❈ Understanding Proverbs Cross-Culturally in Light of Framing Theory ❈

فهم الأمثال عبر الثقافات في ضوء نظرية التأطير

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الكلمات المفتاحيّة: نظرية التأطير ، الأمثال ، الخلفية المعرفية ، المعنى.

Registered   مسجلة في

ROAD

مفهرسة في
Indexed IASJ

مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية 2021 المجلد 11/ الجزء 1

Understanding Proverbs Cross-Culturally in Light of Framing Theory

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed light on how some proverbial utterances are understood on the light of framing theory. Proverbs can be considered to be a summery to human experiences or a short story. They can be about anything, although they are ordinarily about human concerns. This inclination might be shared by the different cultures around the world. They are also meant to eternalize the memory of a person – in a positive or negative way – as said in Arabic *braver than Antarah*. The former is to be praised, and the latter is to be memorized. Or as in saying *more coweredly than Isma'iel Yaseen*. Although he is one of the renowned comedians, his roles were merited with fear and cowardice. Proverbs-making is an art that only creative people can

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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master. Just as drawing relies on symbolism to express an idea, so the proverb summarizes a story or an incidence in a creative way that has significance and implicature. The study will explore the reasons that the same notion can be found in different cultures; however, different utterances and/or expressions are to be used to convey the same notion in the different communities. Examples are chosen from English and Arabic. Proverbs are to be discussed from the perspective of framing theory which is as a branch of cognitive linguistics that deals with the way people perceive the surrounding. The first who connected the interpretation of schemata to cultural systems and beliefs through the framing theory is said to be Erving Goffman (1974).

نبذة مختصرة

ان الهدف من هذا البحث هو إلقاء الضوء على كيفية فهم بعض الأقوال المأثورة في ضوء نظرية التأطير، حيث يمكن اعتبار الأمثال ملخصًا للتجارب البشرية أو لقصة قصيرة. يمكن أن تدور الأمثال حول أي شيء ، على الرغم من أنها تتعلق عادة بشؤون الإنسان. قد تكون هذه النزعة مشتركة بين الثقافات المختلفة حول العالم. كما أنها تهدف أيضًا إلى تخليد ذكرى الشخص – بطريقة إيجابية أو سلبية – كما قيل باللغة العربية *أشجع من عنترة*. حيث يتوجب الثناء على الأول ، وتخليد ذكرى الآخر. أو كما في قول انه *أجبن من إسماعيل ياسين*. فعلى الرغم من كونه أحد الممثلين الكوميديين المشهورين ، إلا أن أدواره كانت تتسم بالخوف والجبن. ان صنع الأمثال هو فن لا يستطيع إتقانه سوى المبدعين. مثلما يعتمد الرسم على الرمزية للتعبير عن فكرة ، كذلك يلخص المثل قصة أو حدث بطريقة إبداعية لها مغزى وايحاء. سوف تستكشف الدراسة أسباب وجود نفس الفكرة في ثقافات مختلفة؛ ومع ذلك ، يجب استخدام أقوال و / أو تعبيرات مختلفة لنقل نفس الفكرة في المجتمعات المختلفة. يتم اختيار الأمثلة من اللغة الإنجليزية والعربية. ستُناقش الأمثال من منظور نظرية التأطير التي هي فرع من علم اللغة الادراكي او المعرفي والتي تتعامل مع الطريقة التي يدرك بها الناس ما يحيط بهم. يُقال إن أول من ربط تفسير الخرائط الذهنية بالنظم والمعتقدات الثقافية من خلال نظرية التأطير هو إرفينج غوفمان عام (1974).

1.Introduction

The meaning of a word can only be understood against a background frame of experiences, beliefs, or practices that 'motivate the

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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concept that the word encodes'. We all, from time to time, face forms, terms, or linguistic expressions which we find difficult to understand unless we conceptualize the relationship between that linguistic expression and the frame where the word being used. Our understanding of the frame theory helps us understand the situation depending on our background knowledge about the different connotations of the same expression in the different domains behind the word definition in the dictionary. After understanding the *Frame Theory*, we will apply it on the understanding of some of proverbial utterances cross-culturally. Charles Fillmore is said to be the first theorist behind the development of what is, sometimes, called *Frame Semantics*. His work is driven by the conviction that semantic theory must be linked directly to people's comprehension process, that is, to how we understand texts in contexts, how people apply their lexical knowledge in interpreting and producing real discourse. This implies finding ways of integrating information about a word's meaning and grammatical properties both with information about related words and with cultural knowledge about the world (Goddard, 1998).

The better understanding of the frame theory cognitively is best shown through examples. Let's say we hear some linguistic expression like: *He has a broken disc.* It is not easy to understand directly what is meant exactly by this sentence without knowing the frame where the word *disc* was broken. It could refer to a compact disc if the frame was the multimedia, or it may refer to one of the parts of the breaks of the vehicle if the frame was cars maintenance, or it means the cutting part of an electric saw, or even it may refer to one of the connecting parts of the backbone vertebras if the frame was medicine. So, without the knowledge about the frame, it is hard to construe the real or the intended meaning of the said sentence.

Another example is: *There is an apache in the apache.* The expression *apache* requires immediate cognitive activity to look for the frames where such a word normally appears in. There are at least three

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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frames where this word can be used and it refers to something different at each frame. The apache can be a member of an American-Indian tribe, or a helicopter model, or a car model. The understanding of the different frames determines specific conceptualization of the situation.

The frame isn't itself what is generally thought of as "the meaning" of a word but it is nevertheless crucial for understanding it. A good understanding of a word requires a significant amount of knowledge that extends well beyond the dictionary definition. This background knowledge is referred to as the 'frame' (Lee, 2001, p. 8).

However, the understanding of the different frames is different cross-culturally. In every culture there are different frames, different categorizations, and different metaphoric expressions. In the Middle-eastern cultures, people tend to give names of animals to cars and cell-phones models according to the way they either conceptualize similarities between the product and the animal or give more cultural outfit to everything they are in contact with. They use dolphin, duck, rabbit, bear, bull, sheep, and hawk. Or sometimes they give cars celebrity names as they imagine them as dear as the celebrity and try to pamper them. They conceptualize a kind of connection between the products and animates. Consequently, the notion of frame has both a conceptual and a cultural dimension. In principle, everything that the speaker knows about the word is a potential part of the frame for a particular term even though some aspects of that knowledge-base are more immediately relevant to a particular term than others.
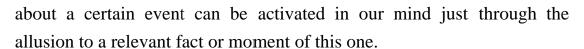
2.Proverbs in Framing Theory

After this detailed crucial introduction about *framing theory*, it is time to move forward to our main subject about the understanding of proverb frames cross-culturally. Cognitively speaking, proverbs are mentally economical, since from one particular situation presented in them many other situations can be understood. Besides, a whole scene

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ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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about a certain event can be activated in our mind just through the allusion to a relevant fact or moment of this one.

The proverb is a complex, intriguing, and important verbal entity. It has been the subject of a vast number of opinions, studies, and analyses. To handle this deluge, seven views about proverbs have been defined: personal, formal, religious, literary, practical, cultural, and cognitive. Our concern here is the cognitive approach. The essence of this view is that there are universal principles that bring about proverb reasoning, regardless of the entities that use proverbs (Honeck, 1997). Proverbs are always a result of social, cultural, and political values. They are understood in relation to a background of assumptions and values, so they are primarily a social phenomenon. Frame (background knowledge) is essential for their correct interpretation.

"What is universal about proverbs is the cognition mechanisms speakers use in order to produce, understand, and transmit them" (Moreno, 2005, p. 45). Cross-culturally we conceptualize different metaphorical schemas that show how we conceive the frame when we use animals and how we apply this folk knowledge to the construction of schemas. Thus, we can understand people in terms of lower-order forms of being or even understand these lower-order forms in terms of human attributes and behaviors. "According to people, the domain of animal life is one of the most elaborate ones which we use to understand the human domain. This is important for proverb analysis and interpretation. People present some common propositions that take place in schemas for animals cross-culturally" (Moreno, 2005, p. 45).

Below are the different frames correlated to each animal adapted from (Lakoff & Turner, 1989) in line with selected Arabic counterparts.

➢En. Pigs are dirty, messy, and rude.

➢Ar. Pigs are dirty, villain, and mean.

➢En, lions are courageous and noble.

➢Ar. Lions are courageous, proud, and noble.

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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➢En. Foxes are clever.

➢Ar. Foxes are clever and cunning.

➢En. Dogs are loyal, dependable, and dependent.

➢Ar. Dogs are loyal and dependent.

➢En. Wolves are cruel and murderous.

➢Ar. Wolves are courageous and grab opportunities.

The examples above and the mild differences between their conceptualization show that the folk knowledge behind these frames is natural and universal. But that deep rooted knowledge is subject to possible change based on the background knowledge shared at the same culture which is different or similar to any other knowledge at other cultures.

Proverbs can be about anything, although they are ordinarily about human concerns. Sometimes people around the world share the same knowledge about the frames where proverbs are to be used. The 'cat' when comes to describe a female can be understood at many cultures as being *hot*. On the other hand, malicious female can be better conceptualized as a 'dragon' in some cultures and as a 'snake' in other cultures. In every culture people analyze the input from the surrounding in different ways. *A wet man fears no rain* is a proverb mostly produced and understood by many Asian, middle-eastern, and Mediterranean cultures. It is said to describe a person when he/she is taking risks while he/she has already been indulged in the risk. The image schema they conceptualize about being wet doesn't add to the risk of being wet again because of the rain. Moreno (2005) states that "This is what makes many proverbs coincide, if not in the perspective or in the form, at least in the message along different cultures in the world" (p. 46). Hatch and Brown (1995) have persuasively claimed that although we think proverbs are connected to cultures, a lot of equivalents are found across cultures. But even we do not have the same proverbs; we can interpret them if we

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ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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encounter them for the first time because of their underlying mental mechanisms.
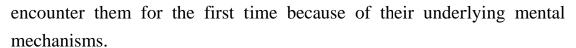
Let's have a look at some of the proverbs that are picked from English and their counterparts in Arabic and see why people decide to pick different linguistic forms to express the same situation or to convey the same connotation.

➢En. Add fuel to fire.

➢Ar. Add water to mud.

Both of the proverbs express the fact that someone's intervention or participation is making things worse or more difficult. But what caused the choice of those forms in the speaker's mind in each culture is something different. Arab civilization is more ancient than the western in terms that, at that time, they hadn't had come across fuel as their life was simply built on nature. They lacked the oil industry and they conceptualized the worst thing that may happen when it rains and everything becomes muddy. On the other hand, the western world is more sophisticated and has everything built on materials. They have fuel as a prominent part of their life, and their houses are made of wood, and the worst thing might happen when there is a fire that someone adds fuel to it instead of water. Hence, each proverb has a frame that fits into the speaker's mind and better explains the significance of the proverb. The effect of industry and materialistic world is obvious in many English proverbs, while the simple forms of life determine the framing of Arabic proverbs.

➢En. Every medal has its own reverse.

➢Ar. Every flower has its own thrones.

Nature and its simple but expressive entities determine, to some extent, the way people think (about the proverb and its significance to their everyday life). However, we see the influence of the new world on the thinking of the people who are concerned with competitiveness and

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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how big victory requires accepting to give sacrifices. The proverb conjures that the big victory needs painful tolerance, persistence, and sacrifice.

➢En. Every tide has its ebb.

➢Ar. Every horse has its stumble.

Once again we experience the effect of the surrounding on the way people conceptualize the world. Arabia and heroism thousand years ago influenced the way they think that everyone or everything whatever it is has its own misfortune someday. The desert doesn't imply that influence with the sea and tide simply because there is no sea at the desert.

With reference to what was discussed above, the notion of frame has both conceptual and cultural dimension, i.e., some words have shared frames around the world, others have different frames, and sometimes there is no significance to that word in some place on this planet. The word *graduation* might be conceptualized similarly all over the world. Its understanding involves knowledge that a student graduates from a college or a school and gets his/her certificate. This could be the conceptual knowledge of that term, but that knowledge overlaid with other aspects of knowledge that are also part of the frame. That means that the concept of the frame embraces the traditional concept of *connotation* (Lee, 2001). For many people the word *graduation* conjures up pleasant images of relaxation after hard times, the end of all tests, researches, assignments, presentations, and stress. Also, it evokes sports, and enjoying oneself the victory. Other example is *Christmas*; some people think about it as the start of the new year. Other people consider it the time for celebration and exchanging presents. The third example is the *thanksgiving* or the *Easter*. They are completely reserved by the western world. They do not have any significance or lack the frame in many other cultures.

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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3.Conclusion

In a frame-oriented approach, however, knowledge frames are different depending on the individual life experiences (including growing up in a particular culture). The concept of 'frame' suggests that meaning is not an asset that belongs to expressions but it is the product of interaction between an utterance and a person's experience, culture, and knowledge base.

In the end, what is essential in this research is that the same phenomenon is sometimes referred to by different words when it is located in different frames culturally and cross-culturally. Instead of thinking of proverbs in terms of 'concepts', it is better to think of them as tools that cause listeners to activate certain areas of their knowledge base, with different areas activated to different degrees in different contexts.

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Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies :2021 Volume: 11 Issue :1
ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)   (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)

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