A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF PROVERBS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND ARABIC
A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

The present paper deals mainly with a contrastive pragmatic study of proverbs in both English and Arabic and how this helps a second language learner – whether an Arab studying English or vice versa – to master his target language. The study starts with the objectives as well as the difficulty encountered during tackling it. Then, the methodological framework of both Firth and Malinowski’s Context-Dependent Utterance Theory will be discussed. Finally, the analysis will result in some factors determining the use of Egyptian Arabic proverbs. An appendix of both varieties in English and Arabic proverbs will be given at the end followed by some pedagogical implications for teaching English to Arab students. Egyptian proverbs are italicized in the appendix whereas their English semantic equivalents are not.

1. INTRODUCTION

A water-tight definition of a proverb should be given in the first place. Champion (1938) as well as Archer Taylor’s (1962) definitions will be highlighted.

Taylor (1962) says, "the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone."

Yet, in a very general way one may attempt to quote Lord Russel who said that a proverb is "the wisdom of many, the wit of one". Further, proverbs make use of rhyme, meter, metaphor, alliteration and assonance. For instance:

- A penny saved is a penny earned. (repetition)
- He who hesitates is lost. (alliteration)
- As hungry as a bea. (simile)
- You can lead a horse to the water but you can not force him to drink. (metaphor)

On the other hand, proverbs have certain functions – i.e. a philosophical insight. It is an attempt – as Thompson (1974) indicates – "by man to describe and understand the world in which he lives". Some of the sub-functions which Thompson illustrated were entertainment, instruction and legal use:

- The chimpanzee could strut like a dandy but for his red buttocks. (entertainment)
- Cleanliness is next points of the law. (legal)
- Ignorance of the law is no excuse. (legal)
Proverbs in most – if not all – human languages share common characteristics which help them to survive for generations. One of these traits is shortness such as the international proverbs "love is blind" and "God is above all". It is also characterized by being traditional, i.e. belonging to a folklore viz the language of the people who use them. This folk may belong to a variety of age, socio-economic status and culture which by necessity will lead to a variety of its pragmatic force. Proverbs must also be didactic either directly such as "patience is the key to all relief" or indirectly such as "early birds catch the worms". It can sometimes be symmetrical in form as the Egyptian proverb which encourages warm welcome rather than hospitality "receive me hot but dinner me not".

Any study dealing with proverbs can not shy away from its link with metaphor. The reason behind is that each proverb – in a way – contains a metaphor but not each metaphor contains a proverb, e.g. "His words stabbed me in the heart" is a metaphor but not a proverb. On the other hand a proverb can have a metaphorical world as well as a real world, e.g. the Egyptian proverb "the dog's tail will never go straight". This metaphor indicates that convicts are incorrigible and will never give up crimes. From the above mentioned facts, it is clear that proverbs are not an easy topic to deal with.

2. Data and Data Collection

As mentioned above, this study is difficult and is considered by many a hard nut to crack. The reasons behind this will be mentioned below together with how data is collected. The English proverbs are taken from Ridout/Witting (1967) whereas their Egyptian semantic equivalents from Champions's "The Eleven Religions" together with Burckhardt (1972) and Egyptian seniors and Egyptian friends. The research encounters certain difficulties whether in collecting data or in analyzing it. First, the story behind each proverb is sometimes suspected because one generation may approve of it whereas other generations do not. Second, proverbs belong to different eras, different religions and different regions. There is no clear-cut division among different regions using the same proverbs, or different cultural backgrounds using the same proverb invariably. In other words, one can not delimit the factors which determine the use of English or Egyptian proverbs because these factors are sometimes deliberately violated by interlocutors to achieve an ironical effect. This violation will – by necessity- disturb the analysis and may lead to mixing up the data. An example of that is when the Egyptian president quotes proverbs normally associated with the low-working classes. Finally and perhaps the most major hurdle is that it is a data-based study and it must be limited by nature. One can not include obscene proverbs in a study like that and can not pick out all proverbs in both Egyptian and English eras. From the above mentioned obstacles, it is clear that this is not an easy topic to embark on and
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one should avoid overgeneralizing statements. It is interesting to detect – herewith – some of the factors which determine the use of both English and Egyptian proverbs. The following symbols will be used during the analysis together with their implications:

- **H** high socio-economic status
- **L** low socio-economic status
- **R** rural areas
- **M** male
- **F** female
- **U** urban areas

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Proverbs in both English and Arabic will be regarded and analysed in terms of both Malinowski's (1923) and Firth's (1968) frameworks. The former is an anthropologist who looks at language as "a mode of action not a countersign of thoughts". Therefore, a proverb should be understood in a specific context in which it is used. Since Malinowski's argument was based on the language of the people he was studying in primitive tribes, we can safely say that a proverb will not be understood if it is taken out of its context:

\[
\text{/ habla wi murda\textsuperscript{a} wi uddamha arba\textsuperscript{a}} / 
\]

which roughly means: she is pregnant and nurses a child and has 4 children in front of her; meaning affluence of riches.

In the light of Malinowski's framework, this proverb can only be understood when it is actually said of a busy pregnant lady nursing other children.

Firth (1968), on the other hand, developed Malinowski's theory suggesting the following categories:

- **a)** The relevant feature of the participants: persons, personalities:
  - 1. Their verbal action.
  - 2. Their nonverbal action.
- **b)** The relevant objects.
- **c)** The effects of the verbal action.

Thus, looking at the proverb above from a Firthian standpoint it is said by a low class woman about another woman who was a birth machine normally related to a lower socio-economic status in a rural area. Therefore, the proverb is termed L, R, F meaning low socio-economic status, rural and female respectively. It is worth noting that the pragmatic
force of proverbs changes from one period to another. Two centuries ago such a proverb indicated the Affluence of Riches (Burckhardt 1972) whereas nowadays such a proverb arouses the feeling of sympathy for the poor lady who has lots of children.

Proverbs in both English and Arabic have been gathered from Champion (1938), Ridout/Witting (1967) and Burckhardt (1972). Then, the Arabic ones have been given to a committee of judges consisting of Egyptian seniors and friends to coin each proverb H, L, F, or M. On the other hand, their English semantic equivalents were judged by Champion (1938). Obscene proverbs have been excluded from that study.

4. DISCUSSION

As indicated above, the difficulty of the present study mainly lies in the opposing opinions of the committee of judges. For instance, a proverb like:

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('He was an anvil, now he is a hammer') is used by a male community that belongs to a certain profession which is "blacksmith". Any pragmatic error committed by the interlocutors may either lead to laughter or communication breakdown. The above proverb on "anvil" and "hammer" can not be quoted by females. It is worth noting that most of the Egyptian proverbs quoted here were prevailing among illiterate Egyptians more than one hundred years ago. Nowadays, after the spread of technology and stamping out illiteracy in most parts of the country, one can safely indicate that the change of the life system in Egypt has tremendously affected the choice of proverbs; in proverbs like:

الرحا يتوضى غرق

meaning 'He went to make ablution in a pond and was drowned'. Such a proverb was normally used in rural areas where people used to wash themselves in a canal or on river banks because there were no running water in their rural houses. As noted earlier, when a proverb misfits the situation, it turns into a pragmatic error which means using the wrong utterance in the wrong situation and this can be represented by the 31 proverbs quoted below in appendix one which were judged by the committee as being old and should be replaced by their new version:
A Contrastive study of Proverbs In both English and Arabic ...

1. 'Money is sweet balm' (old)
   - 'If you have 1 piaster, you 're worth it' (new)
2. 'He was an anvil, now he is a hammer' (old)
   - 'He was crude now he is more open' (new)
3. 'throw him to the sea and he will come out with a fish in his mouth' (he is lucky) (old)
   - 'wherever he jumps, he never falls down' (new)

Thus, defining pragmatics as:

"The study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used" as Richards et al. (1985) suggest, may lead us to specify factors such as socio economic status, gender, formality, region which all participate in bettering our understanding and improving our communication. See the miscellaneous proverbs in appendix 3 below.

Examples of violating these pragmatics factors were detected by the researcher. For instance, superiors and seniors sometimes quote proverbs normally associated with low class. John Major, the ex. PM, quoted a proverb: "cut your coat according to your cloth" while delivering a speech. Further, actors and actresses on stage violate these constraints especially the one dealing with "gender" to arouse laughter.

Pragmatics – therefore – is an essential subject for understanding any written or oral discourse. This is going to be dealt within the following section dealing with the ways how to use proverbs in teaching situations.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Since we are not dealing with the form of proverbs here, teaching rhyme, figures of speech, alliteration or syntax lies outside the circle of our interest. Our main concern is with pragmatics, i.e. how to relate a certain proverb or a certain theme to a certain context or passage. For example, university students – especially freshmen – may be given three proverbs decontextualized and then three passages which may serve as suitable contexts or stories referring to these proverbs.

To explain the above pedagogical dimension further, the teacher may give the students three proverbs e. g.:

1. Do not sell the coal in New Castle.
2. Cut your coat according to your cloth.
3. You can't hit a one-eyed man on his damaged eye.
Then, three passages dealing with stereotypical characters e.g. those who should live according to their own income, incorrigible characters, and those who exert unwanted efforts, should be provided and students should relate each proverb to each passage.

Teachers of English are highly recommended to teach their students how to translate proverbs from English to Arabic or vice-versa. For a translator it is not enough for him to be bilingual but he should be bicultural as well. Metaphorical translation is superior to a literary one. Because every proverb has its real world as well as its metaphorical world, students are recommended to be able to translate proverbs literally as well as metaphorically. See the miscellaneous proverbs in both English and Arabic in the appendix. Consequently, studying proverbs is academically fruitful for teachers as well as their students.

6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHES

As noted above in section II, there are difficulties encountered while embarking on such a study. One major hurdle is the "data" which by virtue of its nature is always limited; any linguist finds it difficult to collect proverbs related to all eras, all professions, all socio-economic status of the whole world. Such a job needs a team work of linguists who belong to a variety of linguistic backgrounds. An effort like that may result in a fieldwork project translating any culturally loaded text in a variety of ways. However, unfortunately one has to admit that such a project has never come into existence in the linguistic or academic arena.

APPENDIX 1: EGYPTIAN PROVERBS TAKEN FROM BURCKHARDT (1972)

1. Let them slap a thousand necks but not mine. (L.M)

2. The burial is attended by crowds of people, the deceased is a dog. (L.M.F)

3. What can I think of thy qualities, O onion as every bite draws tears. (L.F.R)

4. Thou art but the washer man of the dead, you have no influence to insure him paradise. (L.M.U.R)
5. The tongue is the neck's enemy. (L.M.R)  
(meaning) 'the language is retorted upon the neck of him who uses it, with a blow'.

6. Throw him into the river and he will rise with a fish in his mouth.  
(meaning) 'he is lucky'.

7. The one-eyed man is a beauty in the country of the blind.

8. She went to sleep hungry though her husband is a baker.

9. Come, let us circumcise the boy who has tumour in his testicles. Let us do it in this crowd.

10. I came to utter an imprecation against him, and I found the wall inclining over him.

11. I brought the bald - headed to amuse me, he uncovered his head and frightened me.

12. Like the hunger of a louse upon the head of the scabby. It is said when a person in affluence pleads poverty.

13. If thy mother-in-law is quarrelsome, divorce her daughter.

14. She is pregnant and nurses a child and has 4 children before her  
(meaning) 'affluence of riches'.

15. Money is sweet balm (meaning) 'it heals all wounds'.

السن عدو القنا
5. The tongue is the neck's enemy. (L.M.R)  
(meaning) 'the language is retorted upon the neck of him who uses it, with a blow'.

أرمية البحر ويطلع في فمه سمكة (M.F.R)
6. Throw him into the river and he will rise with a fish in his mouth.  
(meaning) 'he is lucky'.

الأعور في بلاد العميان طرفة (M.F.R.U)
7. The one-eyed man is a beauty in the country of the blind.

بائنت جعائرة وزوجها خياز (F.R.)
8. She went to sleep hungry though her husband is a baker.

تعالوا في دى الزحمة نظاهر القليط (M.L.R)
9. Come, let us circumcise the boy who has tumour in his testicles. Let us do it in this crowd.

جيت ادعى عليه لقيت الحبيط مايل عليه (M.F.R)
10. I came to utter an imprecation against him, and I found the wall inclining over him.

جيت الأقرع يونسني كشف رأسه وخوفني (F.R.L.)
11. I brought the bald - headed to amuse me, he uncovered his head and frightened me.

جوع القملة في رأس الأقرع (M.F.L)
12. Like the hunger of a louse upon the head of the scabby. It is said when a person in affluence pleads poverty.

حمائط مناقرة طلق بنتها (M.U.R.L)
13. If thy mother-in-law is quarrelsome, divorce her daughter.

حيلة ومرضعة وقدمها أربعة (F.U.R.L)
14. She is pregnant and nurses a child and has 4 children before her  
(meaning) 'affluence of riches'.

الدراهم مراهب (M.F.U.R.L.H)
15. Money is sweet balm (meaning) 'it heals all wounds'.

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16. Your mouth reminds me of the jackass of my family.
(meaning) 'a man was following a woman in the street thinking her beautiful, but when she lifted up her veil, he discovered her ugliness'.

17. On tardiness. I saw you going to the pilgrimage at the same time that the people returned from it.

18. He went to make ablution in a pond and was drowned. (meaning) he expected an advantage but he was met with a total ruin instead.

19. The husband who has 2 wives is misfortunate.
(meaning) 'like a neck between 2 sticks'. (F.M.U.R)

20. Said of a man who is fond of company and noise.

21. They took it off from the beard and put it into the moustache.
(meaning) 'the change didn't better the condition'.

22. The kettle reproached the kitchen spoon "thou black, thou idle blabber."
(meaning) 'those who reproach others for faults of which they themselves are more guilty'.

23. You dispute over something you will never need as a bald quarreling over a comb.

24. In whatever manner you strike a bald-headed on his head, his blood will flow.
(meaning) 'a man is easily wounded in his weak part'.
25. He was an anvil, now he is a hammer.  
(meaning) 'the complete change from being passive to being daring'.

26. He used to swear by cutting off of his right hand, now he swears by the giving of his money to the poor.  
(meaning) 'those who were poor and assume the language of the rich'.

27. If I were to trade in shrouds, no one would die.  
(meaning) 'those who are poor and assume the language of the rich'.

28. No worn eaten bean remains without finding a half-blind measurer.  
(meaning) 'bird of a feather flock together'.

29. A barber opened his shop, the first customer whom he shaved was scald-headed.  
(meaning) 'young surgeons practice upon the bodies of the poor'.

30. A person demanding from God the rise of morn – when it arose, he became blind.  
(meaning) 'young surgeons practice upon the bodies of the poor'.

APPENDIX 2: FROM CHAMPION (1938)

MONEY

1. Avarice destroys what the avaricious gathers.  
   Money isn't everything. (M/F/R/U/H/L)  
   Money is the root of all evil. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

2. White piaster is useful in a black day.  
   Saving for a rainy day. (M/F/R/U/H/L)  
   Look after the pennies and the pound will take care of themselves. (M/F/R/U/H/L)
3. **The man who carries a water skin with holes in it, it leaks down his back.**
   He whose wealth perplexes him may buy pigeons and let them fly.
   A fool and his money are soon parted. (84) (M/F/R/U/H)

4. **Wealth that comes in at the door unjustly, goes out at the window.**
   Cheats never prosper. (35) (M/F/R/U/H)

5. **Gain upon dirt rather than lose upon musk.**
   Where there's muck there's brass. (M/F/R/I)

**ANIMALS**

6. **The beetle in its hole is a sultan.**
   An Englishman's home is his castle. (M/F/U/H)

7. **The beetle is a beauty in the eyes of its mother.**
   Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. (11) (M/F/R/U/H)

8. **Thy beloved is the object that thou lovest, were it even a monkey.**
   Love is blind. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

9. **If you see a town worshipping a calf, mow grass and feed him.**
   When in Rome do as the Romans do. (M/F/R/U/H)

10. **If thy camel break down, put on an ass-load.**
    Cut your coat according to your cloth. (47) (M/F/R/U/H)

11. **When a slave mounts a camel he wants to ride on both humps.**
    If wishes were horses beggars would ride. (M/F/R/U/H)

12. **The barking of dogs doesn't hurt the clouds.**
    His bark is worse than his bite. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

13. **Teach your dog to snap and he'll soon sit up and bite you. The dog that fetches will carry.** (241 Br Is)
    A man can cause his own dog to bite him. (243 BR IS)

14. **If you owe a dog something, call him sir.**
    **Kiss the hand which you cannot bite.**
    He stoops to conquer.
15. A gift goes on a donkey and returns on a camel.
   Giving is better than receiving. (M/F/R/U/H)

16. If I am to be prince, and you are to be prince, who is to drive the donkey?
   Too many cooks spoil the broth. (228) (M/F/R/U/H)
   Too many chiefs and not enough Insians. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

17. The tail of a dog never gets straight. (F/M/R/I)
   The flautist dies and his finger still moves. (F/M/R/I)
   The leopard will never change its spots. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

18. A bird in the hand is worth ten on the bush.
   A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

19. He who is bitten by a snake is afraid of an end of rope.
   Once bitten, twice shy. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

**FOOD**

20. Put your dates in the honey-pot – but don’t sink it afterwards in the Nile.
   Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. (M/F/R/H)

21. Live in a place and eat of its onions.
   When in Rome do as the Romans do. (M/F/R/U/H)

22. An onion with a friend is a (roast) lamb.
   The company makes the feast. (40)

**FAMILY**

23. The boy is the mother’s double.
   Like father like son. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

24. The dead is the best of his family.
   Death is the great leveler. (50)
   Call no man happy till he dies. (107)

25. Blood will never become water. (M/R/H/L)
   Blood is thicker than water. (M/F/R/U/H/L)
GOD

26. Men depend on men, and all on God.
   Man proposes, God disposes. (95) (M/F/R/U/H)

27. Take what the gods give while their hands are open, for none know what they will
   withhold when they are shut.
   Make hay while the sun shines. (M/F/R/H/L)

28. From outside it is Allah (wonderful) and from inside God only knows. (L/F/M/R)
   The one who sees how well a door is decorated from the outside will not predict how
   (his) mouth’s gone dry from the inside. (L/F/M/U)
   Water from under hay. (M/R/F)
   All that glisters is not gold. (M/F/R/U/H)
   Don’t judge a book by its cover. (M/F/R/U/H)

29. God is above all. (H/L/M/F/R/U)
   God is above all. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

MAN

30. Everyone has a detractor one who criticizes and an adulator one who praises.
   To each his own. (M/F/R/U/H)

31. He that knocks at the door hears an answer.
   To him that asks shall be given. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

32. Throw the fortunate man into the Nile and he will come out with a fish in his mouth.
   Everything is coming up roses. (M/F/R/L/I)

33. He that stirs the poison will taste it.
   He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon. (53)

34. Everyone sells his rags in his own market.
   Blow your own trumpet. (M/F/U/H/L/I)
   Look after your own. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

35. He only loosed the tent-pegs.
   Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. (M/F/R/U/H/L)
36. *Tobacco without coffee is like a prince without furs.*

37. *If I were to trade in winding-sheets no one would die.*
   You couldn't organize a pissup in a brewery. *(M/F/R/U/H/L/I)*

38. *He who treats you as himself, does you no injustices.*
   Do as you would be done to.

39. *In the well out of which you drink, throw no stone.*
   Look after your own. *(M/F/R/U/H/L)*

40. *One hand can't clap by itself.* *(M/F/R/U/H/L)*
   Many hands make light work. *(F/RAJ/H/L)*

41. *There is no use hitting the eye of a one eyed man.* *(M/U/L)*
   You cannot spoil a rotten egg.

42. *A tree that affords thee shade, do not order it to be cut down.*
   Don't cut off your nose to spite your face. *(M/F/R/U/H/L/I)*

43. *The disaster of someone might be the blessing of another.*
   One man's loss is another man's gain. *(M/F/R/U/H/L)*

44. *Those who cultivate good, find good.* *(F/M/L/H/R)*
   Those who sow good, reap good.

45. *Don't sell water in a waterman's alley.* *(M/L/U)*
   It's like taking coals to Newcastle. *(M/F/R/U/H/L)*

46. *He walks on eggshell.* *(U/L/F/M)*
   Can't you move faster than a snail.

47. *The one who has a glass house should not throw stones at people.* *(L/M/F/U/R)*
   People in glass houses should not throw stones. *(M/F/R/U/H/)*

48. *Laugh to the world and the world will laugh to you.* *(M/F/H/L/U)*
   Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone. *(M/F/R/U/H)*

49. *He steals the kohl from the eye.* *(I/M/U/L)*
   He steals the coffin of the corpse.
50. *The ship which has two captains must drown.* (R/L/M/F)
   Too many cooks spoil the broth. (M/F/R/U/H)

51. *Everything forbidden is sweet.*
   Stolen fruit is sweet. (213)

52. *Conceal the good you do, take example from the Nile which hides its source.*
   Virtue is its own reward. (M/F/R/R/U/H)

53. *Haste is of the Devil.*
   Haste is from the Devil. (107)

54. *The griminess of labour is better than saffron of sloth.*
   An idle brain in the devil's workshop. (118)

55. *Stretch your legs according to the extent of your carpet (sleeping-rug).*
   Cut your coat according to your cloth. (47) (M/F/R/U/H/L)

56. *A smooth lie is better than a distorted truth.*
   Half the truth is often a whole lie. (104)

57. *Patience opens the door of rest.*
   Patience is a virtue. (175) (M/F/R/U/H)

58. *Power is sweet to nurse, bitter to wean.*
   Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. (182) (M/F/U/H)

59. *Rotten eggs move quickly towards one another.* (R/M/F/L/I)
   Birds of a feather flock together. (M/F/R/H/L/I)

60. *Every night must have an end.* (H/L/M/F/R)
   There is a light at the end of the tunnel. (M/F/R/U/H/L)
   Every cloud has a silver lining. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

61. *Don't build castles in the air.* (M/F/U/H/L)
   Don't count your chickens before they hatch. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

62. *Silence is golden.* (H/U/F/M)
   Silence is golden. (M/F/R/U/H)
63. The new sieve has its own strength. (R/F/L)
   A new broom sweeps clean.

64. The mirror of love is blind. (M/F/U/H/L)
   Love is blind. (M/F/R/U/H/L)

65. Equality in injustice is justice.
   Poetic justice. (M/F/R/U/H)

APPENDIX 3: MISCELLANEOUS PROVERBS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND ARABIC WHICH REPRESENT
THE SAME IDEA IN DIFFERENT METAPHORS, TAKEN FROM THE COMMITTEE OF
JUDGES

(A) stands for Arabic.
(E) stands for English.

1. Blood will never become water. (A)
   Blood is thicker than water. (E)

2. He walks on an egg shell. (A)
   Can't you move faster than a snail. (E)

3. He steals the kohl from the eye (A)
   He steals the coffin of the corpse. (E)

4. Rotten eggs move quickly towards one another. (A)
   Birds of a feather flock together. (E)

5. The ship which has 2 captains must drown. (A)
   Too many cooks spoil the broth (E)

6. The new sieve has its own strength. (A)
   A new broom sweeps clean. (E)

7. There is no use hitting the one-eyed on his blind eye. (A)
   You can't spoil a rotten egg. (E)
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