Universality and Language Specificity: Evidence from Arab and English Proverbs

Turki Mahyoub Qaid Mohammed[1]*, Imran Ho-Abdullah[2]

[1]*Department of English, Centre for Languages and Translation, Taiz University, Yemen*
[2]*School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia*
Corresponding Author: Turki Mahyoub Qaid Mohammed, E-mail: turki_mhd1@yahoo.com

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

All languages have proverbs that reflect their community's attitudes, thoughts, values, and beliefs. Similarities between proverbs of different languages can be accounted for in cognitive semantics as motivated by shared human experience and universal schemas. At the same time, differences in the proverbs can be linked to the general idea of cultural diversity and hence language specificity in proverbs. This paper investigates twelve Arabic proverbs from a cognitive semantics viewpoint to determine their underlying schemas. The main aim is to arrive at a better understanding of the universal and language-specific nature of the Arabic proverbs. The methodology employed in the analysis is to explicate and determine, utilizing a cognitive semantics framework, whether the twelve Arabic proverbs have literal equivalence in English with shared schemas. In this regard, the Arabic proverbs and their English counterparts that have shared schemas are evidence for universality. While Arabic proverbs that have no literal equivalence in English and hence no shared schemas are good candidates in support of language specificity. Some of the proverbs might have shared schema but still, exhibit some variations that could be a manifestation of diversity of values and cultural background. Based on the analysis presented in this study, the Arabic proverbs examined fall into three categories: (i) proverbs that demonstrate universal construals; (ii) proverbs that demonstrate universal construal with variations; and (iii) proverbs that demonstrate language-specific construals.

INTRODUCTION

Aim and Scope

This paper examines Arabic proverbs from a cognitive semantics perspective to determine their underlying schemas. The main aim is to arrive at a better understanding of the universal and language-specific nature of the Arabic proverbs. Proverbs constitute a very significant part of a community's culture and, at the same time, reflect the community's attitudes, thoughts, values, and beliefs. Fergusson (2000) asserts that every culture and language has their own proverbs and these proverbs belong to the culture and tradition of that language. By examining proverbs cross-linguistically, it is possible to reveal cross-cultural similarities and differences in attitudes and behavior since "[p]roverbs are expressions of language and human thoughts that contain the values of wisdom of a tribe in understanding the world around them" (Mansyur and Said, 2019, p. 259). In addition, proverbs have a critical role in inter-cultural communication. The relationship between proverbs and cultures stems from the necessity of expressing our experiences in our everyday life and it is mostly through proverbs that these experiences are depicted (Hou, 2013; Nikolaeva et al., 2017). Different languages vary in the ways they utilize proverbs to express these life experiences. Languages differ in how they lexicalize and describe the experiences depending on the details of the experience itself, and the contexts in which these proverbs are used.

Research Questions

This paper investigates twelve Arabic proverbs from a cognitive semantics viewpoint to determine their underlying schemas by comparing and contrasting proverbs in Arabic and English. Since Arabic and English belong to two different families of languages and cultures it seems particularly interesting and insightful to compare and explore:

1. How similarities between the proverbs of these two languages can be accounted for using the constructs of universal schemas in cognitive semantics;
2. How differences between the proverbs of these two languages can be linked to the general idea of cultural diversity and hence language specificity in proverbs.

Through the analysis of proverbs in Arabic and their equivalents in English the paper contributes to the discussion of language specificity and universality of human cognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Proverbs and Culture

Proverbs are commonly considered as relatively short, well-known sentences (or in some cases incomplete sentences)

expressing conventional or commonly held ideas or beliefs from a speech community (Odebunmi, 2008). According to Fahmi (2016) proverbs are:

> words combined together to form larger semantic units which are encoded by the speaker and decoded by the hearer by means of their underlying knowledge of the language itself. Proverbs, in this sense, have their own conceptual meaning which is an essential part of what language is (p. 54). "

What is exceptional about proverbs is that they are used as a means to say something in an unpredictable way. In other words, things are expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. Hence, proverbs are often treated as figurative language. Proverbs are an indirect way of passing on a proposition that is shared between the hearer and the speaker. A crucial question that can be asked is why do speakers choose to say things implicitly rather than explicitly. Specifically, why resort to using a proverb? When a speaker decides to express a proposition using a proverb, he does not do so from scratch. Instead, the use of a proverb has its value as part of a much wider range of language use. Using a proverb relevant to a particular occasion or circumstance identifies the speaker as a member of that speech community. A proverb is a saying that is used to convey a general belief, thought, value, approach, or attitude of that speech community. The proverbs exemplify how the speech community thinks and acts as members of their community – a part of the culture of that community (Ferraro, 1990). Proverbs can reveal whether a community has a group-oriented or individual-oriented culture; disclose what is desirable and undesirable in that community as well as expose what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in that culture. Cultures express their likes and dislikes mostly through proverbs.

It has been noted that the word *culture* has various meanings. Culture can be seen as the medium of human development that prepares humans for interaction with their world (Cole and Parker, 2011, p. 135). Tylor (1967) defines culture as:

> a complex whole of social traditions and as prerequisite for one to be a member of the society. Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices, and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture encompasses beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide one's behaviors and to solve problems. Moreover, one can look at culture from an interpretative and performance perspective by viewing it as a system of expressive practices and mutual meanings associated with one's behaviors (Hou, 2013, p. 31).

Mazhitayeva et al. (2019) argued that relationship and interaction of language (proverbs) and culture is one of the key problems in modern linguistics. "In most cases, a person does not deal with the world itself, but with its representations, with cognitive patterns and models. A person imagines the world (or different worlds) through the prism of its culture and language" (p. 178).

Seidensticker (1987) asserted that proverbs express common concerns that people think are important in ways that

people can remember. This is true about proverbs of every culture and language. These 'words of wisdom' endure, so that each generation learns about what a culture deems significant. According to Seidensticker (1987), 'proverbs are compact treaties on the values of culture' (Hou, 2013, p. 32). Hence, similarity in proverbs between different languages points towards a universal or shared value (where a proposition is construed in the same way). On the other hand, differences in proverbs between languages (where a proposition is construed in very different ways) point towards language and culture-specific values.

Proverbs from a Cognitive Semantics Perspective

Proverbs have often been regarded as figurative language and metaphorical in nature. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) attest to the recurrent occurrence of metaphors in everyday thinking and conversations. They propose that metaphor is an apparent representation of abstract thinking in everyday life. They argued that the pervasive presence of metaphor is not just in language but in thought and action. Hence, the concept of metaphor should no longer be recognized as verbal ornamentation or a stylistic device. They emphasize the fact that metaphor is to be viewed as an effective mechanism used in everyday communication. The cognitive views of proverbs advocated by various proponents utilise the Great Chain Metaphor Theory (GCMT), which maps a single generic-level schema onto a large number of specific-level schemas having the same generic-level structure (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Other researchers like Gibbs (1994, 2001, 2002, 2006) and Gibbs et al. (1997) have argued about the influence of the mental images of proverbs in people's minds (Njui, 2019). Other works have dealt with how the figurative and literal meaning of proverbs interact in people's mind to produce an accurate and proper interpretation (Bock & Brewer, 1980; Temple and Honeck, 1999).

Ibáñez-Moreno (2005) argued that "cognitively, proverbs are mentally economical, since from one particular situation presented in them we can understand many others" (p. 42). She further claims that we can activate a whole scene about a certain event in our minds just through the mention of a relevant fact related to that event. From a cognitive semantics perspective, we can analyse a proverb through their different metaphorical schemas and apply folk and cultural knowledge to the construction of metaphorical schemas. For example, in the English proverb, *a barking dog never bites*, we use the domain of animal life (i.e., the attributes and behaviour of the dog) to understand the human domain in terms of human traits and behaviour. The question remains whether this metaphorical schema is universal. Ibáñez-Moreno (2005) and Ho-Abdullah (2011) believe that what makes many proverbs coincide, if not in perspective or form, at least in the message along different cultures in the world might be a matter of convention. Hence the metaphorical propositions are 'not universal, but common to many societies.' She concludes that proverbs reflect social values and that 'proverbs are always a result of social, cultural, political values, and the only difference between ones and others is their range of extension along countries and societies'. In other words, proverbs

are understood in relation to a background of assumptions and values, so they are primarily a social-cultural phenomenon. Context is essential for their correct interpretation, because they provide a message in an indirect way. They are learned through social interaction and for social purposes, and they promote social values. For this reason, we can learn many things about a specific culture just by examining their idioms and proverbs. Maalej (2009) also concludes that cognitive semantics, in particular, "the GCMT remains the best theory available (…) to account for proverb understanding and production. It presents itself as a cultural, cognitive, and pragmatic theory (p. 149)."

Universality and Specificity of Proverbs

Heine (1997) looks at language as a 'product' of our experience of the world. He maintains that language is the product of people's interaction with the world around them. In other words, our understanding of the world and the ways we interact with the world is embodied in our language. We would argue that proverbs are also a result of such interactions. Consequently, the ways different languages have similar proverbs to express a particular idea reflect the universality of the human experience. On the other hand, variations in the proverbs point to cultural differences and language-specific conceptualizations of our experiences. What is interesting about proverbs is that most of the time, people can recognise the intended meaning of a proverb intuitively.

No matter how cultures may differ, humans tend to encode life experiences in terms of proverbs that may live for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. These proverbs pass from generation to generation through informal and formal learning and become a part of the language system. Speakers of the language have the cognitive capacity to determine or conclude what proverb to use and in what linguistic and experiential environment. Although these proverbs more often than not revolve around the same contents though they represent different cultures, their formation and content will differ accordingly. Ibañez-Moreno (2005) states that what is universal about proverbs is the cognitive mechanisms speakers use to produce, understand and transmit them as proposed in the Great Chain Metaphor Theory (GCMT). Unquestionably, the analysis of proverbs allows us to understand how different cultures encode values and attitudes. Although cultural diversity mainly reveals differences, there are common aspects between cultures. The similarity in proverbs between different languages points towards a universal or shared value (where a proposition is construed in the same way). On the other hand, differences in proverbs between languages (where a proposition is construed in very different ways) point towards language and culture-specific values.

As stated above, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the role of proverbs in disclosing cultural diversity through scrutinizing Arabic proverbs and their English equivalents. Thus, it provides a perspective into Arabic culture and may inspire the interests of readers who are interested in cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication.

METHOD

As was mentioned above, proverbs have cultural and cognitive significance. The central view of proverbs idea from a cognitive semantics perspective utilising the Great Chain Metaphor Theory (GCMT) maintains that proverbs can be mapped onto a large number of specific-level schemas having the same generic-level structure (Lakoff and Turner, 1989, p.162). From this standpoint, it can be argued that along with a vast range of human experience and action, proverbs are manifestation of this schemas and may share both: cultural-specific, individualistic as well as collectivistic, universal features. As well as this, cultural universality or specificity of proverbs becomes particularly obvious when contrasting them in different cultures.

The proverbs discussed in this paper present only a small part of an ongoing project focusing on the exploration of proverbs in Arabic, compared and contrasted to compatible examples from the English language. The twelve Arabic and English proverbs under study were identified and contrasted according to different propositions and analysed. Specifically, evidence was sought for universality or language specificity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the proposition and schemas of the proverbs, three categories of proverbs emerged which are discussed below. It is clear that proverbs provide clear evidence for both universality and language specificity.

Universal Construals

In terms of human interaction, the English proverb *Silence gives consent* captures a long-held assumption that if one does not object to what someone else is saying or doing, we can assume that he agrees with or condones it. Similarly, the admonition in the Christian marriage ceremony to 'Speak now or forever hold your peace' is an admonition to share information that may not be known by others, or else keep this information to yourself for eternity. The admonition is often met with an awkward silence, and the wedding proceeds.

In Arabic, a similar proverb exists for the English proverb *Silence gives consent*.

السكوت علامة الرضا .1

assukuut ʔ alaamat arriDa
silence   sign   consent
Silence signi ies consent

Both proverbs uphold the notion that "consent" is not always explicitly expressed. In the case of the Arabic proverb, the act of not speaking and the act of giving consent are mapped onto one another. One is used as a sign of the other. In the case of the English proverb, the consent is conceptualised as an object which is transferred by the act of keeping silent. It is enough to stay silent to indicate that one does not have any objection. What can explain this similarity between the two proverbs is the fact that keeping silent is a universal human behavior. In all cultures, a person need not speak to express "consent" (for instance, it can be done by a

nod of the head). Silence can be a means of communication. The similarity in the proverbs in Arabic and English is an outcome of universal experience in human communications. If someone opposes with something or is reluctant to do as they are asked to, they usually state that. If they make no complaint at the time, we assume that they have no objection. Thus, one would condemn himself by saying nothing. Both languages capture this experience in a simple three-word proverb.

Another English proverb with an almost similar Arabic counterpart is the proverb *A friend in need is a friend indeed*, Pintarić (2016). The Arabic counterpart is presented in [2]:

2.   الصديق وقت الضيق

assadiiq	waqt	aDDiiq
a friend	time	need

A friend in time of need

Both proverbs express the idea that the 'test' of true friendship is in times when you are really in need of help. Your real friends are those who remain your friends regardless of your misfortunes. This truism reflects a universality as to how human beings understand [friendship]. No matter how different our cultures or individual unique experiences may be, human beings share a common cognitive schema about [true friendship]. Both proverbs present an understanding of human nature and the human condition which is subjected to trials and tribulations. To this end, some 'friends' are there with us through thick and thin, while others are there only in 'good times'. The proverbs in both cases conceptualise true friends to be those that remain under the condition or circumstances of need. It is only under these circumstances that we will know our *true* friends.

The proverb *when the cat's away, the mice will play* also has a similar Arabic proverb:

3.   إن غاب القط العب يا فار

Ɂin	Gaab	alqeT	ilʕab	ya faar
[if	absent	the cat	play	oh mouse]

If the cat is absent, the mouse will play

The similarity between the proverbs suggests a universal experience of the relationship between authority and their subordinates, as reflected in the instinctive relationship between the two animals - cat and mouse. It is to be noted here that the prey in Arabic is singular, while the English proverb uses the plural form.

The proverb *the calm before the storm* or *the lull before the storm* also has an identical Arabic counterpart:

4.   الهدوء قبل العاصفة

alhuduu	qabl	alʕasifah
[calm	before	the storm]

The calm before the storm.

According to Ammer (2013),

Numerous writers from approximately 1200 on also are recorded as saying that calm will come after a storm. Transferring fair and foul weather to human affairs, particularly to good fortune and adversity, and to peace and war, are … very old (p. 119).

In this instance, the Arabic and English proverbs manifest a similar understanding of a universal portent of nature, a period of peace before a disturbance or crisis.

Universal Construals with Variations

There are proverbs in Arabic that use similar constructs as those of English but with some variations. For instance, the proverb below [5] warns against taking unnecessary risks. A similar proverb can be found in English: *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*. While the use of the metaphor of the 'captured bird' appears to be common and perhaps universal, we argue that there are variations that point to differences in culture and experience.

5.   عصفور في اليد ولا عشرة على الشجرة

ʕasfuur	fii	alyad	wala	ʕašarah	ala	aššagarah
[a bird	in	the hand	and not	ten	on	the tree]

A bird in the hand and not ten on the tree.

The variation of note is the number of birds in the Arabic proverb compared to the English proverb. The 1:10 ratio in the Arabic proverb suggests a culture that is more risk-averse i.e., less willing to take risks compared to the English proverb, which presents a double return only. Interestingly, other cultures with almost similar proverbs differ in the number of birds to be 'traded' with 'the one in the hand'. For instance, in Spanish, it is *Más vale pájaro en mano que cien volando* (*a bird in the hand is better than a hundred in flight*). Similarly, Brosh (2013) notes that in Italian culture, it is '*Better one bird in the cage than four in the arbor*'; in Romanian – '*better a bird in the hand than a thousand on the house*' and in Frisian – '*a bird in the pan is better than many in the air.*'

In addition, there is also variation between the Arabic and English proverbs in terms of the spatial relations and the landmarks used. The English proverb profiles a containment relationship '*a bird in the bush*'. In contrast, the Arabic proverb uses the preposition/*ala*/(*on*). Hence in Arabic, the spatial relation between the bird and the tree can be characterized as a supportive relationship where the tree serves as a supporting entity to the bird.

The proverb below [6] shares a universal or common entity of the book with the English proverb '*do not judge a book by its cover*:

6.   الكتاب باين من عنوانه

alkitaab	bayen	min	ʕinwaanoh
[book	is clear	from	its title]

The book is obvious from its title.

The Arabic proverb, while using the same book construct as the English, reveals opposite propositions about passing judgment. The Arabic proverb advocates that the content of a book can be known based on its title, even without reading or going into the content of the book. In contrast, the English proverb advocates the opposite i.e., one cannot know what someone or something is like just by looking at the person or thing's appearance. [Going by this proverb alone might suggest that there is a culture of prejudgment or superficiality in Arabic. However, there are other proverbs in Arabic that advocate that one should not be misled by just the appearance. For instance, the proverbs below [7 – 8] both advocate that one should not create a judgment on someone or something based purely on what appears on the surface:

7.   أسمع كلامك أصدقك أشوف أمورك أستعجب

Ɂsmaʕ	kalaamak	ɁSeddiqak	ɁŠuuf
Ɂumurak	Ɂstaʕgeb		

[hear (I)   your words   believe you (I)   see (I)
your deeds   get surprised (I)]
I believe you when I hear your words, but get surprised when I see your deeds

8.   من برع الله الله ومن داخل يعلم الله

min   barraʕ   allah   allah   wumin
daaxel   yeʕlam   allah
[form   outside   Allah   Allah   and from
inside   knows   Allah]

We like the appearance of someone but only God knows what is on the inside.

These two proverbs show that one should not prejudge someone or something based purely on what appears on the surface. In other words, the two proverbs above emphasize that we should not be deceived just by people's appearance.

Language-Specific Construals

In the following section, we will discuss four Arabic proverbs that provide evidence of language and cultural specificity in proverbs. Although there are counterpart proverbs in English, they draw on different constructs. The first is an idiom of impossibility, used to indicate that a certain event is impossible or unlikely to happen.

9.   في المشمش

fii   almišmiš
[in   the apricot]
In the time of the apricot (It is unlikely to happen)

In Arab countries, the opportunity to enjoy an apricot fresh off the tree is rather unusual due to the very short season of apricots. This geo-nature fact experienced among Arabic speakers has given rise to the very commonly used expression/*fii almišmiš*/which is believed to be originally an Egyptian expression to convey 'impossibility.' This expression is usually uttered when a speaker wants to inform the hearer that whatever event they are talking about is unlikely to happen or just wishful thinking (akin to the expression 'In your dreams' in English). The expression is often used as a riposte to an improbable prediction, or a rash promise to fulfill a request. While Arabic speakers chose a fruit and its rarity in the Arabic proverb to denote improbability, English speakers use an animal and its physical characteristics to express the same notion. A flying pig is a symbol of an unfeasible event happening. The popular saying that something will happen 'when pigs fly,' or 'when pigs have wings' is traditionally stated to imply that the given event will never occur. It would also be highly unlikely that speakers of Arabic would use 'a flying pig' to convey the idea of 'improbability' for the reason that speakers express themselves and lexicalize their beliefs in accordance with their understanding of the real world around them and in accordance with their social and cultural background. In the real world, 'pigs' are rarely, if not at all, found in Arab countries. However, this does not mean that Arabic speakers have no conception of [pig] as an animal, only that the cultural interaction with pigs will not extend to using this particular animal in the proverb of improbability.

Another fruit-based proverb, which is language-specific to Arabic used to describe someone who is totally chill about something:

10.   خلي في بطنك بطيخة صيفي

xallii   fii   baTnak   baTTiixah   seefii
[keep   in   your stomach   watermelon   summer]
Keep in your stomach a summer watermelon.

Among Arabs, it is believed that eating 'watermelon' keeps one calm and relaxed since it helps the body cool down and provides our bodies with a large amount of liquid. Hence the choice of this particular fruit in the idiom is not arbitrary at all. The characteristics of the 'watermelon' and its nutritional value to people in hot climates support the semantic message of the idiom. This expression is usually uttered when a speaker wants the hearer to be at ease and that things will be fine.

Another Arabic proverb that reveals cultural diversity and lexical variety is the proverb in [11]. In Arabic, 'stone' is frequently used in idioms perhaps because of the familiarity and commonplace occurrence of stones in the geo-landscape of the desert environment. [as evidenced in the commonly-used proverbs in Arabic such as/*addam min raasak wa al Hagar min alwaadi*/which can be literary translated as "the blood is from your head and the stone is from the valley" and the idiom/*algaaweʕ Yaakol Higaar*/which can be literary translated as "When hungry, one would eat stones"].

11.   ما تكسر الحجرة إلا أخته

ma   tekser   alHajarah   ʔilla   ʔuxteh
[no   break   the stone   except for   sister its]
The stone is broken only by her sister

The proverb in [11] is used to describe rivals or opponents who are equal in intelligence, skill, strength, or power. An English proverb having an almost similar meaning to this Arabic proverb is the idiom '*diamond cuts diamond*' to describe a situation in which a sharp-witted or cunning person meets their match. While the Arabic proverb utilises a specific cultural understanding of kinship (an obstinate sister) and an everyday object (a hard stone) as two equally matched entities, the English proverbs rely on knowledge of the interaction between two hardest substances known to mankind. The choice of different entities in the idioms shows speakers of different languages can exploit their knowledge of their surroundings and what is familiar in the real in culturally specific ways.

A final example where there is cultural specificity in proverbs is shown in [12], which is best expressed directly in English by the proverb *beauty is in the eyes of the beholder*:

12.   القرد بعين أمه غزال

alqerd   biʕeen   ʔummuh   Gazaal
[The monkey   in the eye   mother-his   gazelle]
A monkey is a gazelle in its mother's eyes

Like the proverb *beauty is in the eyes of the beholder*, the 'beholder' in the Arabic proverb is the monkey's mother who sees her offspring as a beautiful gazelle. In Arabic culture, the gazelle is regarded as a swift, beautiful, and attractive animal. Once more, the speakers of Arabic exploit their culture-specific values based on their perception of the real world by choosing the gazelle to convey beauty. The proverb juxtaposes two animals to convey the semantic message what one person considers ugly may seem beautiful to another. Many proverbs involving animals contain

culture-specific values (Ibañez-Moreno, 2005; Ho-Abdul-lah, 2011). For example, the use of the dog to suggest the idea of *loyalty* and the camel to suggest the idea of *patience* are language-specific. However, the universal portrayal of human characteristics in terms of animal stereotypes also exist (Tendahl, 2009). For examples, the donkey, the ox and the cow are universally used to express the idea of *stupidity*, and the tiger or the lion to express the idea of *courage*.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the Arabic and English proverbs in this paper, it is clear that proverbs have both a cognitive and cultural basis. In this regard, proverbs that have shared schemas between different languages are evidence for universality. Some of the proverbs in different languages might have shared schemas but still exhibit some variations, which could be a manifestation of diversity of values and cultural background. The third category consists of proverbs that do not have shared schemas, and the proposition of the proverb is manifested by different schema in different languages.

This paper has attempted to link the schemas of the proverbs to the general idea of cultural diversity and hence language specificity in proverbs. The notions of cognitive semantics and shared human experience can also account for the similarities of proverbs between languages as driven by universal schemas.

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