



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

### The Semantic Meaning and the Pragmatic Function of Animal Proverbs: A Contrastive Study between Arabic and English Proverbs

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The semantic nature of proverbial expressions forms a big challenge for linguists who are interested in the analysis of the functions of proverbs among languages, bearing in mind the cultural differences which exist between them and the role that these differences play in the semantic interpretation of these expressions. This study aims at highlighting the semantic meaning and the pragmatic function of animal names in Arabic and English proverbs besides showing the importance of the similarities and the differences between Arabic and English proverbs. Although there are many different animal proverbs in Arabic and English, some animals share universal cognition, while others have different cognition in Arabic and English. So the same conceptual metaphor occurs in animal proverbs both in Arabic and English.

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### Introduction

Proverbs are inherent sayings that are used to offer advice or present a warning (Wierzbicka, 1985). They are simple and concrete sayings, which express a truth, based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. Proverbs are often borrowed from similar languages and cultures, and sometimes come down to the present through more than one language and almost every culture has examples of its own. The study of proverbs has been approached from many different points of view: personal, formal, religious, cultural, cognitive, and so on.

There are a large number of animal proverbs in Arabic and English. Some of their cultural connotations and the range of usage are the same or similar, and some are different. On the one hand, they are the same or similar, because human beings have similar capabilities of thought, similar laws of cognition, and some animals have the same important role in people's lives in these cultures and have the same attributes and features. On the other hand, because of the long course of history between these two social groups, they are discrepant in religion, customs, and history. These discrepancies make animal proverbs different in their cultural connotations in these languages. Because of these discrepancies, we should consider the differences and similarities of the cultural beliefs carried by the animal proverbs.

Different nations have different views on different objective things, but all human beings have some similar capabilities of thought, some laws of cognition are the same, and the animals have the same attributes. In different languages, some of the same animals will be endowed with the same or similar images. These images will make different nations have the same or similar association of some ideas. Their usages and meanings in languages are based on correspondence or similarity. The present study will thus set out to compare Arabic and English in terms of proverbs.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the semantic meaning and the pragmatic function of animal names in Arabic and English proverbs. This study also aims at showing the importance of the similarities and the differences between Arabic and English proverbs.

In this study, a cultural view about the animal proverbs in Arabic and English is adapted. The semantic meaning of animal names in proverbs and their pragmatic function in both languages will be analyzed. Proverbs reflect conceptual structure with high communicative and cross-cultural value. The contrastive analysis between Arabic and English proverbs is conducted to show how they share a common underlying conceptualization, while they reflect different cultural beliefs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Proverbs are metaphorical descriptions of certain situations, which are generalized implications. Cuddon defines the proverb as: "A short pithy saying which embodies a general truth. It is related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism. Common to most nations and people, it is a form of expression of great antiquity" (Cuddon 1984, 537). A proverb that describes a basic rule of conduct may also be known as a maxim. If a proverb is distinguished by particularly good phrasing, it may be known as an aphorism.

Mieder (2004, 4) defines the proverb as "a short, generally known sentence or folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a morphological and

memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation". Proverbs convey messages indirectly or figuratively; thus, the meanings they entail are socially understood as people share the same experience and inherit the exact aspects of proverbs. Norrick (1985, 78) portrays the same idea in defining proverbs as "traditional, conversational, didactic genre with a general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably with the figurative meaning".

Proverbs are common in almost all communities. Yet, each culture enjoys its repertoire of proverbs which can be viewed as highly informative sources about the traditions and popular beliefs of a community of people. Al-Sudais classifies the Najdi<sup>1</sup> proverbs according to their contents into four groups: proverbs containing the natural world, proverbs concerned with social life, wisdom proverbs, and medical proverbs. He categorizes animal proverbs under the group which contains the natural world. Moreover, he states that "animal proverbs refer either to the traits of the animal which relate to its body, health...etc, or to its temperament habits and way of life" (Al-Sudais 1976, 354).

Al-Sudais includes eight qualities under the physical traits of animals and fifty categories under the habits and temperaments of them. For example, under the physical categories of animals, he includes traits, the small size of the body, sharp sightedness, physical weakness, emaciation, physical strength, ability to carry burdens, having capacious bellies, and ability to drink large quantities of water. Moreover, he points out that proverbs are derived from anecdotes and wise sayings. They are distilled and concise to the point. They usually bear the color of milieu and reflect the values system of society (Al-Sudais 1993, 65).

Krickmann (2001, 47) discusses the relationships which exist between proverbs and animals. She classifies these proverbs into four semantic categories:

- (1) Proverbs concerning animals' identity;
- (2) Proverbs concerning the relationships between animals and people;
- (3) Proverbs concerning the relationships between animals; and
- (4) Proverbs concerning the relations of animals.

In the above classification, Krickmann (2001, 47) presents different semantic meanings of animal proverbs. Whereas many proverbs discuss the qualities of animals, others may personificate these qualities to refer to human beings. However, this classification represents a problem in that many proverbs can relate to more than one semantic category.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The data has been extracted from several proverbs from Arabic and English. The English proverbs used as examples in this study are mainly drawn from the book *English Proverbs Explained* (Ridout & Clifford, 1969). Besides, the Arabic proverbs are extracted from *Jamharat Al-Amthal* (Al-Askari, 1988). In *English proverbs explained*, there are nine hundred English proverbs.

The proverbs are given a generic explanation, which provides important information for the study of the animal proverbs. There are many animal proverbs with dogs, fish, cats, birds, wolves, and so on in both languages. Out of all these, the

<sup>1</sup> Najdi Arabic is one of the dialects spoken in Saudi Arabia

scope of this study is delimited to provide a more detailed description. Thus, only a limited set of animal proverbs related to the research are selected for the analysis; in other words, only the animal proverbs consisting of 'cats, dogs, birds and horses' are used in this study.

Through comparison and contrast, a detailed account of similarities and differences between Arabic and English animal proverbs were analyzed to show to what extent the proverbs share a common underlying conceptualization, and to what extent they reflect different cultural beliefs. Thus, the cognitive similarities of the animal proverbs in both languages were described. Furthermore, the cross-cultural differences in the animal proverbs in both languages were illustrated to show their different cultural beliefs.

### FINDINGS

Arabic and English can have similarities and differences in animal proverbs. Thus, many proverbs were analyzed concerning the semantic meaning and the pragmatic functions of proverbs which include names of cats, dogs, birds, and horses in both Arabic and English.

#### 1. The Universality of Conceptual metaphors

The same conceptual metaphor occurs in several unrelated languages. There might be a universal motivation for the metaphors to emerge in the cultures or one language may have borrowed the metaphors from another, or it might have happened by accident. Whatever the reason is, the phenomenon does exist. Some conceptual metaphors may be universal and the universality of this metaphor can be found at the generic level.

Animal Proverbs are considered as having a pragmatic function. Regarding Lakoff and Johnson (2003), animal proverbs are considered as metaphors in which people are animals. Their analysis enables us to apply the animal proverbs in all situations where these proverbs depict metaphorically different states of human beings. For example, a proverb like *all bark and no bite* will apply to practically all similar situations, except to dogs, unless it is not metaphorical.

Consequently, the domain of animal proverbs is very rich in constructions which enable us to understand our human nature. Lakoff and Turner (1989, 83-90) present in their studies some common traditions that take place in the scheme of animals:

*Table 1. Lakoff and Turner's Common Traditions of Animals in Proverbs.*

Pigs	Lions	Foxes	Dogs	Cats	Wolves	Gorillas
Dirty Messy Rude	Courageous Noble	Clever	Loyal Dependable Dependent	Fickle Independent	Cruel Murderous	Aggressive Violent

Accordingly, Lakoff and Turner (1989) assume that this knowledge behind proverbs is natural and universal. The semantic studies on animal proverbs have reached the fact that the interpretation of proverbs can be universal or culturally specific.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Proverbs are the cream of a language. They reflect the relationship between language and culture. Human beings' common social activities are in many aspects similar, so Arabic and English proverbs have cognitive similarities. They both

originate from folklife, mythology, literary works, and other languages. They also have similar linguistic characters. For instance, the conceptual metaphor *people are animals* is widely used in animal proverbs in both languages.

Because of the different cultures, differences between English and Arabic animal proverbs also exist. In general, the major differences lie in religions, customs, and history. As a result, English and Arabic proverbs are different in the detailed contents. With the development of the long course of history between these two nations, different animals have different cultural connotations in these two languages. So many animal proverbs show the differences in the cultural beliefs between Arabic and English.

#### The cognitive similarities in Arabic and English proverbs

Through global communication and contact between nations, many proverbs have absorbed a great number of expressions of other nation's culture. Some proverbs in English can have the same expressions in Arabic. Other proverbs in English can find their equivalents in Arabic. The reverse is also true. Although their equivalents are different in expression and show different perspectives, they are similar in meaning. No matter that they have the same expression or the equivalent expression, the proverbs share a common underlying schema of cognition, which demonstrates the way we think and structure it in our minds.

##### Same expression

In Arabic, some proverbs are sharing the same expression as the English ones. From these similarities, it can be seen that English and Arabic people have similar social activities and emotional reflection and observation of the world; for example:

(1) *You may lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink.*

(2) قد تقود الفرس إلى الماء، ولكن لا يمكنك ان تجعله يشرب

/qad taqu:do lfarasa ?ila lma? wa lakim la: yomkinoka ?an taz'alaho yafro?b/

In Arabic, the same animal "horse" "الفرس" /alfaras/ is used. The proverb says, you may be acting in the best interests of the horse by taking him to the trough, but if he does not want to drink he is not going to. So it means that you can do your utmost to make a person share your views, yet there is a point beyond which he will not go. In this proverb, "a person who does not want to accept others' opinion" is understood in terms of "a horse that does not want to drink". The other example is below:

(3) *A bird in the hand is worth than two in the bush.*

(4) عصفور في اليد خير من اثنين فوق الشجرة

/?psfu:r fi ?al yad xayrun min ?i?nayni fawqa ?alfazara/

If a hunter has shot one bird, he should be satisfied with that and not go off looking for the ones that flew away. The proverb is used to mean that it is better to accept something small than to reject it and hope to get more later on. In other words, it is better to keep what you have than to give it up and try to get something better and risk losing everything.

There is another example of the similarity between Arabic and English proverbs concerning dogs. Both languages describe a dog as a human being in which the barking of dogs is unimportant, for instance:

(5) *Barking dogs do not bite*

(6) الكلاب تنبح و القافلة تسير / الكلاب النباحة لا تعض

/ʔal kɪlabɔ tanbaħɔ wa lqa:fila tase:r/ /ʔal kɪlabɔ nabaha la: ta'ɔdʔ/

In Arabic culture, a cat is a domesticated animal; this case is found also in English culture where people raise cats and dogs in their homes. Being so it is highly recommended that people in both cultures give the same semantic interpretation to the cat, for example:

(7) *A cat has nine lives*

(8) القطط بسبعة ارواح

/alqɪtɔɔ bɪsab'atɪ ʔarwah/

This is another way of saying that a cat is much more likely to escape death than most animals. It is too wily and agile to be taken by surprise, and even when it falls, it manages to come down on its feet, which is sufficiently padded to break the stock. The proverb is used rather loosely in contexts as: '*She's had so many accidents with her new car that wonder she's not been killed.*' Whether there is any play on the word 'cat' in the sense of '*spiteful woman*' depends on the feelings of the speaker.

#### **The cross-cultural differences in Arabic and English proverbs**

In human communication, many animal words are widely used to enrich the language and culture. The vivid images of animals enhance the expressive ability of language by associating with their features showed from outside appearances or individual temperaments. Meanwhile, there are a variety of animals in our life. Different nationalities have their own different "totem" animal, that is, each nation has its favorite animals.

Specific cultures and regional discrepancies exert a strong influence on the language. Animal words as association vehicles are the products under specific cultural backgrounds. These animal association vehicles have their respective cultural connotations which are known to different nations or which are completely strange to people. The culture of a nation is formed by many factors, and the development of a society influences the formation, the development, and the disappearance of the culture. The cultural connotations of some animal words in English and Arabic are closely related to religion, customs, and the history of the nation.

#### **Different expression**

Some animal proverbs in Arabic and English share the same root idea but differ in figurative ways of expression. That is, they are close in meaning but different in expression. They contain the same advice, counsel, wisdom, or warning, and they can perform the same functions in life. So there are many animal proverbs in Arabic and English, when we turn to their corresponding proverbs in the other language, animal words disappear or being replaced by other animal words. That is, they apply to different animals, images or words, and so on.

These proverbs convey almost the same connotative meaning although their ways of expression seem to be unrelated. For instance, the English proverb

(9) *the fox preys farthest from home*

has the equivalent expression in the Arabic proverb, that is;

(10) لا تَأْكُلِ الْارَابُ الْعُشْبَ حَوْلَ جُجُورِهَا  
 la: taʔkɒlo lʔara:nɪbɒ l'ɒjba hawla ʒɒhu:rɪha

Both proverbs mean that it is believed that a villain usually does not harm his neighbors, though they apply to different animals; they can also mean that thieves steal far from home, to avoid suspicion.

#### **Dogs**

According to Lakoff and Turner (1989) analysis, they are portrayed as dependable and loyal. In English, it is frequent for dog proverbs to represent people metaphorically in a particular situation. The portray of dogs in proverbs as dependable and loyal relates to the fact that in English culture dogs are depicted as domesticated animals; they can be raised in homes and live with the family. However, metaphorically, this dependability of dogs refers to human beings, i.e., the one who is controlled by or dependent on the others; they are barking but they cannot bite. The following proverbs show this state:

(11) *Dogs wag their tails not so much in love to you as to your bread*

(12) *Barking dogs seldom bite* (1989, 104)

The above two proverbs have a negative connotation; they are used in situations where one person is hated for his dependability and even bad deeds. Moreover, people avoid using the proverbs of dogs on the face of the one who is concerned with the intended meaning of them.

Arabic, on the other hand, indicates a more negative semantic feature to the state of the dog. They are described by people as unclean and they are of no value (Al-Sudais, 1993, 101). Moreover, the rising of dogs is prevented in Islam, though it is not expected to find animal proverbs relate to the dependence of the dog on others in Arabic. Most proverbs found in Arabic reflect the social life of the Arabs when they were using dogs in hunting and watching houses.

#### **Ravens**

The raven is a kind of bird that has a black color. English language deals with raven and owl as symbol of wisdom and good omen. This means that when a raven or an owl is used in proverbs, it describes a person who is wise and who is loved by people as a symbol of good omen and optimistic. For example: *If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows.*

Arabic language in contrast deals with this bird as a symbol of cunning, pessimism, and a bad omen. Al-Zou'bi (1999, 19) argues that the Arabs feel inauspicious if it crows before traveling. Moreover, the black color of the raven, which is in Arabic culture associated with sad emotions, makes them very pessimistic about this bird. Although in Islam it is not allowed to be pessimistic from anything which surrounds Muslims, Arabs are still in their proverbs depicting human beings ravens. They tend to say the following proverb to describe a bad person who gives an evil impression as being as ominous as an owl or a raven:

(13) أَشَامُ مِنْ غُرَابٍ /ʔaʃʔamɒ min yura:b/

Another difference between Arabic and English proverbs relate to the intimacy between the speaker and the person who is depicted by the proverb. Whereas English proverbs which include the raven in their structure indicate a close intimacy between



the speaker and the person who is depicted in the proverb, raven in Arabic proverbs mean remote relationship and even a state of loathsome between the speaker and the person whom the proverb refers to.

### ***Cultural and environmental differences between Arabic and English proverbs***

In Arabic, the interpretation of animal proverbs is affected by two factors: culture and environment.

#### **1. Cultural differences**

The English cultural connotations of some animal words are the same or similar to the Arabic cultural connotations of other Arabic animal words. Their implied meanings are the same, but their names are different. Because of the differences between the two cultures and image thoughts of the two nations, it is natural that the two nations have different emotional reactions to the same kind of animal. In different cultures and civilizations, the same kind of animal might be given different cultural connotations, which will lead to the vacancy of cultural connotation in the other language, and lead to obstacles for cross-exchanges.

For example, a peacock represents arrogance in English, but it stands for beauty in Arabic. The Arabs think *owl* means "ill-omened", while in English culture, it is viewed as "wisdom". For example:

(14) *A wise old owl sat on an oak; the more he saw the less he spoke; the less he spoke the more he heard; why aren't we like that wise old bird?*

(15) لو كان في البومة خير ما تركها الصياد

/law ka:na filbu:mati xayrun ma: tarakaha saya:d/

There are also many different cultural scripts in proverbs in one or another language, so the proverb would be culturally specific. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989, 93), different metaphorical schemas show how we conceive of animals, and how we apply this folk knowledge to the construction of metaphorical schemas.

#### **2. Religious differences**

There is a big difference between the Arab religion and the English religion. Arab people believe in Islam, while most English people believe in Christianity. That is why some animal words about religion are quite different in Arabic and English. The proverbs about dogs reflect the religious difference between Arabic and English customs. No matter in the East or the West, the dog is familiar to everyone. Both Arabic speaking people and English people like raising dogs, but their aims and attitudes towards dogs are quite different.

In Western culture, the dog is treated as their favorite pet, and it is referred to as man's best friend. It is not uncommon for an Englishman to kiss his dog, and take them to visit a doctor [Veterinarian] when it is ill. They can also enjoy a "vacation" when their hosts spend their holidays. For them, a dog is loyal and dependable, so they love it and praise it. Although a dog is an animal, it is usually used to refer to human beings. The following proverbs are good examples:

(16) *Every dog has its day.*

(17) *Old dog will not learn new tricks.*

As shown in (16), the generic meaning is that every person's moment of glory is inevitable. This proverb is the conceptual metaphor of 'people are animals'. In example (17), the proverb means that as people get older they grow more set in their



ways and do not welcome any innovation. It is the conceptual metaphor of 'people are animals' (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, 231).

While in Arabic the case is different. Arabs keep dogs to protect themselves from thieves, and the dog is known as a watchdog. They, in general, dislike the behavior of dogs, so a *dog* is used to describe the bad guys, those who are cruel and unscrupulous. For example:

(18) فكل بلاء الناس من لسان الكلب

/fakɒɓ balaʔɪ na:sɪ min lɪsanɪ lkalb/

In this case, the *dog* is a negative image. This proverb says a filthy mouth cannot utter decent language. The proverb is used to ridicule the person whose mouth is not clean enough and cannot say a good word. In this case, a *dog* is used to describe the bad guys who cannot say a decent word.

### 3. Environmental differences

In Arabic, the environment that surrounds the Arabs is usually desert; this makes the animal such as horses and camels important in their life. They ride the camels in the hot desert and use horses in war and peace state. Consequently, people gave qualities of the animals according to this environment

A camel is patient because he can stay for a long time without food and water. Arabs respect horses because they serve them to adjust to difficult deserts. Moreover, there are different names to camels and horses as:

Camel: حوار، قعود، الهيم، الناقة، البعير

/ħɒwar/, /qa'u:d/, /alħr:m/, /ʔanaqa/, /alba'r:r/

Horse: الفرس، المهرا، الحصان، الخيل

/alfaras/, /almuħr/, /alħis'a:n/, /alxayl/

However, in English, the environment that surrounds the west is almost cold so the animals that adjust to this weather are different from Arabic animals. Camels are almost nonexistent in English proverbs and horses are rare.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, some insights have been shown regarding the role of generic cognitive mechanisms in animal proverbs use. Although there are many different animal proverbs in Arabic and English, some animals share universal cognition, while others have different cognition in Arabic and English. Moreover, the same conceptual metaphor occurs in animal proverbs in both languages. There is a universal motivation for the metaphors to emerge in Arabic and English, though they are unrelated languages. Some conceptual metaphors are universal and the universality of this metaphor can be found at the generic level.

However, different cultures in Arabic and English nations entrust cultural connotations to animals, which cause discrepancies in the application of animal association vehicles. These discrepancies bring an obstruction of intercultural communication. If we do not know the cultural information and only understand the information according to our national cultural backgrounds, we would cause the deviation from information transmission and misunderstanding in intercultural communication to lead to the failure of communication.

Therefore, people should pay attention to the figurative meanings of animal words to make successful cross-cultural communication. This study analyzes the cultural connotations between Arabic and English animal proverbs and compares the animal images and their cultural connotations. Animals have their features and cultural connotations in their languages. Some of their cultural connotations are the same in Arabic and English, but most of them are different.

It is clear to conclude that animal words are not only the sights of real animals but also gifted with special cultural connotations of different cultures. Therefore, if people want to have a good grasp of animal proverbs, they have to understand the connotations of these words especially the cultural connotations.

Although the theme of this study has its main roots in the linguistic field, it is believed that this study will provide a better understanding of the use of animals in proverbs and the differences between Arabic and English proverbs for everyone interested in the field of semantics. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will pave the way for other researchers to carry out studies on this topic.

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## معنای لغوی و کاربردشناسی ضرب المثل‌های حیوانات: بررسی مقابله‌ای ضرب المثل‌های عربی و انگلیسی

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ماهیت معنایی عبارات ضرب المثل‌های چالش بزرگی را برای زبان‌شناسانی ایجاد می‌کند که علاقه‌مند به تحلیل کارکرد ضرب المثل‌ها در بین زبان‌ها هستند، با در نظر گرفتن تفاوت‌های فرهنگی موجود بین آنها و نقشی که این تفاوت‌ها در تفسیر معنایی این عبارات ایفا می‌کنند. این پژوهش با هدف برجسته کردن معنای لغوی و کاربردشناسی نام حیوانات در ضرب المثل‌های عربی و انگلیسی علاوه بر نشان دادن اهمیت شباهت‌ها و تفاوت‌های ضرب المثل‌های عربی و انگلیسی است. اگرچه ضرب المثل‌های حیوانات مختلف در عربی و انگلیسی وجود دارد، برخی از حیوانات در شناخت جهانی مشترک هستند، در حالی که برخی دیگر در عربی و انگلیسی شناخت متفاوتی دارند. پس همین استعاره مفهومی در ضرب المثل‌های حیوانی هم در عربی و هم در انگلیسی وجود دارد.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** حیوانات، مقایسه، کاربردشناسی، ضرب المثل‌ها، معناشناسی.

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