Polysemy in English and Arabic Proverbs of Life: A Contrastive Stylistic Study

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Abstract

This paper considers the significance of polysemy as a stylistic device in English and Arabic proverbs of life. It aims to show how proverbial words or phrases are choosen with two or more interpretations to enhance the depth and richness of language, allowing multiple layers of meanings, and reinforcing the stylistic and didactic power of the proverbs. So, to analyse the data and achieve the aims, the study follows Jeffries and McIntyre's (2010) model as far as polysemy is concerned. The analysis comes up with some results and conclusions that prove the post.

Keywords: *Polysemy, Proverbs, Stylistics, Contrastive Stylistics*

1. Introduction

Proverbs are traditional sayings offering advice, wisdom, or truth shortly. The wisdom of proverbs guides people in their social interaction throughout the world crossing all cultural boundaries for years ago and until now. Proverbs contain everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or even written communication (Speake, 2004, p.1).

It means that proverbs exhibit a unique style characterised by the rich use of stylistic devices to convey persuasive meanings and lessons. Thus, studying the stylistic devices of English and Arabic proverbs is crucial as it provides insights into the devices and nuances embedded within these expressions. The analysis of stylistic devices in proverbs, such as sentence structure, word choice, and figurative language, allows for a deeper understanding of how language is utilised and how meanings are conveyed (Mieder, 2004, p. 4). Taking into account the aim of the study, it hypothesises that semantically, English and Arabic proverbs exploit polysemy to capture the attention of the recipients and persuade them.

2. Proverbs Value

English proverbs have numerous applications in different fields of life. For instance, slogans, travel directions, and advertisements often contain whole phrases from proverbs. Besides, proverbs can be components of larger texts and have an interactive purpose with them. To explain more, they summarise a story or make an

evaluative comment (with a didactic tendency) on the immediate situation. Therefore, in both cases, as either a discrete text or a part of a text, proverbs are interesting to study (Norrick, 1985, p.5-12).

ملحم (2017, p. 39-40) explores that the importance of proverbs is evident in their unaltered nature despite the passage of time; they, often, maintain their purity. They travel through the ages with vitality, carrying with them the marks of each era, expressing them sincerely, and transmitting their effects to others without distortion. As for the second dimension, it represents an active role in people's lives. Proverbs are used to condense practical experiences. Proverbs' nature and meanings of wisdom form the relations and experiences between human nations.

3. Proverbs Linguistic Features

Proverbs' unique forms often exhibit metaphoric nature, rustic imagery, and prosodic patterns, which are stylistically significant. Thus, they are worth considering since these aspects serve as the basic tools for the memorability of a proverb and consequently for its survival (Norrick, 1985, P.5-12).

العسكري (1988, p.10) illustrates that proverbs encapsulate the heritage, experiences, and values of communities, reinforcing their expressive power through simplicity, precision, and aesthetic qualities**.** He asserts that proverbs reflect the richness of expression and thought, highlighting their ability to convey profound meanings succinctly. Additionally, proverbs promote linguistic richness through unique sound features, cohesion, lexical expressions, and memorable structures, enhancing their significance within various contexts.

4. Proverbs: A Stylistic Perspective

According to Nørgaard et al. (2010, p.1), stylistics is the study of how language creates meaning in both literary and other sorts of texts. To this end, stylisticians use linguistic models, theories, and frameworks as their analytical tools to describe and explain how and why a text works as it does, and how humans come from the words on the page to their meaning. The phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and /or discourse components of texts, as well as, the cognitive processes involved in the reader's processing of those characteristics, are usually the focus of the stylistic analysis, which can be qualitative or quantitative.

حمداوي (2015, p.8) clarifies "stylistics" as the scientific study of style in its various manifestations, including phonetic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects. It focuses on exploring the devices of both literary and non-literary styles and identifying their distinctive features. It extracts the aesthetic components and demonstrates the effects of the text on the recipient mentally, emotionally, and physically.

5. Polysemy

Examining how a single expression conveys various interpretations based on the context and metaphorical structures, polysemy reflects the multifaceted nature of language. This device is, particularly, significant in understanding how the word functions within different linguistic frameworks. It, also, arouses the recipient's interest in figuring out its intended meaning. It is a lexical item that has a range of different meanings (Crystal, 2008, p.373).

Blank (1999, p.11) goes further to assume polysemy not only as a feature or a word but also of a phrase. To him, polysemous word or a phrase is a one that has different, but related senses. Although

Cruse (2000, p.68) agrees with Blank that "polysemous" can be a feature of a phrase, he exceeds further to claim that polysemous words can have less predictable connections between its different senses. He referred to such polysemy as irregular polysemy. For example, metaphorical polysemy occurs when one sense of a polysemous word has a more literal interpretation and the other has a more figurative interpretation.

Similarly, مكرم (2009 p.9) points out that polysemy is a single word that possesses various related meanings, and often the correct meaning arises from contextual use. مصطفى (2022, p.1) explains that polysemy can be described as a term that has either one general meaning that is shared by a group of words, or two or more meanings that are far from each other or literal and figurative meanings at the same time.

6. The Model of the Study

The current study depends on Jeffries & McIntyre (2010), as a model, to achieve the aim of the study. The study adopts polysemy at the semantic level from Jeffries & McIntyre (2010) model.

7. Data Description

Proverbs are found in all languages regardless of their cultural background, rural or civilised, primitive or advanced. Thus, considerable attention is given to proverbs. For the current study, ten proverbs are extracted from a variety of English and Arabic books on proverbs.

In terms of life, many proverbs try to tackle life from its both positive and negative sides in a way that helps its recipients accept it in all its good and bad. As life is the lord-given gift and a part of His divine grace. Thus, the selected proverbs are choosen to explain human life, focusing on how the significance of life lies in its meaning, derived from creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. For Yongqiong (2015, p.102), life mirrors cultural values, societal attitudes, and ethical principles, leading to understanding life experiences across generations.

8. Data Collection

The selected data of the study are gathered from different sources, whether in English or Arabic, for enrichment. English proverbs rely on books written on proverbs, such as those of Collis, H., & Risso, M. (1992), Simpson, D., and Speake J. (1998), and Stone, J. R. (2006). In contrast, Arabic proverbs rely on صيني (1992) and خلايلي (1998).

To be more specific, English and Arabic proverbs are collected for the period from 1992 to 2006. Such a coverage of time is significant for capturing the development of language in diverse circumstances. Also, it demonstrates how proverbs maintain their traditional roots while addressing modern concerns, making them an essential tool for communication. These books, whether English or Arabic, provide lists of proverbs categorised in various ways. Therefore, the selected proverbs of life follow the categorisation of proverbs in their original resources.

9. Research Design

Research design, for Kothari (2004, p.32), is an essential part of the research project. It examines the feasibility of the research project and describes the strategy for gathering and analysing data so that a conclusion may be drawn. This paper focuses on a qualitative method that has to do with quality or kind.

10. Data Analysis

10.1 Stylistic Analysis of English Proverbs of Life:

Proverb 1

"What must be must be" *(Simpson & Speake, 1998, p.226)*

The Analysis

This proverb captures the acceptance of one's fate and the inevitable nature of some events in life. It implies that certain things happen in life that are unavoidable. Sometimes, no matter how much people work to alter the circumstances, the results stay the same. The proverb highlights the interaction between determinism and individual's plans and encourages critical thought on how people and/or even cultures negotiate life's complexities; though it suggests a passive acceptance of fate.

In this proverb, polysemy arises from the different possible interpretations of the word "must". "Must" can convey the idea of something inevitable. In this sense, the proverb suggests that certain events or outcomes are destined to happen, regardless of one's intentions or deeds. It expresses a sense of fatalism or acceptance of fate, referring to necessity or inevitability. On the other hand, "must" can suggest a sense of responsibility or obligation, when something needs to be done because it is expected or necessary, reflecting a requirement or obligation. In this instance, the proverb may describe carrying out duties or tasks regardless of one's sentiments.

Proverb 2.

"You Never Know What You can Do Till You Try" *(Stone, 2006, p.109)*

The Analysis

The proverb comprises the essence of experiential learning and self-discovery in daily life. It suggests that potential abilities and strengths often remain undiscovered until one engages in new experiences in life**.** It supports the notion that one's capabilities may be unknown until they are tested through action**.** It encourages the recipients to go through the situations that challenge them bravely.

This proverb uses polysemy as the semantic device, where it conveys multiple related meanings concerning the context. The proverb exhorts people to try new things because it implies that potential skills are frequently unknown until they are put to use. This supports the idea that polysemy's multiple meanings may influence behaviour. Whereas the verb *"try"* refers to both effort and experimentation and has a variety of personal and situational implications. Besides, the verb *"know"* suggests both self-awareness and outside approval.

Proverb3.

"By the Yard, Life is Hard; By the Inch, it's a Cinch" *(Stone, 2006, p.259)*

The Analysis

This proverb embodies the idea that tackling life's challenges in smaller, manageable portions lead to greater success and ease whereas the reverse is too harmful. Then, the broader understanding of proverbs can be taken as a tool for conveying life lessons and moral values. It emphasises the ease of taking small steps over large ones, reflecting the value of gradual progress that can encourage the individuals to go on over the frustration that they may face if consider the difficulty of taking large steps.

Polysemy as a semantic stylistic device in the proverb arises from the multiple meanings or interpretations of certain keywords. Both literally (a unit of length) and figuratively (the scale of life's obstacles), *"yard"* can be used. Similarly, *"inch"* is used to denote a small, manageable unit of measurement. It implies that overcoming obstacles in life becomes simpler when they are divided into smaller, more manageable steps, each represented by an inch. In this proverb, the term *"cinch"* refers to something simple or assured, but it can also signify something that is tightly secured.

Proverb 4.

"You have to Take the Good with the Bad" *(Collis, 1992, p.96)*

The Analysis

The proverb indicates the idea of accepting both positive and negative aspects of life. This duality is reflected in various everyday situations. It suggests that people, frequently, engage in compensating behaviour, weighing good deeds against harmful deeds, especially in environmental circumstances. In a broader sense, it is about realising that both happiness and adversity are a part of the same path, embracing them can lead to a more fulfilling and mature perspective on life.

polysemy, the phenomenon where a single word or phrase carries two or more related meanings, serves as a significant stylistic device in the proverb as *"bad"* refers to negative emotions, outcomes, challenges, or circumstances (e.g., pain, failure, loss) or unpleasant events and unfortunate aspects of life. Whereas *"good"* relates to the pleasant or desirable parts, favorable encounters, results, or attributes, and the good aspects of life (e.g., happiness, success, health). This idea highlights how different experiences are intertwined and that one cannot exist without the other. Because of this interpretive flexibility, the proverb can be applied to a wide range of circumstances and has greater applicability in diverse contexts.

Proverb 5.

"Art is long and life is short " *(Speake, 1997, p.30)*

The Analysis

This proverb can be seen as a reflection of the interplay between human life's transitory nature and human creativity's enduring nature. It illustrates the paradox that although people may not live long, their artistic contributions may endure for a very long time. In essence, it highlights the difference between the brevity of human existence and the permanence of artistic accomplishments, urging people to appreciate the lasting influence of art while acknowledging the limited nature of time.

Polysemy refers to a word or phrase having related meanings. The word *"long"* is polysemous in the proverb: it can refer both to time (something that lasts a long time) and to the notion that something is valuable, enduring, lasting, or transcending temporal limits. Similarly, *"short"* also has different interpretations. It may allude to how short life is in terms of time, but it can also mean that one does not have the opportunity to do all of the things one may want to do in life.

10.2 Stylistic Analysis of Arabic Proverbs of Life:
Proverb 1

"لا يأس مع الحياة، ولا حياة مع اليأس" *la yeas mae alhayat, wala hayat mae* (خلايلي, 1998, p.253)

"There is no Despair with Life and no Life with Despair"

The Analysis

This proverb highlights the value of having an optimistic mindset despite difficult circumstances and captures a profound philosophical perspective on perseverance and hope. This proverb, which is mirrored in many cultures, illustrates the fundamental relationship between hope and life, implying that despair contradicts the purpose of life.

The proverb embodies polysemy twice as a semantic stylistic device, illustrating the interplay of multiple meanings within its structure. (الحياة)*Life* denotes not only existence but also vitality, hope, and potential. It signifies different states of being, such as happiness or difficulty. (اليأس)*Despair* expresses meanings of hopelessness and failure, yet also suggests a transitory state that can be overcome, indicating a flexible interpretation. The proverb's duality emphasises how meaning is shaped by context, enabling a wide range of interpretations that are relevant to various experiences.

Proverb 2

" الدنيا غرور حائل، وَزُخْرُفَ زائل، وظل آفل"

aldunya ghurur hail, wazukhruf zail, wazulun afil (خلايلي, 1998, p.253)

"The World is a Deceptive Barrier, and its Adornments are fleeting, and its Shade is Temporary"

The Analysis

This proverb encapsulates a profound philosophical reflection on the transient nature of worldly life and its illusions. It indicates that even comfort and security are not permanent, encouraging people to look for longer-lasting sources of fulfillment. The proverb underscores the transient nature of material possessions and beauty, echoing sentiments found in various cultural proverbs that warn against valuing the temporary over the eternal.

The proverb embodies polysemy three times, demonstrating the intricacy of the meanings attached to its core phrases. Understanding polysemy—a word with several connected meanings—enhances one's perception of the proverb. The word"غرور" encompasses "deception" as well as "illusion," indicating the fleeting nature of worldly life pursuits. The word "زخرف" is understood as "decoration" or "ornamentation," it symbolises ephemeral beauty that eventually vanishes. "ظل"shadow" alludes to safety or the transient aspect of life، implying that even shadows pass away.

Proverb 3

"ان الحياة عقيدة وجهاد" *in alhayaat aqidatun wajihad* (صيني واخرون 1992, p.14)

"Life is a Belief and a Struggle"

The Analysis

The proverb outlines life as a process involving both faith and effort. The relationship between belief systems and actively pursuing one's values is shown by this analysis. Belief is more than just accepting something; it is about actively participating in and adhering to values that help define one's identity and purpose. The

struggle has mental and spiritual components as well as physical ones, reflecting the comprehensive nature of human experience in life.

The proverb exemplifies polysemy where words have multiple interpretations depending on context. This proverb provides complex ideas about life, faith, and effort, illustrating how polysemy enriches language. (عقيدة)*Belief* can represent ideology, faith, or conviction, indicating both individual and group ideals. (جهاد) *Struggle* is frequently understood to mean a physical struggle and it refers to moral or spiritual difficulties, highlighting perseverance and commitment.

Proverb 4

" طعم الدواء مر، إلا أن فيه شفاء" *taem aldawa' maru, 'iilaa 'ana fih shifa'un* (صيني واخرون, 1992, p.16)

"The Taste of Medicine is Bitter, but it Brings Healing"

The Analysis

This proverb captures the idea that bad experiences can lead to beneficial outcomes in daily life. It emphasises how experiences are dual—immediate unpleasantness has long-term advantages. This is consistent with the idea that meaning is frequently context-sensitive, as the interpretation of experiences varies based on individual circumstances in life. Additionally, the proverb encourages patience and strength when facing problems in daily life, since they frequently offer hidden rewards.

The proverb illustrates polysemy where words carry layered meanings through their structures. The word "مر" (bitter) has two meanings: it refers to the bad taste of medicine as well as the struggles one faces while trying to heal. It also stands for any difficult or painful experience that one must go through in order to profit in the end. Considering the variety of human experiences in life, the word "فيه شفاء" (it brings healing) suggests a more expansive understanding of pain resulting in growth or improvements. On a figurative level, it also represents comfort, harmony, or reprieve from life's difficulties.

Proverb 5

"العيش في الدنيا جهاد دائم" *alaysh fi aldunya jihadun daimun* (صيني واخرون, p.15)

"Living in this World is a Constant Struggle"

The Analysis

This proverb encapsulates the essence of human existence as a continuous battle against life's obstacles. It aligns with the idea that life is inherently filled with trials. The proverb emphasises the inevitable nature of difficulties but it also encourages contemplation on the opportunities for development and resilience that result from confronting difficulties in life. Its dual nature deepens its meaning and serves as a moving illustration of the human condition.

The proverb exemplifies polysemy twice where the terms "العيش" (living) and "جهاد" (struggle) convey multiple meanings. The word"عيش" is used to describe the state of being alive, the quality of life, or a more comprehensive philosophical idea of living well that encompasses several facets of the human experience. Polysemy in the word "جهاد" (Struggle) The proverb's meaning is improved by considering the possibility of moral or spiritual striving besides the typical sense of physical struggle or effort.

This multiplicity allows for interpretations and makes it possible to go from a literal survival viewpoint to an existential understanding of life.

11. Conclusion

English as well as Arabic proverbs make use of polysemy as common stylistic devices. However, its interaction with the linguistic structure differs. Each language has distinct linguistic manifestations of this device. English proverbs operate it at the lexical level, exploring multiple meaning of individual words for concise expression. By contrast, Arabic Proverbs link polysemy intricately not only to the lexical level, but also to the morphological level. The rich morphology and syntactic flexibility of the Arabic language permit to layered meanings woven into the structure of the proverb. Such a difference has a counterpart similarity, whereby both languages employ polysemy, particularly in proverbs, to condense meaning, achieve economy of expression, and enhance memorability. Future studies could illuminate stylistic profiles through focusing on the distribution of Polysemy types within each language proverbs .Finally, understanding how polysemy is used differently in English and Arabic proverbs is crucial for learners as well as translators to get the nuances of meaning in both languages.

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المستخلص

تناول هذه الدراسة أهمية المشترك اللفظي كوسيلة اسلوبية في الأمثال الإنجليزية والعربية. تهدف إلى إظهار كيف يتم اختيار الكلمات أو العبارات مع تفسيرين أو أكثر لتعزيز عمق وغنى اللغة، مما يسمح بتعدد طبقات المعاني، ويعزز القوة البلاغية والتعليمية للأمثال. لذلك، من أجل تحليل البيانات وتحقيق الأهداف، تتبع الدراسة نموذج جيفريز وماكنتاير (2010) فيما يتعلق بالمشترك اللفظي. وتخرج التحليلات ببعض النتائج والاستنتاجات التي تثبت الموضوع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المشترك اللفظي، الأمثال، الاسلوبية، الاسلوبية المقارنة.