

## Animal Proverbs in Jordanian Popular Culture: A Thematic and Translational Analysis

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### Abstract:

The present paper deals with a corpus of 70 animal proverbs in Jordanian/Arab popular culture. It shows that these proverbs have touched on a wide variety of motifs in most walks of life, a fact which is attributed to the key role animals have played in Arab nomadic lifestyle from medieval ages up to present time. That is why utterances involving reference to animals have soon acquired proverbial status and a wide metaphorical application. In terms of translation, animal proverbs seem to be able to travel into English supported by annotation and/or relevant contexts in different text types. In particular, the process of intercultural transfer is largely enhanced by accessing familiar proverbial templates in the target language.

### Background

De Saussure (1916/1983) views languages as systems of *signs*, which establish their own meaning through relationships with each other. The overall meaning of a sign is primarily determined by its function within the language system, as well as by its relationship with other signs inside or outside the system. Having a unitary meaning, proverbs, just like lexemes, semiotically function as signs connecting the *signifier* to the *signified*, a relationship mediated by the *interpretant*, which enables us to make sense of the sign. For example, the Jordanian proverb *اللي بده يصير جمال بده يوسع باب داره* (He who wants to be a camel owner must enlarge his gate), which the interpretant must have assigned a literal meaning at the time it came around, has over the years developed a wide metaphorical application and is only seldom used in its original sense, which reflects a valid observation, given the size of the gate in relation to the size of the camel. Thus, it is now cited in response to a person's complaints about shouldering lots of responsibility by undertaking some human affair in order to show that taking up a big/challenging task entails a person's willingness to suffer and sacrifice. Therefore, the interpretant has forsaken the proverb's literal import in favor of

a widely applied metaphorical one.

The Arabic proverb that best unravels the philosophy of proverbial wisdom and experience is *لكل مقام مقال* "For every situation, there is a saying", which roughly communicates a motif similar to that of the English proverb "Circumstances alter cases". It is, therefore, wise to have two or more contradictory proverbs, simply because they are required by different situations. For example, *الحلوة بطلع الحية من جحرها* "Sweet speech can make a snake come out of its hole" and *الحية عمرها ما بتصير خية* "A snake will never be a sister" are cited for contradictory themes, viz. kindness vs. enmity, by employing the same animal metaphorically. In the first case, it is possible for a person to befriend a snake through the use of kind behavior; whereas, in the second case, it is impossible for a snake to become a friend. Therefore, it is the context that legitimates the existence of counter proverbs.

In terms of language production and meaning-making in communication, proverbs, like idiomatic expressions, are a paradigm example of set phraseologies. They are readily recognized as having unitary meaning which follow the *idiom principle* rather than the *open principle* (Sinclair 1991). However, besides emotiveness, which is

the main function of idiomatic expressions in discourse, proverbs transmit collective human wisdom and experience. For example, the idiomatic expression “(He) works like a donkey” (حمار شغل) merely expresses the negative proposition that “A person works too much” emotively without communicating human wisdom or experience. By contrast, the proverb “He who does not know the falcon will grill it” (اللي ما يعرف الصقر بشويه) metaphorically communicates the wise message that a person should study his adversary very well before engaging with any ventures with him. Therefore, the virtual dividing line between an idiomatic expression and a proverb has to do with the function it performs in the course of human communication.

One should note that metaphoring, whether original or latent, lies at the heart of creating and using proverbs in human communication. Metaphors are figures of speech in which comparisons are usually brought up between two concepts/entities by the producer in an unusual way to attract the receiver’s attention and have him conceptualize ideas more clearly and vividly. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors underlie the human conceptual system where there is a systematic mapping of two conceptual domains: source and target, the first of which is interpreted in terms of the second. To create metaphors, therefore, there must be a cognitive relationship (an area of cognitive correspondence/Grice, 1975) between the entity or concept from which we borrow and the entity or concept to which we borrow. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Schaffner (2004: 1257-1258) explains “metaphors are not just decorative elements, but rather, basic resources for thought processes in human society”.

In the area of proverbs, the metaphorical use may come from the original lexicalization of the proverb or as a latent metaphorical application of a literal utterance. In the former case, proverbs originate as conceptual metaphors that are later proverbialized, i.e. become proverbial expressions, the way scores of conceptual metaphors get idiomatized in a language. For example, the Jordanian proverb “He who is not jealous (of others) is a donkey” (اللي ما يغار حمار) is originally based on mapping an attribute of a target domain (a donkey) onto a source domain (a human being).

To explain, the alleged attribute that a donkey does not show jealousy of other donkeys that are doing better than them is mapped onto a person who is not jealous of people who are more competent than them in different human affairs.

In the latter case, the proverb may express a truth or an observation literally, but it gradually finds its way into metaphorical application apart from its literal, original meaning. For example, the proverb “A duck’s ducklings are good swimmers” (فرخ البط عوام) offers a general truth about ducks, has mapped ducklings’ ability to swim well by instinctively inheriting this attribute from their species onto human contexts where a child resembles one of their parents in some respect. Thus, it can be assumed that the metaphorical interpretation of literal statements that changes them into proverbs does not originate with them but is rather acquired latently over time, unlike proverbs that start out as metaphorical analogues.

After dividing proverbs into literal and metaphorical, Simpson (1982) talks about three types of proverbs. First, we have truthful proverbs that reflect objective facts in the outside world e.g. “A snake does not bite its belly” (الحيه ما بتعوض بطنها), which metaphorically communicates the idea that a person would not harm a loved one (e.g. father and son) at the end of the day. Second, observational proverbs are based on subjective observations from what happens in the outside world, e.g. “A monkey is a gazelle in its mother’s eye” (القرود بعين أمه غزال), reflects a person’s evaluation of beauty, i.e. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Third, there are proverbs that express traditional wisdom, e.g. “Choose the company of the lion even if it eats you” (رافق الأسد لو بوكلك), which metaphorically encourages us to choose the company of strong/powerful people rather than weak ones regardless of consequences.

Norricks (1985; Ntshinga 1999), however, rightly argue that most proverbs have lost their literal meanings in favor of a wide metaphorical application, which involves a standard interpretation assigned by the proverb’s speech community. Therefore, most Jordanian proverbs that cite animals draw metaphorical analogues between animals and humans to deliver various themes. For example, the interpretation of the proverb “Like knight, like horse” (الخيل من خيالها) emphasizes the

role of the agent rather than the instrument he is using has been metaphorically extended to cover all human activities, despite the fact that a literal interpretation may be maintained if the reference is to actual knight and horse. Sometimes, however, one may come across an animal proverb that only communicates its literal meaning. For example, the proverb *جنب العقرب لا تقرب وجنب الحية أفرش ونام* “Stay away from a scorpion, but spread out a blanket to sleep beside a snake” merely communicates the literal message that one should not trust a scorpion because it stings whatever comes in its way for no reason, whereas a snake would react aggressively only when it is attacked. However, it would be extremely unlikely to metaphorically apply such a contrast onto a human situation because this would involve describing someone as a snake whose negative associations are inalienable. Therefore, the proverb will only apply literally.

Within the sphere of social life, proverbs are considered the mirror through which different cultures can be viewed and judged; they represent the cumulative wisdom and experience of a nation (Simpson 1982; Norrick 1985; Mieder, 1992, 1985; Honeck 1997; Mollanazar 2001). Proverbs have both a literary value that contributes to the aesthetics of discourse, as well as a practical value which touches readily on people’s day-to-day undertakings and helps them conduct their affairs more smoothly and effectively (Honeck 1997; Moosavi 2000; Mieder 2004). In this regard, animal proverbs take the lead in Jordanian culture in particular and Arab culture in general. In terms of literary and aesthetic value, for example, describing someone being in serious trouble as *ورطة واوي بعليقه* “a fox in blackberries” far exceeds its literal counterpart. By the same token, the proverb *حصانين ما بنربطو على طواله وحده* “Two stallions should not share the same manger” not only does it express the proposition that two people should not have the same degree of authority/power in a human activity poetically, but it also offers us social advice in conducting our human affairs, in order to avoid undesirable outcomes.

The lexicalization of proverbs across languages seems to have both an intercultural and an intracultural parameter. On the one hand, the similar lexicalization of proverbs like *الطيور على أشكالها تقع* “Like birds run into each other”/“Birds of a

feather flock together” and *كل الطرق تؤدي إلى روما* “All the roads lead to Rome” in Arabic and English, among many other languages, points to an intercultural aspect of proverbs whereby the same proverb may be traced to a common origin.

On the other hand, the fact that languages also possess culture-bound features and images gives special significance to the intracultural parameter, when thematizing and lexicalizing proverbs. Apart from proverbs that have gained some universal status, proverbs may inherently acquire some culture-bound features, e.g. *الحق اليوم بدلك ع الخراب* “Follow the owl; it will lead you to ruins” reflects how Arabs consider the owl as ‘ominous’, while it is considered as a symbol of wisdom in Anglo-American cultures. Sometimes, similar topics may be worded differently to communicate contrary motifs by a pair of languages. The English proverb “No news is good news” communicates an optimistic attitude towards the state of affairs in question, whereas the Jordanian proverb *قلة الخير خير* “No news is news” delivers a pessimistic attitude towards the relevant state of affairs. Both proverbs deal with the same topic, i.e. lack of awaited news, but they adopt contrary psychologies, thus transmitting different themes.

### Thematic Analysis

A corpus of about 70 Jordanian popular proverbs which make reference to animals/birds has been collected. This sample indicates how salient the animal kingdom is in the lexicalization of Jordanian proverbs. The bulk of these proverbs concretizes abstract entities by metaphorically mapping animal attributes onto humans, e.g. the Jordanian proverb *الفص القوي على الجحش الضعيف* “The strong fart comes from the weak donkey” metaphorically maps this alleged donkey attribute onto a person who claims more authority than what they actually have in various relevant contexts. This metaphorical contrast between pretense and reality, which employs an animal referent in its portrait, may functionally reflect the motif in the English proverb “The hollow drum sounds the most” in analogous situations.

The frequent employment of animals in Jordanian proverbs in particular and Arabic proverbs in general comes as no surprise because of the key role animals, both livestock and other domestic/

wild animals, played in the nomadic lifestyle of Bedouins in the Arabian desert in the past. In fact, the bulk of their life affairs revolved around raising livestock, using pack animals for commuting, and hunting wild animals, mainly for food. The camel, for example, was named *the ship of the desert* and was key to their traveling long distances. So was the status of the horse, which functioned as a symbol of chivalry and bravery in the desert where only the fittest could survive. There is no wonder, therefore, to find many proverbs making reference to camels and horses in particular, alongside other animals in general.

Consequently, the thematic analysis of animal proverbs shows a diversity of motifs (more than 20), including moderation, competition, intelligence/stupidity, indifference, clumsiness, fear/anxiety, kinship, friendship, ignorance, beauty, compromising, religion, pretense, self-dependence, corruption, decadence, pragmatism, habits, futility, opportunism, and resemblance. The common employment of animals/birds indicates the importance of mapping features from the animal kingdom onto humans, in order to concretize abstract human attributes by calling up natural analogues and, consequently, clarify propositions and transmit proverbial wisdom and experience metaphorically. In this section, we present a contextualized number of animal proverbs (10 examples) that metaphorically communicate some salient themes in Jordanian society.

### Moderation

**One stroke on the hoof, another on the nail**  
دقه ع الحافر ودقه ع السمسمار: This proverb metaphorically refers to the act of shoeing a horse to express the moral of 'moderation'. According to this proverb, therefore, one should be moderate when undertaking various kinds of daily activity. In the upbringing of children, for instance, parents should not be too strict with their children in order for things not to fire back. For example, Abu Mohammed may tell his friend that he has forbidden his teenage boy to go out after school because of his poor achievement. This may induce Abu Mohammed's friend to say "This is wrong! You don't correct a mistake by a mistake. As they say, *one stroke on the hoof, another on the nail*, my dear friend". The English proverbs "All things in moderation and moderation

in all things" and "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" dwell on similar ideas.

### Stupidity

**The donkey attempts to reason - it farts**  
تفلسف الحمار فظطرط: This proverb is used to describe a person who talks on something without any knowledge about it or who uses bad reasoning. Ali may tell Mohammed that he sought Khalid's opinion on running for Member of Parliament and that he encouraged him and advised him to secure a good amount of money to buy votes. Mohammed comments critically "What ridiculous advice! *The donkey attempts to reason - it farts*. One can't be an MP by buying votes. You should be able to convince the voters".

### Intelligence/Competence

**A smart rooster will crow while in the egg**  
الديتتش الفصيح من البيضة بصيح: This proverb metaphorically tells us that a person's intelligence/competence is readily noticeable through the way he acts. It can be used in a wide range of contexts when reflecting on people's behavior, whether positively or negatively. In the positive sense, a school teacher may tell his colleague that the school's performance has improved tremendously since the employment of a new principal, to which the latter may respond, "I agree with you one hundred percent! *A smart rooster will crow while in the egg*", to indicate that nobody could miss the principal's competence. In the negative sense, the schoolteacher may tell his colleague that they should give the new principal a chance to improve his performance, which currently alarms everyone. This may induce his colleague to say, "This is of no use! As they say, '*A smart rooster will crow while in the egg*'", to show that the principal is incompetent and there is no room for improvement.

### Clumsiness/Incompetence

**Like a camel's ploughing**  
زي حراث الجمال: The camel in Jordanian culture is well known for its clumsiness in ploughing – the furrow made in going one direction the camel will usually flatten when coming back in the opposite direction, due to its flat, large feet. The proverb metaphorically compares a camel's ploughing with a person doing a task. No sooner he finishes a part of it than he is back to square one. For example, Professor Merry

may ask “Professor Smith, can you believe that our colleague Dr. Johnson has been working on a paper for more than a year now?” which may induce Professor Smith to respond, “He will never finish it! His work is *like a camel’s ploughing* – what he does today, he’ll spoil tomorrow”.

### Flippancy/Corruption

**Its worms are from within** **دوده من عوده**: This proverb may be said flippantly in the literal sense to indicate that the worms in fruit come from within it, i.e. they are not harmful to health. For example, someone may offer another some figs and the latter finds worms in them, so he refuses to eat them. The host comments flippantly, “Oh, my dear friend! *Its worms are from within*”. However, this proverb is also widely employed metaphorically in situations that involve corruption. For example, someone may complain about the spread of corruption in Jordan, to which another may comment, “Oh, man! *Its worms are from within*”, i.e. the corruption comes from within the government. In its serious use, this proverb thematically replicates another Jordanian proverb that reads **سوس الخشب منه وفيه** “*Wood worms are from within*”.

### Pretense

**A lion during daytime, but a hyena at night** **بالنهار سيع وبالليل ضيع**: This proverb metaphorically describes a person who, in fact, fears going out at night but pretends to be brave during daytime. Traveling long distances at night either alone or with pack animals was a key activity of traditional Jordanian society for economic and social purposes, hence the need for a proverb to cover this aspect of their life. In one respect, men’s courage was measured by their adventures at night. A person who fears darkness is compared to a hyena that usually cannot confront a lion. For example, Ahmed may tell his friend that Abu Mohammed keeps talking about his night adventures every time they meet, on which Ahmed’s friend may comment, “Don’t believe him! He’s *a lion during daytime, but a hyena at night*”.

### Opportunism

**When the bull falls, the knives multiply** **عند ما يقع الثور بتكثر سكاكينه**: This metaphorical proverb compares the fall of an important person or a public personality, when facing a serious

problem, to a falling bull, which many knives will be ready to slaughter. The proverb communicates the message that people wait for the misfortunes of important persons in order to vocalize their long-suppressed grudges. For example, someone may say to his friend “Look at the bad things people are saying about the mayor after he had been told to resign”, which may induce his friend to comment, “This is our society. As they say, *when the bull/camel falls, the knives multiply*”, to indicate that people are opportunists.

### Compromising

**A hair from the pig’s hide is a blessing** **شعره من جلد الخنزير بركة**: We Jordanians use this proverb when we manage to get a very small contribution from a stingy person, which is considered a big achievement anyway. The miser here is compared to a pig (a hateful animal to Muslim Arabs) and the contribution we get to a hair (which stands for smallness). For example, a person may tell his friend, “Imagine: Abu Mohammed has contributed only one dinar to the project of building a health center in our village”, on which his friend comments “You were lucky to get one dinar! *A hair from the pig’s hide is a blessing*, as the popular proverb says”.

### Fear/anxiety

**He who fears the hyena will run into it** **اللي يخاف من الضيع بطلعه**: This proverb refers to a folkloric conception of the hyena, which is stereotyped as the most dangerous animal that has survived in the Levant’s wilderness. There are hundreds of anecdotal stories about this animal and how tricky it is when attempting to feed on humans. Hence, the proverb invests in this animal metaphorically to deliver the message that if one is afraid of a possible problem when dealing with a state of affairs, it will occur the way a hyena appears if someone keeps thinking of it when walking alone in the dark. This proverb, therefore, advises us to be free of fear when handling our affairs lest what we fear will come true. For example, someone keeps talking to his friend about his fear of not being able to secure monthly bank payments out of the business he has just started. This may push his friend to say “Stop this nonsense! This fear can make it come true, thus proving the proverb ‘*He who fears the hyena will run into it*’, as they say”.

## Habits

**A dog's tail will always be crooked**  
ذئيل التئلب عمره ما بتعدل: This proverb metaphorically describes a person who will never change his bad manners the way a dog's tail will never be straight. An anecdotal story tells us that a dog's tail was placed in a mold for forty days in the hope of making it straight but to no avail. A person's bad nature, therefore, will never change. For example, Ahmed may complain to his friend about Ali's bad behavior toward their new neighbors, on which Ahmed's friend may comment, "That's him all along! As they say, *"A dog's tail will always be crooked"*.

## Translatability

In the hands of a competent translator, most proverbs may travel between different cultures by adopting Modified Literal Translation, where both the communicative import and the cultural features of the SL maybe transferred between languages, even sometimes when rendered individually. This becomes an easier task in connected discourse where annotation and context can play a key role in interpreting culture-bound elements, and translators may follow several procedures including formal/literal, functional, and ideational equivalence, or combinations of them (See Nida 1964; Catford 1965; Newmark 1988; Farghal 1994, 2012, among others). For example, encountering an Arabic proverb like *ورطة واوي بحليقه* (The fox stuck in the blackberries), the translator may combine ideational equivalence (The referent is in serious trouble) with modified literal translation (MLT) in parentheses, in order to render the discourse comprehensible, emotive and aesthetic, simultaneously (for more details, see Farghal and Al-Hamly, 2015).

This section deals with the translatability of animal proverbs as self-contained texts by adopting MLT. The purpose is to see how far can MLT go in transferring Source Language (SL) cultural features into Target Language (TL) and, consequently facilitate and enrich intercultural communication. The continuum of literal translation (see Larson 1998), it should be noted, ranges between gloss or word-for-word translation and semanticizing meaning insofar as the grammar and style of the TL allow. Translation theorists refer to this procedure by which the SL features are maintained using

different terminologies as formal equivalence (Nida 1964; Catford 1965), semantic translation (Newmark 1982), overt translation (House 1982), foreignization (Venuti 1991), adequate translation (Toury 1995), etc., which all, more or less, reflect the same idea (Farghal 2008). All these terminologies are meant to contrast a SL-oriented translation with one that is more oriented toward the TL features and that embraces a fluent target text that does not shock the target reader's expectations.

This tug of war between form and function seems artificial because the skopos of a translation (Vermeer 2000) should determine whether the overarching translation strategy is biased toward form or function, bearing in mind that a workable translation would never exist in a pure form (Farghal 2008). That is, it is impossible for a translation to be 100% formal (semantic) or 100% functional (communicative) because the relation between form and function is a matter of focus, but it is never a matter of exclusion. For example, the Arabic popular proverb *عصفور باليد ولا عشرة على الشجرة* may be functionally, and to some extent formally, translated into the analogous English proverb "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" in a text written for general purposes to naturalize the discourse, but it may be rendered formally into "A bird in the hand is worth more than ten in the tree" in an authoritative text to reflect the features of the source culture. More often, however, the split between form and function is much larger, e.g. compare the functional rendering of the Jordanian proverb *اللي بده يعاشر القط بده يصير ع مخاميشه* as "Love me, love my dog" with the MLT "He who befriends a cat should put up with its paws". Although the two proverbs communicate similar themes, the two translations of the proverb serve different purposes and are likely to be found in different text types.

In order to provide workable and creative MLT of proverbs, the translator needs to be aware of the structure of the proverbial templates/formulas in the TL (Farghal 2015). Proverbs that lend themselves to TL templates are usually readable, interesting, and poetic. Despite the novel motifs, the following examples: *الخيل من خيالها* "Like night, like horse", *كلب حاييم ولا سبع ناييم* "Better a roaming dog than a sleeping lion", and *اللي ما بعرف الصقر بشوييه* "He who does not know the falcon will grill it" are expected to be easily processed and appreciated

by the target reader because they are molded into familiar English proverbial templates, viz. the comparative form ‘Like X, like Y’, the compromising form ‘Better X than Y’, and the relativized form ‘He who ...’. Thus, not only does the molding of a foreign proverb into an English proverbial template render it comprehensible, but it also furnishes it with an aesthetic and poetic nature. In the long run, moreover, such proverbs find a natural habitat in the TL and, subsequently, enjoy intercultural transfer as has happened with tens of proverbs shared by many languages, and whose origin can hardly be determined.

Needless to say, MLT, more often than not, will need annotation when offered lexicographically and a supporting context when given in connected discourse. For example, the MLT “Catch a camel and levy its tariff” would make little sense without being annotated or couched coherently within a context to bring out the intended motif, i.e. one should not charge someone of a wrong act without catching them committing it. In a lexicographical work, the translation may be annotated thus “*This metaphorical proverb historically refers to the Arabs’ use of camels to smuggle goods. Levy, therefore, can be imposed only when a camel is caught smuggling. Jordanians now use this proverb (often flippantly) to indicate that a wrong act may receive a penalty only if the person is caught red-handed*”. In connected discourse, the above MLT may be employed by the speaker as a response to someone blaming them for a wrong act without having sufficient evidence.

### Conclusion

Proverbs are the lens through which a culture can be approached and understood. This paper shows that animals have played a key role in Arab nomadic lifestyle throughout the ages. Therefore, animal proverbs occupy a key position in Jordanian/Arab culture; they actually touch on themes relating to most walks of life. Although many of them had started out as literal utterances, they soon acquired proverbial status and enjoyed a wide metaphorical application. In terms of translation, Jordanian animal proverbs may travel into other languages easily, especially when they are supported by annotation and relevant contexts. This task becomes easier when the proverb formally

finds home in a familiar proverbial template in the TL despite the fact that it may offer a novel theme.

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## Animal Proverbs in Jordanian Popular Culture: A Thematic and Translational Analysis

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