

Associative Meaning in English Proverbs With their Arabic Equivalents

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Abstract

All meanings create associations of some kind or another. Associations, however, are the result of certain specific situations that frame interactions in real social settings. The interpreting ability of the reader (and the hearer), hence, depends on his conceptualization of the world around as well as his social and cultural background knowledge which encapsulates different beliefs, attitudes, experience, values, etc. of both source and target languages. Lack of knowledge about these facts poses actual problems in communication if not drawbacks or total failure), including translation.

Building on the facts mentioned above, it is hypothesized that the more varied the translator's background knowledge is, the greater is his ability to comprehend and then render proverbs into a target language.

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This paper concludes that the pragmatic aspects of the language , as well as the context in which a certain proverb is used, reveal different associative meanings of proverbs. Moreover, the main sources of difficulty in translating proverbs, stem from the complexity of the concepts they carry (or are intended to carry) ; the more difficult the concepts, the more culture dependent the proverbs become and vice versa.

1. Introduction

Some people would claim that proverbs are not important at all; and that the person who keeps using them is regarded as "a person who has no ideas of his own" (Tregidgo, 1962: 278). In this regard, it suffices to mention the significant role of proverbs in language and communication, their aesthetic value, and the wisdom they may provide the society with.

Proverbs or proverbial sayings, on the other hand, "express in few words a truth which relates to everyday experience"(Seidl and McMordi, 1978: 241). They are products of human thought about the reality of things, human attitudes, feelings and beliefs. Such a broad area of human experience has made proverbs universally accepted.

In general, proverbs are less opaque than lexemic idioms, phrasal idioms or even proverbial sayings. Proverbs proper are, to a large extent, transparent. What makes proverbs useful and attractive is their fertility in

moral and educational lessons. The three main pillars on which proverbs are set up are truth, advice and wisdom; these are usually presented in "expressive and picturesque language"(Coles, 1978). Moreover, these components are related, in essence, to everyday experience and as such they could widely be understood and applied by all people regardless of their class, education, etc.

2. Familiarity with Proverbs

Familiarity with proverbs fixed by long usage in any language is strictly a personal responsibility, since acquiring them does not come from any pedagogical suggestions. Proverbs, just like any idioms or idiomatic expressions, can only be learnt through continuous reading, long practice and good educational, social and cultural background.

One may ask if an idiomatic expression is that which contains fine or impressive words? Not at all, if the case were this, any piece of literary work would have been considered to be full of idiomatic expressions. An idiom is a set expression that frequently disobeys rules and "can only be altered to a limited extent"(ibid: 276). Very often, an idiomatic expression appears to be quite odd, illogical and sometimes ungrammatical. For example, 'look forward to something' does not imply the act of looking at all; 'on foot' and 'to market' require articles, etc. Idioms, thus, are "peculiarities of language whose rightness is based on usage, not on logic or etymology"(Eckersley and Eckersley, 1960:277).

Less opaque idioms (and less important from pedagogical perspective) are those which could be termed 'phrasal sayings'. These are, as some writers used to point out, "half way between idioms and proverbs"(Tregidgo, 1962: 277). The 'sayings' are interesting and attractive since they invoke various sense relations and rhetorical images. They depend heavily on figures of speech summarizing in that the hearer's experience about the world as they see it. The examples below confirm this point:

- Add fuel to the flame.
(= To make a bad matter worse by adding to its cause)
(Makkai, 1984:2)
- Come back to earth.
(= Turn to the real world)
(Ibid: 61)
- To be born under a lucky star.
(= To be continually lucky)
(Seidl and McMordi, 1978: 168)
- The black sheep of the family.
(= The one who disgraces the group)
(Tregidgo, 1962: 277)

3. Sources and Types of Proverbs

The two main sources of proverbs are religion and literary works. This does not mean that the public life has no role to play in creating proverbs. In fact, the public life is the main source/cause of the myriads of colloquial (and frequently informal) proverbs. The following examples refer to the two main sources respectively:

- The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt 16: 40-41)
(Lit. الروح تواقه، ولكن الجسد ضعيف)
- Cowards die often (Dryton),
Or
- Cowards die many times before their deaths
(Shakespeare)
(Lit كثيرا ما يموت الجبناء؛ يموت الجبناء مرات عدة قبل اجلهم
إن الجبان حتفه من فوقه
(Ba'albaki, 1980: 28 and 86)

Proverbs, due to different linguistic approaches, are of several types, the most important of which are:

- (1) the straightforward proverbs, which do not require any transference of meanings or any rhetorical styles; rhetoric lies in the meaning of the simple words used, and.
- (2) proverbs with metaphorical quality where there is transference of meaning from literal to figurative. 'A proverb, in this sense, is an embellished way of expressing wisdom, advice, etc. This last type, which extends far beyond the literal meaning, is the most preferred and practiced by the people. For example, 'A burnt child dreads the fire'^(*).

(Lit. الطفل المكتوي بالنار يخاف النار)

من نه شته الحية حذر الرسن الأبلق

المللدوغ يخاف جرة الحبل

does not concern only the situation of a burnt child fearing the fire but it extends to any situation about which one has a bitter experience which one has to avoid.

4. Associative Meaning in Proverbs

(*) It is to be noted that "the message or referential aspect of proverbs is not tied to the image employed. That is to say, the same or similar message may be communicated by different images. The proverb 'He who is bitten by the snake fears even a rope' is in terms of semantic import quite similar to the French proverb 'A scolded cat fears even cold water'; and both proverbs are similar in message to the Greek proverb 'Whoever is burned as hot squash blows on the cold yogurt' (cited in Taylor, 1981: 46;94). The images differ; the messages do not'

One may ask what types of meaning can be conveyed through proverbs. No doubt, all types of meaning "fit into the total composite effect of linguistic communication"(Leech, 1981:10). And since proverbs do convey meaning (or message), they make use of several types of meaning.

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 underlined knowledge of the language itself: what contrasts with what and what constituent structure the proverb has. Proverbs, in this sense, have their own conceptual meaning which is "an essential part of what language is" (ibid.13); and that the conceptual meaning of nearly any item in any language is the same since the **conceptual meaning** is "a universal property of the mind" (ibid.: 15).However, this by all means, does not mean that all people show the same conceptual framework, since differences in age, education, etc. play the greatest role. The following proverb shows that the meaning of the key word 'evils' is the logical (or referential or denotative) meaning that no two speakers would differ about:

Of two evils choose the least

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The features of words that compose the whole conceptual meaning of proverbs have other important properties due to the association of ideas based on 'contiguities of experience'. This is termed '**associative meaning**', which comprises several types of meaning, the most important of which are **connotative, affective, stylistic and collocative meanings**. This diversity of associative meaning is as a result of the diversity of the individual experience.

4.1 Connotative Meaning of Proverbs

The connotative meaning of proverbs is their communicative value by virtue of what psychological or social properties of what the linguistic items within the proverb imply. In talking about connotative meaning,

one is talking about "the real world experience one associates with an expression when one uses or hears it"(ibid.).

The intended meaning of a proverb cannot be effective unless the words are "associated with certain characteristics of the items to which they refer"(Palmer, 1981: 92). For example, people have different ideas about 'women', whether good or bad; these ideas are reflected in proverbs they use by means of words that are frequently associated with 'evil' (and rarely with 'gentleness'). The following borrowed proverb from French into English connotes that the 'women' are the source of all evil:

- Cherchez la femme.

(Lit)

فنتش عن المرأة

المرأة شرّ كلها وشرّ ما فيها انه لا بد منها

In the Arabic culture, such negative connotations are also evident:

- تحت البراقع سمّ نافع

(Lit.) Behind the veils (lurks) fatal poison.

This, however, does not exclude the positive view embodied in a great number of wise sayings and proverbs in Arabic literature. The following proverb is indicative:

- وراء كل عظيم امرأة

(Lit.) There is a woman behind any great man.

Many other factors determine the extent of connotative meaning in proverbs, most of that reflect the worldview adopted by individuals, societies and cultures. For example, the idea that a wise man is supposed to make use of his previous mistakes or failures, can be expressed equally or differently from one culture to another depending on the world view the individuals have. In the English and Arabic cultures, people, for instance, would refer to such an idea by resorting to the world of animals and the nature respectively:

- A fox is not taken twice in the same snare.
(Lit.) لا يوقع الثعلب في الشرك نفسه مرتين
لا يلدغ المؤمن من جحر مرتين

In addition to these factors, additional varieties of connotations arise from differences in time and space. For example, the Biblical proverb:

- A living dog is better than a dead lion
(Ecclesiastes, 9: 4-5)

refers to the priority of life(whatever life it could be) over ceremonial death. It is difficult, however, to find many people nowadays using such connotation. Even the Arab Christians would feel الكلب الحي خير من الاسد الميت 'A living dog is better than a dead lion' awkward and may prefer to use a better translation equivalent الحية نومة في كدر ولا رقدة تحت الحجر (Lit) To live in distress is much better than lying under the stone for ever). Undoubtedly, non-of them would think to use ألف مرة جبان ولا مرة الله يرحمه

(Lit. To me, it is better if people say: "God curse him, he ran away", than if they say "God bless him he died".

Moreover, connotations of a certain idea in one geographical area may not be the same as in others, even if the language is the same. For example, in Egypt people use:

- حمارتك العرجاء ولا سؤال اللئيم

(Lit.) (Rather use) your lame donkey than ask a mean person (to lend you his good one).

In Iraq, on the other hand, a different connotation is used:

- طهر ابنك بالفأس ولا تحتاج منة الناس

(Lit) Circumcise your son by an axe; you don't need people's kind act.

Thus, connotations in proverbs are relatively determined by instability. What promotes this lack of stability more and more is the fact that connotations have indeterminate status. Leech (1980: 15) in this regard states that the "associative meaning is open-ended in the same way as our knowledge and beliefs about the universe are open-ended".

This instability can also be traced through the natural process of change of words or expressions due to some factors such as the avoidance of taboo words associated with socially unpleasant terms and replacing

them by euphemistic ones, where pleasant and more becoming qualities are referred to:

- Air one's linen in public.
(= To talk about one's private disgrace where others can hear).
- Keep the census down.
(= To abort a fetus; to masturbate).
- Make love to the porcelain goddess.
(= Vomiting into the toilet).
- Standing too long in the sun.
(= Intoxicated with alcohol).
- Wring the dew off the branch.
(= To urinate).

(Spears, 1991: 3,251,278,423,589)

4.2 Affective (or Emotive) Meaning of Proverbs

The affective or emotive meanings conveyed by the proverbs above show "a consciousness of the social implications of address"(Leech and Short, 1981: 311). We are not going to further proceed with affective

meaning, since all other types of meaning are usually charged with it in one way or another.

4.3 Stylistic Meaning of Proverbs

The stylistic meaning of proverbs is related in large to some features of style (e.g. permanent, temporal, etc.). The most important stylistic values of proverbs are essentially related to the stylistic dimensions of status which comprise different vehicles for expressing any item (of thought) in language (e.g. formality vs. informality, politeness vs. impoliteness, etc.).

A large percentage of proverbs are informal in both senses as related to structure or situation:

- مت يا زمال لمن يجيك الربيع

(Lit) While the grass grows the steed starves.

- Die with one's boot on / die in one's boot.

(= to die while still active in one's work).

(Makkai, 1984: 79)

Variations in style are reflected in the way synonymous proverbs, or rather more precisely, the different styles used in expressing the same idea or message to be conveyed, e.g. the idea that the outward appearance is less important than the inner qualities. However, appearance can be

deceptive. This is reflected in the following two sets of synonymous proverbs (A and B):

A. - All that glitters is not gold

- Beauty is only skin deep.
- Clothes do not make man.
- Fine feathers make fine birds.

(Lit.)

ما كل ما يلمع ذهباً

- ما كل بيضاء شحمة وكل سوداء تمرّة

- ما كل مدعبل جوز

B. - Many hands make light work.

- Too many cooks spoil the broth.
- A man cannot serve two masters.

(Lit.) -

ليس بمقدور المرء أن يخدم سيدين اثنين.

لا يجمع سيفان في غمد

4.4 Collocative Meaning of Proverbs

Proverbs, as a literary style, frequently consist of the association of ideas due to collocation. Collocation could be normal or unusual. Writers use the latter type at times for creating stylistic effects to impress readers.

analogy, equivocation, etc. This area, to be noted , is full of rhetorical images. Thus, it is in need to be excavated thoroughly. A few proverbs in this regard are useful to illustrate the point raised above:

- ***Personification:***

Actions speak louder than words.

(Lit.)

الاعمال اعلی صوتا من الافعال

الافعال ابلاغ من الاقوال

السيف اصدق انباء من الكتب

- ***Analogy:***

Blood is thicker than water.

(Lit.)

الدم اشد كثافة من الماء

أنا وأخي على ابن عمي وأنا وابن عمي على الغريب

- ***Equivocation***

Christmas comes but one a year.

(Lit.)

عيد الميلاد لا يفد الا مرة كل عام

فتمتع بالصبح ما دمت فيه

لا تخف أن يزول حتى يزولا

- **Metonymy**

Constant dropping wears away a stone.

(Lit.) التقطر المتواصل يبلي الحجر

ومعظم النار من مستصغر الشرر

أن العصا من العصية

- **Metaphor**

Every cloud has a silver lining.

(Lit.) لكل سحابة بطانة من فضة

- **Simile**

Like father, like son.

(Lit.) الولد صورة أبيه

إن هذا الشبل من هذا الأسد

None are so blind as those who will not see.

(Lit.) ليس أحد أعمى من أولئك الذين لا يريدون أن يبصروا

6. Conclusions and Suggestions

Generally speaking, the difficulty in guessing correctly the meaning of proverbs lies in the fact that there is usually no association between the original meaning of the individual words and the intended (cultural)

meaning of the proverb. And even if someone is aware of the form or structure of proverbs, their meanings remain ambiguous and unpredictable, since their constituent elements do not serve as indicators of the meaning. Undoubtedly, the case with proverbial idioms is less severe than that of phrasal and lexemic idioms. For instance, one may easily identify the meaning of 'to give someone the green light' as 'go ahead'. However, the case is relatively different with proverbs proper. Proverbs can be usually predicted though not heard before in any context. This indicates, to an extent, the universal value of proverbs.

There are many interesting areas in proverbs, which are still in need to be studied thoroughly in order to enrich the field of semantics in Arabic: Rhetorical images in proverbs; Sense relations in proverbs; Boundaries between idioms, sayings and proverbs; Proverbial idioms and context, etc.

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ملخص

المعنى الایحائي في الامثال الانجليزية ومكافئاتها العربية

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أن لجميع المعاني احياءات على نحو او اخر. لكن لكون الاحياءات نتاج مواقف حياتية معينة تؤثر التفاعلات في مواقف اجتماعية حقيقية، فان مقدرة القارئ (أو السامع) على التأويل والتفسير تعتمد على قابليته الادراكية في فهم العالم من حوله اضافة الى مهاده الحضاري والاجتماعي الذي يشتمل على مختلف المعتقدات والمواقف والخبرات والقيم وغيرها في اللغة الام واللغة الهدف. وان قلة المعرفة بشأن هذه الحقائق تسبب مشكلات كبيرة في عملية التواصل وبضمنها الترجمة، هذا أن لم نقل أخفاقا او فشلا كاملا.

تفترض هذه الدراسة، بناء على ما ورد اعلاه، ما يلي: كلما كان مهاد المترجم المعرفي اكثر تنوعا واتساعا كلما كانت قابليته للاستيعاب ومن ثم عملية الترجمة الى اللغة الهدف اكبر. وتخلص الدراسة الى أن الجوانب البراغماطيقية للغة اضافة الى السياقات التي تستخدم فيها الامثال تكشف عن معان ايحائية مختلفة لامثال على هذه الشاكلة. كما ان الصعوبة والاشكال في ترجمة الامثال يكمنان في التعقيد الذي يكتنف المفاهيم التي تعبر عنها (او المراد نقلها من خلالها)، فان كانت هذه المفاهيم معقدة، لن يكون تأويلها ممكنا الا بالاعتماد على البعد الحضاري والثقافي لها وبالعكس.

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