Informativity of Arabic Proverbs in Context: An Insight into Palestinian Discourse

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Abstract

This paper provided a linguistic analysis of five Arabic proverbs taken from the Palestinian culture. The five proverbs were analyzed in terms of sound features, cohesion and lexical expressions. The analysis showed how the uniqueness of the structure and content of proverbs make them informative and memorable. The proverbs were given to 10 native speakers of Palestinian Spoken Arabic (PSA), first out of context and then in 5 short dialogues to see whether they could be easily understood when they occur in their social contexts. The results showed that 80% of the subjects were able to provide the meanings of the proverbs in context, whereas only 48% were able to provide their meaning out of context. The results also revealed that the context that precedes the proverb gives more indication of its meaning compared to the context that follows it.

Keywords: Linguistics, Discourse analysis, Arabic proverbs in context, Informativity, Palestinian discourse, cohesion, Parallelism, lexical expressions

1. Introduction

In general, humans utilize different methods and strategies to convey messages and to deal with various situations. Some people may prefer to be explicit and express their thoughts directly; preferring to use words and sentences in their literal sense. On the other hand, others prefer to be somewhat implicit and indirect, using devices designed to leave a greater impact on the audience or maybe to capture their attention via presenting a funny or metaphorical expression (Kὄvecses, 2002). Reasons for such behavior differ according to different speakers. However, people generally utilize such expressions to convert a tedious and boring communicative occurrence into something more interesting and intriguing. Some linguists even went on to argue that most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured that is, most concepts, mainly abstract ones, are perceived in terms of other concepts (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Put differently, people usually perceive and experience one kind of thing in terms of another. For instance, people conceive of the abstract concept "anger" in terms of another concept which is more understandable to them based on their experience in the world, namely, "heat". Thus, they produce expressions like "he erupted in my face" (Boers, 2000).

There are various devices that could be used by different speakers to convey messages; an example of such devices is proverbs. Mieder (1985) a well-known proverb scholar defined a proverb as " a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (cited in Mieder, 2004, p.3)". According to Mieder (2004), the study of proverbs could be traced back to Aristotle who analyzed different aspects of proverbs, a fact which reflects that people have been fascinated with the study of proverbs for centuries. Proverbs exist under the umbrella of a branch of linguistics called Phraseology. This field is concerned with studying and classifying fixed phrases such as proverbs, idioms, sayings, etc. Within Phraseology, there is an area that focuses on studying proverbs, namely, Paremiology. It is concerned with "the definition, form, structure, style, content, function, meaning, and value of proverbs (Mieder, 2004, p. xii)". Paremiography, however, is another area which deals with collecting and classifying different proverbs with no reference to their meaning or structure, hence, it is considered to be one side of the study of proverbs. In Paremiography, one can find different proverbs collected from different cultures. An example of Anglo-American proverbs is *human nature is the same all over the world*. Mieder (2004) referred to many scholars who studied proverbs, among them "Alan Dundes, Wolfram Eberhard, Stuart A. Gallacher, Richard Jente, Wayland D. Hand, John G. Kunstmann, Charles Speroni, and Bartlett Jere Whiting" (p. xiv).

Proverbs portray the experience and traditions of different nations; they are very similar to literary works in being a mirror that reflects the image of the traditions and cultural values of different societies (Hasan-Rokem, 1990). Due to their conciseness, proverbs are stored in memory in their entirety, in terms of their meaning, sound and syntactic properties, just like single words (Mieder, 2004). Hence, proverbs are used in all walks of life; one can find them in political speeches, novels, poetry among many other fields. This can be due to the fact that proverbs do not require much time to be formulated and used in the same way as new phrases and sentences do. On the contrary, proverbs can be automatically retrieved and utilized in

various communicative settings.

With regard to their structure, proverbs are considered to be unique. One can find irregularity in their grammatical structure. Put differently, their cohesion may not be ordinary. This also applies sometimes to their conceptual structure, namely, coherence (Hasan-Rokem, 1990; Mieder, 2004). In fact, it is probably the way they are formed grammatically or conceptually which make them interesting and informative. According to De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), informativity of a text is related to whether it presents something new and unexpected. Thus, processing highly informative texts, ones in which a person may encounter irregular and improbable content, calls for more effort to be exerted in understanding them than when facing a regular and predictable content. However, one may argue that interestingness is found in the former more than the latter (De Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). In fact, Mieder (2004) argued that proverbs can be very informative because of their peculiarity. However, this may present a challenge to text receivers. Thus, the best way to understand the meaning of proverbs is to use them in their social contexts. For instance, the proverb *the best defense is a good offense* can be easily understood in the context of military battles or football games.

On the basis on Mieder's (2004) argument, this paper shows how proverbs, five Arabic (Palestinian) proverbs in particular, can be informative via analyzing them in terms of sound features, cohesion and lexical expressions. This analysis is provided in the following section. The paper also aims at testing Mieder's (2004) claim that the intended meaning of proverbs can be easily inferred when they occur in their social contexts. Hence, the paper tackles two questions:

1) Does the context in which 5 Palestinian proverbs occur play a role in understanding their meanings by 10 native speakers of Palestinian Spoken Arabic (PSA)?

2) If they are able to provide the meanings of the proverbs, what strategies do they use to comprehend their intended meanings?

The discussion in this paper relied on the analysis provided by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) in their discussion of informativity as a standard of textuality and its relation to the other standards, namely, cohesion and coherence. The Arabic proverbs that were analyzed in this paper were taken from the Palestinian culture, thus, the proverbs are written in Palestinian Spoken Arabic (PSA). The paper proceeds as follows; the following section presents the proverbs that were analyzed in this paper. The section entitled "analysis of the proverb" deals with some of the features of proverbs in terms of their sound features, cohesion and lexical expressions. The methodology section explains the method used to test the subjects. In the results and discussion section, the two authors present the results of the two questions mentioned above and provide an explanation of the results.

2. Palestinian Proverbs

Palestine is an Arab country located in the Middle East, specifically, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea west of Jordan. The culture and traditions of Palestine is very similar to those of the neighboring Arab countries, namely, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in terms of

language, religion, literature, food and music. Their proverbs, just like the other cultures, are derived from their environment and customs. For instance, one would find proverbs related to lands, especially, planting and harvesting olive trees since a big number of Palestinians used to work in their lands and a big number still do. The proverbs are usually found in the form of a string containing a number of related words, sometimes unusual, that carry information and wisdom. The proverbs that were analyzed in this paper are shown below:

1. يا شَايِف الزّول يا خَايب الرَّجا [1]

   yaa ʃaayif izzo:l yaa xaayib irrajaa.

   'You, who see the illusion of a person from afar, you would be disappointed once he comes close.'

   Meaning: one should not judge people's appearance based on how they look like from afar, one needs to be close to the person so that (s)he can give a clear judgment. This proverb is also used figuratively that is, one should not judge others based on their appearance alone, one needs to get close to them and get to know them better because appearances can be misleading.

2. خَلّي الزّيت بِجْرارُه تايجيه سْعَارُه

   xallii izzeit bigraaro: taayigii sʕaaro:

   'Keep the oil[2] in its jars, until you get a good pay for it.'

   Meaning: valuable things like oil even if kept for a long time, they will not lose their value and one should wait to have a good reason to release them. It also indicates that people should not be hasty in making important decisions; they have to think carefully and wait for the opportune time.

3. جينَاك يا عَبْد المُعين تَاتعين، لقينَاك يا عَبْد المُعِين بِتْنَعانْ

   giinaak yaa ʕabd il muʕiin taatʕiin, lkiinaak yaa ʕabd il moʕiin btinʕaan.

   'We came to ʕbd il-moʕiin (male-name) so that he can help us, we found that ʕbd il-moʕiin himself needs help.'

   Meaning: one should know from whom (s)he should seek help, since people are not always who they claim to be that is, they are not always capable of providing help anytime.

4. جَارَك القَريبْ ولا أخُوكْ البعيد

   gaarak il-kariib wala ʔaxuuk il-bʕiid.

   'Your close neighbor and not your far away brother.'

   Meaning: if in need, seek assistance from your close neighbor and not from your distant brother because a neighbor may be better than your flesh and blood sometimes.

5. عُمُر الحَيّة ما صِارَتْ خَيّة

   ʕumir il-ḥayyeh maa ṣaarat xayyeh.

   'The snake will never become your sister.'

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[1] For the reader's convenience, a key to the symbols used for Arabic consonants and vowels is provided in Appendix 1.
[2] Olive oil is meant in this context since it is quite expensive in Arab countries.

Meaning: an enemy will still be an enemy even if (s)he pretend to like you, they will never become close enough to be a brother or a sister.

3. Analysis of the Proverbs

This section provides an analysis of the Arabic proverbs listed in the previous section in terms of sound features, cohesion and lexical expressions. The analysis sheds light on the features of proverbs showing its richness and uniqueness.

3.1 Sound Features

Proverbs are usually short, which makes them more memorable and easily retrieved. Also, perhaps the most noticeable feature about them is that they rhyme. It could be argued that this feature is not usually found in ordinary speech, which makes proverbs more unique and conspicuous. In this respect, proverbs are similar to poetic texts, in which, language options are somewhat modified when compared to the conventional organization of the language as a whole (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). This rhyme can be seen in:

Proverb 1: *yaa ʃaayif izzo:l yaa xaayib irrajaa* 'you, who see the illusion of a person from afar, you would be disappointed once he comes close.' with the words *ʃaayif* 'you who see' and *xaayib* `disappointed`.

Proverb 2: *xallii izzeit bigraaro: taayigii sʕaaro:* 'keep the oil in its jars, until you get a good pay for it.' with the words *bigraaro:* 'jars' and *sʕaaro* 'prices'.

Proverb 4: *gaarak il-kariib wala ʔaxuuk il-bʕiid* 'your close neighbor and not your far away brother.' with the two words *il-kariib* 'close' and *il-bʕiid* 'far away'.

Proverb 5: *ʕumir il-ḥayyeh maa ṣaarat xayyeh* 'the snake will never become your sister.' with the two words *ḥayyeh* 'snake' and *xayye*h 'sister'.

3.2 Cohesion

According to Renkema (1993), cohesion is "the connection which results when the interpretation of a textual element is dependent on another element in the text" (p. 35). The sentences which occur in the text need to be related to each other to ensure the stability of the text (De Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). Due to their conciseness, proverbs are linked in a particular way so that the words from which they are formed would have their contribution to the interpretation of the whole proverb. After all, if there was no relation between the words of the proverb, people would not have memorized them and used them in different social situations from generation to generation. Among the cohesive devices that can be noted in the proverbs is parallelism i.e. using the same structure and verb tense (Renkema, 1993). This can be seen in:

Proverb 3: *giinaak yaa ʕabd il muʕiin taatʕiin, lkiinaak yaa ʕabd il moʕiin btinʕaan* 'we came to ʕbd il-moʕiin (male-name) so that he can help us, we found that ʕbd il-moʕiin himself needs help.' It can be observed that *giinaak* 'we came to you' and *lkiinak* 'we found you' are both past tense.

Proverb 1: *yaa ʃaayif izzo:l yaa xaayib irrajaa* 'you, who see the illusion of a person from afar, you would be disappointed once he comes close.' It can be noticed that *ʃaayif* 'you who see' and *xaayib* 'you would be disappointed' are both past tense. Hence, it could be argued that parallel structures make proverbs easier to recall.

Other types of cohesive devices can be observed in proverbs too. These devices deal with connections that are based on the words used, namely, reiteration which is the first type of lexical cohesion (Renkema, 1993). An example of such devices is repetition i.e. using the same word or structure:

Proverb 3: *giinaak yaa ʕabd il muʕiin taatʕiin, lkiinaak yaa ʕabd il moʕiin btinʕaan* 'we came to ʕbd il-moʕiin (male-name) so that he can help us, we found that ʕbd il-moʕiin himself needs help.' The name 'ʕbd il-moʕiin' is used twice, that is, instead of using the pronoun 'he' to refer to ʕbd il-moʕiin or in other words, instead of using anaphora, the name was repeated twice. The significance of the name is explained in the following section. Another device is antonymy i.e. words that have opposite meanings. This is shown below:

Proverb 4*: gaarak il-kariib wala ʔaxuuk il-bʕiid* 'your close neighbor and not your far away brother.' *kariib* 'close' and *bʕiid* 'far away' are antonyms, such device may have been used to draw people's attention to the meaning of the proverb. In other words, sometimes your close neighbor may be better than your own flesh and blood who is far away.

The second type of lexical cohesion is collocation, which is concerned with words that are in a relationship because they occur in the same environment (Renkema, 1993). This device can be seen with the words *izzeit* 'oil' and *graaro:* 'jars' in proverb 2: *xallii izzeit bigraaro: taayigii s ʕaaro:* 'keep the oil in its jars, until you get a good pay for it'.

On the basis of the above-mentioned analysis, it can be seen that the weaving of words together in proverbs may have been done for a special effect, and this may increase their informativity. This takes us to the lexical expressions used in the proverbs.

3.3 Lexical Expressions

According to Mieder (2004), a proverb is a short well-known sentence that encapsulates wisdom, truth and morals. As a result, one may argue that special attention must have been given to the selection of lexical expressions used in the proverbs. In a way, these expressions were carefully planned and chosen. The word *zo:l* "the illusion of a person" (Al-Waseet dictionary, 1960, p. 407) used in proverb 1 may not be familiar to many. The peculiarity of the word used make the proverb more informative and unpredictable that is, instead of using the word *xayaal* 'shadow' which has a similar meaning to *zo:l* 'illusion of a person' and may be more familiar, the word *zo:l* was selected. Thus, this gave the proverb the element of unpredictability.

The male name *ʕbd il-moʕiin* in proverb 3 was used for a specific purpose; *ʕbd il-moʕiin* means 'he who serves the supporter (God)'. This person who serves God faithfully would not hesitate to help those who seek his help. The name was repeated twice instead of using a pronoun i.e. 'he' to refer to it in order to emphasize the intended meaning of the proverb,

namely, instead of living up to the expectation, *ʕbd il-moʕiin* himself needs someone to help him. This particular name was used to indicate that people do not always live up to what they claim to be or to what people think of them.

The antonymy used in *gaarak il-kariib wala ʔaxuuk il-bʕiid* 'your close neighbor and not your far away brother' aims at steering the listener's or reader's attention to the meaning of the proverb, namely, usually words that have opposite meanings may help the receiver see the difference between the people or things being compared; the close neighbor and the far away brother.

In proverb 5, the word *xayyeh* 'little sister' may have been selected instead of the word *oxt* 'sister' to show the extreme asymmetry between *ḥayyeh* 'snake', the intended meaning here is 'enemy', and *xayyeh* 'little sister'. Put in a slightly different way, this word may have been chosen to emphasize the meaning that the proverb alludes to i.e. enemies remain enemies even if they tried to pretend to be otherwise.

This section provided an analysis of the features of proverbs, the next section discusses the methodology used to answer the two questions presented in the introduction.

4. Methodology

As pointed out previously, this paper aims at testing whether the context in which five Palestinian proverbs occurs presents a challenge to 10 native speakers of PSA. Put differently, whether they would be able to know their meanings and if so, what strategies they used to arrive at them. The five proverbs were given to 10 native speakers of PSA, students at the University of Jordan (Amman-Jordan) studying different majors, first out of context then, in five short dialogues (see Appendix 2 & 3). The dialogues were based on real dialogues that took place in a Palestinian household (personal communication). Only the names of the participants were changed to respect their privacy. The two authors asked the subjects to provide the meanings of the proverbs; if the subjects were able to, then they were asked to explain how they knew their meanings:

1. Previous knowledge of the proverb.

2. The previous context that occurred before the proverb.

3. The context that followed the proverb.

According to De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), there are three degrees or orders of informativity; first order, second order and third order. First order occurrences receive little attention since they are predictable. Hence, their informativity is low and they do not need to be downgraded i.e. exploiting different strategies to make sense of the occurrences since their intended meaning is very clear. On the contrary, they need to be upgraded, this entails adding more elements to texts to make them more informative. Second order occurrences are considered to be the normal standard in communication since they do not need to be upgraded or downgraded. They are higher than first order occurrences in the sense that they are below the upper degree of probability, which means that they are more informative. Finally, third order occurrences are those which are considered unpredictable, and thus need

more attention and processing effort. This means that they need to be downgraded by text receivers to be able to understand their intended meaning. At first, they may appear to be irrelevant to the presented text. However, after they are downgraded, it will be clear that they are relevant after all. Their unpredictability makes them more informative and thus more interesting.

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) indicated that downgrading is seen as a type of "problem-solving" since text receivers need to use different strategies to comprehend the text (p. 144). They may explore the text in which they encountered the third order occurrence or their background knowledge of the world in order to make sense of the text. If they consider the text that precedes the third order occurrence then, they are doing 'backward downgrading', if they wait to consider the sentences that follow them then, they are doing 'forward downgrading' (p. 144). However, if text receivers bring the knowledge they have about the world in order to understand third order occurrences i.e. going beyond the text, then they are doing 'outward downgrading' (p. 144). Owing to their uniqueness, it could be argued that proverbs are considered third order occurrences and need to be downgraded to second order by text receivers using the strategies mentioned above. The next section provides the results of the test and discusses them.

5. Results and Discussion

The two authors gave the five Arabic proverbs to 10 native speakers of PSA first out of context, then in five short dialogues and asked them to provide their meanings. If they were able to, the subjects were asked to indicate the strategies they used (see Appendix 2 & 3). Table 1 below shows the number and percentages of accurate responses by the 10 subjects when asked to provide the meaning of the proverbs out of context.

Table 1.   Number and percentages of accurate responses by 10 native speaker of PSA out of context

Proverbs	No. of accurate answers	% Percentage
Proverb 1 (literal meaning)	2	20
Proverb 1 (figurative meaning)	4	40
Proverb 2	3	30
Proverb 3	6	60
Proverb 4	7	70
Proverb 5	7	70
Mean	5	48%

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that Mieder's (2004) claim is possibly correct; the low percentage (48%) of the 10 subjects' correct responses indicates that the meaning of the proverbs was not easily recognized out of context. The highest number of correct responses was 7 out of 10 while the lowest was 2 out of 10. However, a look at table 2 shows that the context played a big role in the subjects' answers.

Table 2.   Number and percentages of accurate responses by 10 native speaker of PSA in context

Proverbs	No. of accurate answers	% Percentage
Proverb 1 (literal meaning)	5	50
Proverb 1 (figurative meaning)	4	40
Proverb 2	9	90
Proverb 3	10	100
Proverb 4	10	100
Proverb 5	10	100
Mean	8	80%

Table 2 clearly demonstrates that the context assisted the 10 subjects in recognizing the meaning of the five proverbs. The high percentage (80%) of the 10 subjects' correct responses indicates that the meaning of the proverbs was easily recognized when they occurred in context. The lowest number of correct responses was 4 out of 10 while the highest number was 10 out of 10.   The strategies that they used, however, differed. Table 3 below shows the number of the students who used the three strategies, namely, backward, forward or outward downgrading to provide the meaning of the 5 proverbs.

Table 3. Number of the subjects who used the three strategies to provide the meaning of the 5 proverbs

Strategy	Proverb1(literal meaning)	Proverb 1 (figurative meaning)	Proverb 2	Proverb 3	Proverb 4	Proverb 5
Backward	4	3	8	9	8	7
Forward	-	1	1	-	1	2
Outward	1	-	-	1	1	1
Total	5	4	9	10	10	10

An examination of table 3 shows that the students used different strategies to provide the meanings of the proverbs. However, it can be seen that backward downgrading prevailed. The two authors explain examples of these strategies from the students' answers below by providing three of the five dialogues supplied for the subjects.   These dialogues are provided here in English for the reader's convenience (see Appendix 2 for the Arabic version):

Dialogue 1:
A dialogue between two men (Mohammad and Fady):
Mohammad: the other day I saw a tall guy with broad shoulders from a distance but when he came close to me, I was shocked by how he really looks like.
Fady: you know, there is a proverb that says *yaa ʃaayif izzo:l yaa xaayib irrajaa*
Mohammad: yeah man seriously, we shouldn't judge people on how they look like

from afar.

As mentioned previously, the underlined proverb viz., proverb 1 can be interpreted both literally and figuratively. First, the literal meaning; one should not judge people's appearance based on how they look like from afar, one needs to be close to the person so that (s)he can give a clear judgment. Second, the figurative meaning; one should not judge others based on their appearance alone, one needs to get close to them and get to know them better because appearances could be misleading. A careful study of table 3 shows that five subjects gave accurate answers of the literal meaning of proverb 1. The table also demonstrates that 4 subjects used backward downgrading to provide the meaning of the proverb. At first, the subjects might have thought that the proverb is not relevant to the previous context or in other words, there is a discrepancy or a mismatch between the presented text and the knowledge that the text receivers have stored in their minds. However, if one looks at the context that preceded the proverb in dialogue 1, it is clear that it gives a clear clue about the literal meaning of the proverb that is, being deceived about how someone looks like from a distance and then when(s)he comes close, this person would look totally different. Thus, the proverb was downgraded by the 4 subjects to second order. It could be argued that the subjects who did not know the literal meaning of the proverb might have faced difficulty with the word *zo:l* 'an illusion of a person'. A glance at table 3 shows that the one subject knew the literal meaning of the proverb via outward downgrading. This subject indicated that proverb 1 is very similar to another proverb she knows i.e. *laysaa kullu maa yalmaʕ thahaban* 'not everything that glitters is gold'. The subject knew the meaning of proverb 1 based on her knowledge outside the context provided. Hence, she downgraded the proverb into second order.

A look at table 3 indicates that four subjects knew the figurative meaning of the proverb. It also indicates that three subjects used backward downgrading and one subject used forward downgrading. The latter used the context that followed the proverb to provide its meaning namely, `yeah man seriously, we shouldn't judge people on how they look like from afar`. The subject might have interpreted the word *judge* as 'forming an opinion about a person such as his personality and behavior not about his appearance.' In addition, one may not be able to form an opinion about someone just on the basis of how this person looks like. Hence, the respondent was able to infer the figurative meaning of the proverb. The following is the second dialogue:

Dialogue (2):

A dialogue between a mother and her daughter at their house:

Daughter: someone proposed to my friend but she rejected him since he is uneducated unlike her. The guy seems to be really good; however, her decision is quite reasonable.

Mother: my mother used to always say *xallii izzeit bigraaro: taayigii sʕaaro:* 'Keep the oil in its jars, until you get a good pay for it.'

Daughter: yes that's right; a girl shouldn't just agree to marry anyone because, you know,

people won't stop gossiping about you no matter what you do.

A careful study of table 3 demonstrates that 9 subjects provided accurate responses with regard to proverb 2. It also shows that 8 subjects used backward downgrading while 1 used forward downgrading. The subjects might have been confused at first with the proverb that seems to be talking about oil and prices. However, the context that precedes the proverb shows how proverb 2 could be used to indicate the importance of waiting for the opportune moment to make a decision about different situations in which one finds him/herself during the course of their lives such as marriage, and not being hasty. Hence, the 8 subjects who used backward downgrading were able to infer the intended meaning of the proverb from the context that preceded it, since it discussed a girl's decision about who she should marry and how she has to think carefully and reasonably about her choice. The other respondent, who used forward downgrading referred to the context that followed the proverb to infer its meaning namely, `yes that's right; a girl shouldn't just agree to marry anyone. ` Again, it could be seen that the statement that follows the proverb provides a clue about the intended meaning of the proverb.

Table 3 indicates that all the subjects provided accurate responses with regard to proverb 3, 4, 5 using different strategies. Of the three dialogues, dialogue 5 is provided below to shed some light on the strategies used by the subjects:

Dialogue (5):

> A conversation between two colleagues (Lina and Samia)
>
> **Lina**: did you know who said really bad things about Rima and made her get fired?
>
> **Samia**: no who?
>
> **Lina**: Rima's friend; Fida'a.
>
> **Samia**: you've got to be kidding me; that's impossible!!
>
> **Lina**: why? You don't know the proverb that says <u>ʕumir il-hayyeh maa saarat xayyeh</u> 'the snake will never become your sister.'
>
> **Samia**: but you said Fida'a is Rima's friend! how could she do such a thing!
>
> **Lina**: this is what people think; we don't really know how Fida'a really feels about Rima.

An examination of table 3 indicates that 7 subjects used backward downgrading to infer the intended meaning of the underlined proverb. It could be argued that the context that precedes the proverb gives a hint about its intended meaning; Fida'a who stabs her friend Rima in the back causing her to be fired from her job. Table 3 also shows that 2 subjects used forward downgrading to provide the meaning of the proverb. If one looks at the context that follows the proverb, a clear indication of the proverb's meaning is found; Fida'a was only pretending to be Rima's friend because no one can know how Fida'a really feels about Rima. The 2 subjects indicated that Fida'a is compared to a snake in her deceitfulness that is, she was hiding her true face waiting for the right moment to strike. One respondent used outward downgrading and brought her background knowledge to the text to help her infer the meaning of the proverb. The respondent indicated that she knows another proverb that has a similar meaning to the underlined proverb above: *min giwwa hallah hallah wumin barra yiʕlam allah;* that is, things or people are not always what they seem. Based on the above mentioned

analysis, it is clear that proverbs could be easily perceived when they occur in their social contexts. The analysis also showed that the subjects relied heavily, in many cases, on the context that precedes the proverb to detect its meaning.

6. Conclusion

This paper provided an analysis of five Arabic proverbs taken from the Palestinian culture in terms of sound features, cohesion and lexical expressions showing how the uniqueness of their structure and content make them informative and interesting. The five proverbs were given to 10 native speakers of Palestinian Spoken Arabic (PSA) first out of context, then in 5 short dialogues. The subjects were asked to provide their meanings, if they could do so, they were asked to indicate the strategy they have followed. Based on Meider's (2004) argument, who indicated that proverbs can be easily understood if they occur in their social contexts; the study showed that only 48% of the subjects were able to provide the correct meaning of the five proverbs out of context, whereas 80% of the subjects were able to provide the meanings of the proverbs correctly in context. The subjects used different strategies, namely, relying on the context that preceded the proverb (backward downgrading), the context that followed the proverbs (forward downgrading) or retrieving knowledge they already have and thus going beyond the context (outward downgrading). Hence, the subjects were able to downgrade the third order occurrences, the proverbs, into second order. It was noticeable that backward downgrading was used by most subjects, it is usually the case that when people do not understand the meaning of a word or an expression they encounter in a text, they go back to the context that precedes it to figure out the meaning of that word or expression. Large-scale studies of the strategies used to comprehend the meaning of proverbs in context are recommended to provide insight into the techniques different individuals use to make sense of a certain text.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Arabic Sounds

Arabic consonants/vowels	Symbols	Description
ء	ʔ	voiceless glottal stop
ب	b	voiced bilabial stop
ت	t	voiceless dento-alveolar stop
ث	th	voiceless inter-dental fricative
ج	j	voiced post-alveolar affricate
ح	<u>h</u>	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
خ	x	voiceless uvular fricative
د	d	voiced dento-alveolar stop
ذ	ð	voiced alveolar fricative
ر	r	voiced alveo-palatal trill
ز	z	voiced alveolar fricative
س	s	voiceless alveolar fricative
ش	ʃ	voiceless alveo-palatal fricative
ص	<u>s</u>	voiceless alveolar emphatic fricative
ض	<u>d</u>	voiced alveolar emphatic stop
ط	<u>t</u>	voiceless dento-alveolar emphatic stop
ظ	<u>ð</u>	voiced alveolar emphatic fricative
ع	ʕ	voiced pharyngeal fricative
غ	gh	voiced uvular fricative
ف	f	voiceless labio-dental fricative
ق	q	voiceless uvular stop
ك	k	voiceless velar stop
ل	l	voiced alveolar lateral
م	m	voiced bilabial nasal
ن	n	voiced alveolar nasal
ه	h	voiceless glottal fricative
و	w	voiced labio-velar glide
ي	y	voiced palatal glide
/´/	a	low short central unrounded
/ˏ/	u	high short back rounded
/ˌ/	i	high short front unrounded

آ	aa	low long central unrounded
وو	uu	high long back rounded
يي	ii	high long front unrounded
و	o:	mid long back rounded
او	aw	low short front unrounded + labio-velar glide
اي	ay	low short front unrounded + palatal glide
يي	ee	mid long front unrounded

Appendix 2. The Five Dialogues in Arabic

من خلال قراءة الحوارات الآتية، أجب عن السؤالين الآتيين:

1) ما معنى المثل المخطوط تحته؟
2) إذا تعرفت على معنى المثل فأرجو التحديد إن كان السبب:
   أ. معرفة سابقة في المثل
   ب. الاستدلال على المعنى من خلال السياق الذي سبق المثل أو السياق الذي تلا المثل.

حوار (1)
حوار بين رجلين (محمد و فادي)
محمد: شفتلك والله هذاك اليوم واحد طول وعرض وشخصية بس لما قرب علي انصدمت شكلو كثير بختلف!
فادي:هاذ زي ما بقول المثل <u>يا شايف الزول يا خايب الرجا</u>.
محمد: عن جد الواحد مش لازم يحكم على الأشخاص من بعيد.

حوار (2)
حوار بين أم و ابنتها في المنزل:
البنت: صاحبتي تقدملها عريس بس رفضتو لأنو مش متعلم و هية معاها شهادة جامعية مع انو الشب كتيير منيح بس برضو قرارها معقول.
الأم: والله امي كانت دايما تحكي <u>"خلي الزيت بجراره تايجيه سعاره."</u>
البنت: فعلا البنت مش لازم تتسرع و تقبل اي حدا بس عشان الناس ما تحكي عنها.

حوار (3)
حوار بين زملاء (أحمد و علي):
احمد: و الله الوضع تعبان هالأيام كثير، اذا في مجال ادايني لآخر الشهر 100 ليرة و ان شاءلله بسدهم واحنا عارفينك بنشد فيك الظهر و ما بترجعنا خايبيين.
علي: والله انا كنت بتمنى اني اقدر اساعد بس هالشهر علي التزامات كثيرة مش عارف كيف بدي ادبر حالي.
لما رجع احمد عالبيت سألتو مرتو :
امرأة احمد: شو صار مع علي؟ أعطاك الفلوس؟
أحمد: و الله المثل ما خلا اشي و ما حكا <u>"جيناك يا عبد المعين تاتعين لكيناك يا عبد المعين بتنعان"</u>
امرأة أحمد: ما لقيتش الا هاد تتطلب منو دايما فاهم الناس غل

حوار (4)
حوار بين نساء(لمياء و سهير) عن امرأة عجوز مشلولة (أم جمال)
لمياء: مين ها المرأة الي دايما بتجي بتساعد أم جمال؟ انا بعرف انو ما الها حدا هون!
سهير: ما رح تصدقي اذا حكيتلك هاي جارتها.
لمياء: و الله صدق المثل الي قال <u>"جارك القريب و لا اخوك البعيد"</u>
سهير: الدنيا صارت بتخوف، مين الو قلب يترك هالمرأة العجوز المسكينة وما يسأل عنها؟

حوار (5)

حوار بين زميلتين (لينا و سامية)

لينا: بتعرفي مين الي فسد عن ريما و خلّاها تنطرد من الشغل؟

سامية: لا و الله مين؟

لينا: صاحبتها فداء

سامية: لا يا بنت الحلال مستحيل!!

لينا: ليش ما بتعرفي المثل الي بحكي <u>عمر الحية ما صارت خية؟</u>

سامية: لا بس انتي بتحكي هاي صاحبتها؟!

لينا: هاذا الي ظاهر للناس بس ما بتعرفي شو في جواها.

Appendix 3. The Five Dialogues in English

Read the following dialogues and then answer the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of the underlined proverb?

2. If you were able to provide the meaning of the proverb please indicate what aided you:

Previous knowledge of the proverb.

The context that occurred before the proverb or the one that follows it.

Dialogue (1)

A dialogue between two men (Mohammad and Fady):

Mohammad: the other day I saw a tall guy with broad shoulders from a distance but when he came close to me, I was shocked by how he really looks like.

Fady: you know, there is a proverb that says *yaa ʃaayif izzo:l yaa xaayib irrajaa* 'you, who see the illusion of a person from afar, you would be disappointed once he comes close.'

Mohammad: yeah man seriously, we shouldn't judge people on how they look like from afar.

Dialogue (2):

A dialogue between a mother and her daughter at their house:

Daughter: someone proposed to my friend but she rejected him since he is uneducated unlike her. The guy seems to be really good; however, her decision is quite reasonable.

Mother: my mother used to always say *xallii izzeit bigraaro: taayigii s ʕaaro:* 'keep the oil in its jars, until you get a good pay for it.'

Daughter: yes that's right; a girl shouldn't just agree to marry anyone because people won't stop gossiping about you no matter what you do.

Dialogue (3):

A dialogue between two colleagues (Ahmad and Ali):

Ahmad: things are not going very well with me financially these days; I was wondering if you could lend me 100 JDs till the end of the month and I promise you that I'll give them back. I know you won't turn your back to me and let me go empty handed.

Ali: I wish I could help you Ahmad, but I have a lot of financial obligations this month. In fact I really don't know what I'm going to do.

When Ahmad went back home his wife asked him:

Ahmad's wife: what happed today? Has Ali given you the money?

Ahmad: our ancestors knew what they were doing when they said *giinaak yaa ʕabd il muʕiin taatʕiin, lkiinaak yaa ʕabd il moʕiin btinʕaan* 'we came to ʕbd il-moʕiin (male-name) so that he can help us, we found that ʕbd il-moʕiin himself needs help.'

Ahmad's wife: you should have asked someone else for money; people always manage to deceive you.

Dialogue (4)

A conversation between two women (Lamya and Suheir), they are talking about a patient at the hospital; an old woman (Om Jamal) who is paralyzed.

Lamya: who is that woman who always visits Om Jamal and help her? I thought that her family is not here!

Suheir: you won't believe it if I tell you but that woman is her neighbor!

Lamya: you know there is a proverb that says *gaarak il-kariib wala ʔaxuuk il-bʕiid* 'your close neighbor and not your far away brother.'

Suheir: the world is becoming really scary, who is cruel enough to leave that poor old woman without any help whatsoever.

Dialogue (5):

A conversation between two colleagues (Lina and Samia)

Lina: did you know who said really bad things about Rima and made her get fired?

Samia: No who?

Lina: Rima's friend; Fida'a.

Samia: you've got to be kidding me; that's impossible!!

Lina: why? You don't know the proverb that says ʕ*umir il-hayyeh maa saarat xayyeh* 'the snake will never become your sister.'

Samia: but you said Fida'a is Rima's friend how could she do such a thing!

Lina: this is what people think; we don't really know how Fida'a really feels about Rima.