

This study is grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of structural semiotics, which views meaning as the result of the relationship between signs within a system. Saussure states that a sign consists of two elements: the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*) (Sitompul et al., 2021). The signifier refers to the visible material form, such as text or visual elements, while the signified is the concept of meaning produced in the interpreter's mind. The relationship between the two is arbitrary and determined by social convention; thus, the meaning of a sign is neither natural nor literal. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning there is no natural or causal connection between them; rather, it is determined by social agreement within a linguistic or cultural community (De Saussure et al., 1960).

The arbitrary nature of signs indicates that meaning is not fixed or universal, but rather depends on the social conventions that surround it. Thus, the meaning of a sign can only be understood within the context of a system of meaning agreed upon by a particular society. In visual texts such as political cartoons, the symbols used cannot be interpreted literally but must be understood as the result of social construction that represents a specific reality in accordance with the underlying social and political context (Hoven & Culler, 1980).

Furthermore, Saussure asserts that the meaning of a sign is formed through differential relations that is, the relationships of difference between one sign and another within a system. A sign derives its meaning not from its intrinsic content, but from its distinct position relative to other signs. This principle gives rise to the concept of semantic opposition, in which binary oppositions such as hot and cold, life and death, or open and closed form the basis for the construction of meaning. In visual texts, these oppositions serve to reinforce the message being conveyed implicitly through symbolic comparison (De Saussure et al., 1960).

According to Culler (Hoven & Culler, 1980), the analytical approach used in Saussurean semiotics is synchronic in nature; that is, it examines the system of signs as it functions at a specific point in time without tracing its historical development. This approach allows researchers to focus on the structural relationships between signs within a single visual representation. Therefore, Saussurean semiotics is relevant for analyzing political caricatures

because caricatures are visual sign systems whose meaning is constructed through the relationships between signifier, signified, and oppositions of meaning within a single representational unit.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze and interpret representations of European attitudes toward the Arab Spring as depicted in cartoons published on the Artpictures website, using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework. Through this analysis, it is hoped that we can uncover how the verbal and nonverbal signs in the cartoons function to shape and convey critical messages regarding Europe's role in the political dynamics of the Middle East. This study is limited to the representations found in a single cartoon as the object of analysis; thus, the study focuses on an in-depth reading of the visual and verbal signs that appear.

Literature Review

Etymologically, semiotics derives from the Greek word *seme*, as found in the term *semeiotikos*, which means "interpreter" or "one who interprets signs." As an academic discipline, semiotics is defined as a branch of linguistics and the social sciences that focuses on the analysis of signs, systems of signification, and how meaning is produced, transmitted, and understood in human life (Reda, 2016). Epistemologically, semiotics is a method of analysis for examining the structure of signs, while terminologically, Umberto Eco defines semiotics as the science that studies a series of objects, events, and all phenomena of human culture as a system of signs (Dayu & Syadli, 2023).

Signs are not limited to verbal symbols or literal written text, but also include body movements gestures, text, visual images, architecture, and visual artworks. The use of sign systems serves as a means of interaction and communication between individuals and social groups. Within the scope of mass communication and visual communication studies, semiotics provides a critical methodological framework for analyzing how hidden messages, ideologies, perceptions, and the formation of public opinion are constructed by the media (Puspita, 2022).

Throughout its history, three key figures are recognized as having laid the foundations of modern semiotics: Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes. The tradition of thought established by Ferdinand de Saussure is better known as "semiology," which is deeply rooted in structural linguistics. Meanwhile, the American tradition pioneered by Charles Sanders Peirce uses the term "semiotics," which is based on the philosophy of pragmatism and the triadic relationship of signs (Paskaleva, 2024). In the landscape of visual media analysis and modern political communication, Saussure's structuralist semiotics serves as the primary theoretical foundation for unraveling how visual signs are produced based on social consensus and cultural code systems (Fanani, 2013).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss linguist recognized as the father of modern linguistics and a founding figure of the European structuralist movement, posited that language and communication systems are ordered and interconnected systems of signs. Saussure's ideas were published posthumously in the monumental work "*Cours de linguistique générale*" (1916), compiled by his students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, and continue to be studied through the discovery of his original manuscripts, such as "*De l'essence double du langage*" (Dayu & Syadli, 2023).

Saussure's approach is synchronic in nature; that is, it analyzes the system of language or signs at a specific point in time in an abstract and structured manner, disregarding historical evolution or the historical-diachronic perspective. Saussure emphasized that the internal structure of language (*langue*) is the primary object of study in linguistics and semiology (Widyana, 2023).

Saussure's core idea regarding the sign is that a sign is a two-faced entity or an inseparable two-dimensional unit, much like the two sides of a sheet of paper. A sign is created through the combination of two main component (Fanani, 2013; Reda, 2016; Saussure, 1959):

1. Signifier (Signifiant): The material aspect or physical form of a sign. The signifier is an acoustic image (sound image), a graphic mark, or a shape, line, color, facial expression, or object in an image that can be perceived by the senses.
2. Signified (Signifié): The mental aspect, conceptual representation, or meaning integrated into the mind when the signifier is perceived.

One of the most crucial tenets of Saussurean semiotics is that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (*l'arbitraire du signe*). This means that there is no intrinsic, conceptual, or natural reason why a physical object or concept is named or symbolized by a particular signifier (Paskaleva, 2024).

Saussure explains that the bond uniting the signifier and the signified is formed solely on the basis of social consensus, collective conventions, and cultural norms (social conventions) agreed upon by the community that uses those signs (Dayu & Syadli, 2023). For example, the use of symbols, letters, or pictorial representations in different cultures can lead to different interpretations if there are no shared conventions to underpin them. Limited exceptions to this principle of arbitrariness are found only in onomatopoeic words or symbols that have direct analogies, but Saussure emphasizes that, in general, the primary sign system is arbitrary and conventional (Dewanti, 2023).

In visual research studies—such as political editorial cartoons depicting Europe's stance toward the Arab Spring—this principle of arbitrariness implies that the visual symbols used by cartoonists, such as the European Union flag, the flags of Arab countries, or figures symbolizing

freedom, function according to international political-cultural conventions that are collectively understood by media readers (Kulsum, 2025).

Saussure divides the study of language and the system of signs into two main dimensions: *Langue* and *Parole* (Saussure, 1959).

1. *Langue*: a system of grammatical rules, abstract structures, conventions, and collective codes shared by a speech community as a whole. *Langue* is passive, abstract, stored in collective memory, and serves as the primary prerequisite for communication to take place.
2. *Parole*: refers to an individual's act of actualizing or applying the codes of *langue* into speech, writing, or tangible visual works at a specific moment. *Parole* is concrete, individual, variable, and dynamic.

In the context of this article's research, *langue* represents a system of symbolic conventions, cultural stereotypes, the tradition of Western satirical cartoons, and the cultural codes of European-Arab political diplomacy that are widely accepted in global society. Meanwhile, *parole* refers to the individual cartoon works drawn by cartoonists on the Artpictures website as a specific form of expression regarding the events of the Arab Spring (Affan, 2018).

Saussure also distinguished between two approaches to the study of language and sign systems (Culler, 1985; Saussure, 1959):

1. *Synchronic*: analyzing a sign system at a specific point in time without considering its historical development. Synchronic analysis focuses on the structure, relationships, and functions of the sign system across a broad, simultaneous spectrum.
2. *Diachronic*: analyzing the evolution, shifts in meaning, and historical development of signs from one time period to the next. Saussure's semiotic analysis of the cartoons on the Artpictures website is synchronic in nature; that is, it isolates and dissects the visual representations of European attitudes at the height of the Arab Spring (the 2010–2012 Middle Eastern revolutions) in order to articulate the geopolitical structure of meaning that emerged during that period.

Editorial cartoons, or political cartoons, are a form of persuasive visual communication published in both print and digital media. Political cartoons are not merely visual entertainment or works of graphic art; rather, they serve as a medium for public opinion, political rhetoric, and social criticism, and are rich in ideological content. Editorial cartoons utilize visual rhetorical techniques such as simplification, caricature/hyperbole, visual metaphors, stereotyping, and personification to convey sharp criticism of global geopolitical issues (Wekke, 2019).

Within the framework of Saussurean semiotics, political cartoons function as a form of visual *parole* that draws upon the cultural code system of *langue*. Cartoonists extract conventional symbols recognized by an international audience (such as the Uncle Sam character

for the United States, the Crown/Goddess Europa for the European Union, or traditional attire for the Arab world) and arrange them within a visual syntagmatic framework to convey specific political messages (Kulsum, 2025).

The integration of text (captions, speech bubbles, labels) and imagery in political cartoons creates multimodal communication. Text in political cartoons often serves to explain or guide the reader's interpretation so that it does not stray from the critical message intended by the cartoonist. In addition, the choice of colors (for example, red for danger or crisis, blue for the European Union), the characters' facial expressions, and the proportions of the characters' bodies symbolize the power relations and political stances represented by the media outlet in which the cartoon appears (Syaputra & Santoso, 2023).

The researchers found several previous studies on similar topics, including: (1) Semiotic Analysis of Ferdinand De Saussure's Structuralism in the Short Film *Cindhe* by Gesy Lutfiah R.O. (Anisatullatif, 2026), (2) Democracy in the Arab World as Depicted on the Instagram Account @hajjaj_cartoons (A Saussurean Semiotic Analysis) (Kulsum, 2025), (3) Semiotic Analysis of Motivational Messages in the Lyrics of the Song I'm Fine by BTS (Kaulika & Sakinah, 2025), (4) Semiotic Analysis of Cartoon Content on the Instagram Account Feed of the President of the Republic of Indonesia @Jokowi (Rahman et al., 2024), (5) Structural Semiotics Analysis of Ferdinand De Saussure on Health Campaign Posters with the Theme of World Kidney Day (Dewi, 2023).

Based on the previously mentioned studies, the researchers found that there are similarities in the theoretical approaches used to analyze the meaning of both visual and verbal objects. Although there are significant similarities, research that specifically focuses on analyzing cartoons in online media to uncover geopolitical issues, particularly in the Middle East, remains very limited.

Method

Research methodology is a step-by-step scientific process, from determining the topic to obtaining results that provide an understanding of the topic under discussion (Dawis et al., 2023). This study adopts a qualitative approach as its primary foundation. The fundamental reason for this choice is that the research focuses not on numbers or frequency (quantity), but rather on the depth of meaning, context, and description of linguistic phenomena (Anto et al., 2024).

The research objects or data sources in this study are caricatures obtained from the ArtPictures website as the primary source. The primary data consists of caricatures themed around the Arab Spring, accessed on the ArtPictures website on February 15, 2026. In addition,

several relevant journals and other scientific studies, as well as supporting references, were also utilized.

The data collection method used in this study is documentation or visual content analysis of online sources. The first step in this process is to identify the primary data sources, namely cartoons depicting European attitudes toward the Arab Spring, which were published on the Artpictures website.

Next, the researcher will identify, collect, and select cartoons relevant to the research topic. The selected cartoons are then documented. The documentation process involves capturing images of the cartoons and recording any accompanying text and symbols, as these elements function as signifiers in semiotic analysis. The collected visual and verbal data will be classified to distinguish the signifiers to be analyzed using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework.

Result and Discussion

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, the researcher will classify the study into three parts: the signifier and the signified (Signifiant and Signifié), the opposition of meanings, and the synthesis of meanings.



Figure 1. The Arab Spring caricature of the ArtPictures website
(Source : <https://artpictures.club/autumn-2023.html>)

Signifier and Signified

In this subsection, the researcher will divide the analysis into two parts: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal refers to all forms of text found in the images, while nonverbal refers to the symbols found in the images.

Verbal

Table 1. Verbal analysis

<i>Number</i>	<i>Image</i>	<i>Signifiant</i>	<i>Signifié</i>
1		A worn-out banner reading "Arab Spring"	The collective hopes of the Arab people for political reform, social justice, and freedom of expression that emerged in the early 2010s.
2		A sign on the wall reads "STOP" and "HERE BEGINS THE EUROPEAN WINTER"	The concept of rejection, the lack of a warm welcome for the "Arab Spring." This refers to Europe's cold and protective stance.

Based on the analysis of verbal elements in the caricature, it was found that the texts used play a significant role in constructing the caricature's main meaning. The phrase "Arab Spring" serves as a marker representing the Arab people's hopes for political change, freedom, and social justice following the emergence of various revolutionary movements in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the text "STOP" and "HERE BEGINS THE EUROPEAN WINTER" serve as markers indicating restrictions and resistance to the consequences arising from these events. Thus, the verbal elements in the caricature create a contrast in meaning between the hope for change symbolized by the Arab Spring and the closed-off attitude represented by the European Winter.

Non Verbal

Table 2. Non Verbal analysis

<i>Number</i>	<i>Image</i>	<i>Signifiant</i>	<i>Signifié</i>
2		A boat filled with people wearing a variety of expressions	A wave of protests in Arab and Middle Eastern countries stemming from the political and social turmoil following the Arab Spring.

3		The European Union flag on the wall	European authorities or powers
4		A silhouette behind the wall and fence	Europeans who seem unenthusiastic about the views of the people of the Middle East
5		Rocks and fences	Natural and man-made barriers that are making it increasingly difficult for the voices of Arabs to be heard

Based on an analysis of nonverbal elements in the caricatures, it was found that the visual elements used serve as symbols that reinforce the social and political messages in the images. A boat filled with people, the European Union flag, figures behind walls and fences, and symbols of barriers such as rocks and fences indicate a connection between Middle Eastern communities affected by conflict and Europe as the party imposing restrictions. These visual elements convey the meaning of population displacement caused by political crises and the obstacles to obtaining protection in Europe.

Visually, the cartoon depicts a boat carrying a number of people with various expressions. The boat symbolizes the movement of people leaving their homeland due to unstable sociopolitical conditions. On the other side, there is a large wall with a fence that serves as a boundary between the group in the boat and Europe. The presence of the European Union flag atop the wall indicates that this barrier is associated with European authorities or policies. Furthermore, the figure behind the wall represents the European side, which maintains a distance from the migrants, while the stones and fence reinforce the image of both physical barriers and policies that restrict their access.

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, nonverbal elements in caricatures do not merely serve as supporting imagery but function as signs that generate meaning through the relationship between the signifier (signifiant) and the signified (signifié). The boat, wall, and

fence create a semantic opposition between the movement toward a place considered safe and the closed-off attitude of the destination. This illustrates the tension between the need for protection of communities affected by conflict and European policies restricting access to its territory.

These findings are consistent with previous semiotic studies of caricatures, which show that visual symbols such as territorial boundaries, political objects, and human characters are often used to convey social criticism or specific ideological views. However, this study is unique in that it focuses on the representation of the impact of the Arab Spring and Arab-European relations through the symbols of migration and territorial boundaries. Thus, the nonverbal elements in Artpicture's cartoons serve as a medium for critiquing the post-Arab Spring sociopolitical conditions, revealing a gap between hopes for change in the Middle East and Europe's protective response.

Binary opposition

Table 3. Binary opposition analysis

Binary Opposition	Signifiant A	Signifiant B	Signifié
Expectations vs. Reality	"Arab Spring" (Spring, a symbol of renewal and hope)	"European Winter" (Winter, a symbol of hardship or difficulty)	The hopes of revolution (Spring) in the Middle East are up against the reality of rejection (Winter) in Europe.
Movement vs. Stagnation	A boat in dynamic motion	A static/obstructive wall	The contrast between the wave of change from the Arab world and Europe's efforts to fortify itself.
Open vs. Closed	People on a boat waving their hands (open)	The word "STOP" is surrounded by barbed wire (enclosed)	The Arab stance of seeking support is at odds with Europe's protective and dismissive policies.

Based on the results of an analysis of semantic oppositions in Arab caricatures on the Artpicture website, several forms of sign opposition were identified that construct the caricatures' main messages. These oppositions include the contrast between the Arab Spring and the European Winter, movement and stagnation, and openness and rejection. These three oppositions highlight the differing stances between Middle Eastern societies undergoing sociopolitical change and Europe, which is portrayed as a group that limits the impact of these changes.

The first opposition is evident in the use of the terms "Arab Spring" and "European Winter." The term "Spring" symbolically evokes a season associated with rebirth, growth, and

new hope. In the context of the cartoon, this symbol represents the Arab people's hopes for political change, freedom, and social justice. Conversely, the term "Winter" depicts cold and difficult conditions, symbolizing the obstacles and resistance from Europe toward the consequences that emerged following the Arab Spring.

The second opposition is evident in the difference between the symbols of the boat and the wall. The boat carrying people from the Middle East signifies movement, displacement, and the search for a safer place due to conflict and instability. Meanwhile, the walls and fences on the European side represent a static state and act as barriers to that movement.

The third opposition is depicted through symbols of openness and rejection. The people in the boat, whose expressions and gestures convey a plea for help, represent the hope of finding protection. This stands in contrast to the "STOP" sign, the barbed-wire fence, and the wall, which symbolize a closed-off attitude and restrictions on access imposed by European authorities.

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis, the opposition of meanings in this caricature demonstrates that meaning is formed not only through the existence of a sign, but also through the relationship of difference between one sign and another. The contrast between the Arab Spring and the European Winter constructs meaning regarding the difference between the hope for change and the reality of political and social obstacles. Similarly, the opposition between movement and stagnation, as well as openness and rejection, reveals a conflict between groups seeking protection and those attempting to defend their territorial boundaries.

These findings are consistent with semiotic research on political cartoons, which explains that binary oppositions are often used as a strategy to convey social criticism, as the contrast between symbols serves to clarify the ideological position the cartoonist wishes to convey. However, this study is unique in that it focuses on the opposition of meanings in representations of Arab-European relations in the post-Arab Spring era, particularly regarding hopes for change in the Middle East as they clash with Europe's protectionist policies.

Thus, the opposition of meanings in Artpicture's caricatures not only serves as a visual comparison but also functions as a means of conveying criticism of the tension between human values, freedom, and restrictive policies in the face of the impact of political conflict.

Synthesis of Meaning

Through Saussure's semiotic analysis, this caricature presents an ideological critique of Europe's ambivalent and protective stance in response to the Arab Spring. The cartoon employs a stark contrast in meaning ("Spring" vs. "Winter") to convey the message that the collective hope for democracy and freedom in the Middle East (the Arab Spring) was not met with support, but rather with strong rejection and protectionist policies (the European Winter) by

Europe, which often positions itself as the guardian of democratic values and human rights. Walls, barbed wire, and the word "STOP" collectively serve as symbols of Europe's political stance of closing its doors to refugees displaced by the turmoil in the Middle East.

Based on an analysis of the signifiers and signifieds, as well as the opposition of meanings in the Arab caricatures on the Artpicture website, it can be concluded that these caricatures construct a representation of the conflict between hopes for change in the Middle East and the reality of restrictions imposed by Europe. Verbal elements such as "Arab Spring," "STOP," and "European Winter," as well as non-verbal elements such as boats, walls, fences, and the symbol of the European Union, form a series of signs indicating a connection between the post-Arab Spring crisis and Europe's response to this phenomenon.

Through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, the relationship between the signifier (signifiant) and the signified (signifié) in this caricature conveys the message that the political changes hoped for through the Arab Spring did not fully result in better conditions for the affected communities. Instead, new obstacles emerged, represented by the symbols of the "European Winter," walls, and fences as forms of social and political restriction.

Furthermore, the contrast in meaning between spring and winter, movement and stagnation, as well as openness and rejection, reinforces the critical message conveyed in the cartoon. This cartoon not only depicts the phenomenon of migration but also critiques the disconnect between democratic and humanitarian values and the territorial protection policies implemented by Europe.

Thus, a synthesis of these meanings reveals that Artpicture's caricature serves as a medium for sociopolitical criticism, illustrating the lingering impact of the Arab Spring and the tensions in the relationship between Middle Eastern communities seeking refuge and Europe, which maintains its territorial borders.

Conclusion

This study suggests that cartoons published on the Artpictures website depict Europe's stance toward the Arab Spring in an ambivalent and conflicting manner. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, the analysis of signifiers and signifieds reveals that visual elements such as the "European Winter," walls, and barbed wire serve as significant signs that construct meanings of rejection, protectionism, restriction, and distance from the political and social changes associated with the Arab Spring.

The findings further demonstrate that Europe is not represented solely as a supporter of democracy and political freedom. Rather, the cartoons construct a more complex image of Europe as an entity that simultaneously claims to uphold democratic values while displaying a defensive attitude toward the consequences and influence of the Arab Spring. The opposition

between the ideals associated with democracy and the visual symbols of barriers and exclusion creates a critical representation of the gap between Europe's political image and its perceived attitude toward political transformation in the Arab world.

From a semiotic perspective, the cartoons therefore do not merely depict political events but actively construct ideological meanings through visual signs. The use of symbolic objects, spatial divisions, and visual contrasts enables the cartoons to communicate criticism of European political attitudes without relying on explicit verbal statements. This finding confirms the relevance of Saussurean semiotics for examining how meaning and ideological messages are produced through visual media.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how political cartoons can represent complex international relations and cross-cultural perceptions surrounding the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a relatively specific corpus of cartoons from the Artpictures website. Future research could expand the dataset by examining cartoons from different media platforms, countries, and periods, while also employing complementary approaches such as Roland Barthes' semiotics, discourse analysis, or multimodal critical discourse analysis to obtain a broader understanding of European representations of the Arab Spring.

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