

A Cross-Linguistic Comprehension of Arabic and English Numerical Idioms and Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverbs and idioms are linguistic texts that were formed based on experiences which were accumulated over years and passed from one generation to another. Knowing and apprehending them enable their L2 users to understand the mentality of their native speakers. The present study aims to explore a number of Arabic and English proverbs and idioms in which numbers are used in order to comprehend the way in which they are formed and used. The corpus was subject to inspection to comprehend its linguistic structure and social functions. The findings showed that most of the Arabic and English proverbs and idioms analysed share the same number use and social function. Besides, the investigation showed that while these proverbs and idioms sometimes share the same words, others use different words in order to express the same social function.

Key words: English, Arabic, proverbs, idioms, comparison, numbers, social functions.

Resumen

Los proverbios y modismos son textos lingüísticos formados a partir de experiencias acumuladas a lo largo de años y transmitidas de generación en generación. Conocerlos y aprehenderlos permite a usuarios de una segunda lengua comprender la mentalidad de los hablantes nativos. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo explorar de manera comparativa una serie de proverbios y modismos numerales árabes e ingleses para comprender la forma en que fueron creados y son utilizados. El corpus fue sujeto a inspección para analizar su estructura lingüística y funciones sociales. Los hallazgos mostraron que la mayoría de los proverbios y modismos árabes e ingleses analizados comparten el uso del mismo número y función social. Los resultados también revelaron que, si bien estos refranes y modismos a veces comparten las mismas palabras, otras veces utilizan palabras diferentes para expresar la misma función social. *Palabras claves:* inglés, árabe, proverbios, modismos, comparación, números, funciones sociales.

Introduction

Customs and traditions are a reflection of the language, history, culture, civilization and knowledge of a society. They were formed as a result of the experiences of its members, and, as time passes, they acquire some kind of stability and “sanctity” that would make the process of changing them, or not committing to them, very difficult. Proverbs and idioms are prominent

examples of these customs and traditions, which are the result of a life experience that one individual or people went through in a certain place and time. Over time they form a collective memory of the people and greatly affect their thinking, and social behaviour both positively or negatively. Through their comprehension and repeated use, the society plays a major role in spreading and rooting them to become a basic pattern of the individual and collective thinking and behaviour. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions are lexical units that usually consist of a group of fixed words that carry a special meaning. They are an important part of any language. Proverbs and idioms express stereotypical connotations about literary, linguistic and cultural traditions of a group of people.

These proverbs and idioms enable us to understand and comprehend how people think, see things, and express their moral and practical principles toward others, things or events. Proverbs and idioms are an expressive picture of the wisdom of nations and an honest and accurate portrayal of their visions. They are also common linguistic characteristics between languages that have impact on the understanding of the cultural, linguistic, social and historical developments of the people due to the fact that they reflect the reality of people and their relationship with the surrounding environment as well as their relationship with other peoples in other places. The importance and the impact of proverbs and idioms are evident in their stability in the collective mind of a group of people. Their transmission from one generation to another make them a dominant social behaviour, laws that regulate social relations, and a decisive influence when viewpoints differ. Proverbs and idioms are used as promotive tools to support or refute ideas, opinions, or actions. The Arabic and English languages, like other languages of the world, are bulk with many proverbs and idioms that reflect the people's thinking about things, individuals and events. As a result of the similarity of human thought, the two languages have proverbs and idioms that are alike in their linguistic structure and social functions, including the proverbs and idioms that express their social and cultural functions by using numbers, which the present study aims to investigate.

Literature Review

Any culture has many elements that differ from each other. Despite differences, sometimes there are similarities in their linguistic structure and social function. Such elements include, for example, but are not limited to, aphorisms, jokes, songs, tales, riddles, proverbs and idioms. Over the years, a tremendous number of proverbs and idioms related to varied themes were formed. Some refer to natural conditions, animals, people's way of living, and social relations. Proverbs and idioms with numbers are one of the most commonly used expressions.

According to He and Zhang (2018, p. 425) and Abie (2019, p. 73), proverbs are a genre of oral literature that clearly show the positive or negative, strong or weak sides of its nation and are a form of language that is produced on the basis of cultural concepts and social encyclopedia to help people recognise life, find its meaning, encourage their will, and to reflect a nation's social life, custom and mode of thinking. Proverbs are good teachers because, as Granbom-Herranen, (2010, p. 99) pointed out, "everyday life is full of opportunities to learn the manners, norms and attitudes in society. These are the things that are easily included in proverbs, and using proverbs in the learning process is not only a matter of information and knowledge, it is combined with many kinds of feelings and emotions". As a portrait of life, proverbs, as stated by Jayawardena (2015, p. 107), are known for their wisdom that is brought by earlier generations to the present through oral tradition where they refer not only to humans, and animals, but also to various other subjects such as nature, weather, time, or money. Rasul

(2015, p. 53), and Shi and Zhang (2017, p. 459) added that proverbs are précised and condensed sayings that are frequently used to express general truths, practical precepts and to reflect social customs and human psychological ideas. Because proverbs are part of a given society or culture, they reflect all features of a society such as traditions, habits, democracy, equality, or gender (Barasa & Opande, 2017, p. 83). Fahmi (2016, p. 51) pointed out that ‘exposure to proverbs in both the Arabic and the English languages can transform one’s perceptions and values regarding cultural diversity and can also facilitate new understanding and insights into the foreign cultural concepts enhancing intercultural competence’.

Back to He and Zhang (2018, p. 425) and Abie (2019, p. 73), they stated that an idiom is a concise phrase or short sentence which is used by ordinary people in daily life. Jarad and Abu-Ssaydeh (2017, p. 8), and Salim and Mehawesh (2013, p. 108) referred to idioms as an integral part of language and as a colorful fascinating and pervasive aspect of any language, used in informal, formal, spoken or written contexts, and, as described by Yang (2010, p. 73), which take the responsibility of spreading culture and putting forward the civilization of a nation or a community. Oualif (2017, p. 23) said that ‘idioms are linguistic expressions or lexical items that have got a vast territory in a way that they can include many cultural aspects such as religious beliefs, culture-specific items, superstitions, and different ideologies of the people from diverse societies and nations.’

Concerning idioms in Arabic and English, Aldahesh (2013, p. 28) pointed out that both languages rely on idiomatic expressions in all aspects of their spoken and written mode, idiomatic expressions of a special nature and subject to syntactic and semantic restrictions. They are rather language and culture-specific and their meanings are far from the sum of the meanings of their individual components, their semantic and syntactic complexities require a high proficiency level on the part of non-native speakers to be able to understand and produce them properly. Unlike English, which allows idioms to be grammatically ill-formed, Arabic idioms are perfectly grammatical, and, unlike English, which gives a clear prominence to phrasal verbs as one of the most important types of idiomatic expressions, Arabic does not categorise them as such. As pointed out by Hassan and Hamza (2018, p. 58) Arabic and English idioms can be lexemic, phraseological and proverbial, and can include verbal, nominal, adjectival and adverbial expressions.

As stated by Ackerman (1982, p. 439), ‘a knowledge of how to interpret nonliteral uses of sentences is an important aspect of comprehending a speaker’s message’. Hamdan and Smadi (2021, p. 985) pointed out that transparent idioms are understood earlier and easier than opaque ones. To understand fully any language, the exceptions to standard usage must be understood, being idioms one of them (Cronk & Schweigert, 1992, p. 131). The figurative understanding of proverbs, according to Nippold et al. (1988, p. 19), is an analytical task requiring an individual to reflect actively upon the meaning of a proverb in relation to the context in which it was spoken and to perceive metaphoric comparisons. Because proverbs express opinions rather than absolute truths and because of personal and contextual factors, their messages may be subject to dispute so their comprehension is an important aspect of later language development (Nippold & Haq, 1996, p. 166).

Data Collection and Methodology

As a descriptive and analytical study, the present article depends on data that were collected from different related online and printed sources. For the limited scale of the present study, a representative sample of Arabic and English proverbs and idioms in which numbers

are used has been selected. The corpus of the study is collected by personal efforts of the researcher himself, who then thoroughly investigated the chosen proverbs and idioms in order to find out their cross-linguistic comprehension, linguistic structure and social functions.

Discussion and Analysis

Numbers have a prominent role in life, as they have an amazing impact on the march of individuals and civilization. We live in a world of numbers that enter all aspects and details of existence from the day of birth until the day of death. Our lives are calculated through hours, days, months, and years. Our lives are full with numbers, which affect us all in a way or another. Numbers appear in popular culture in songs, tales, riddles, sayings, as well as proverbs and idiomatic expressions, which employ different elements in their formation. To know the linguistic, cultural and social impact of numbers on our lives, this would require comprehending how they are used in various linguistic texts, such the previously mentioned ones. Proverbs or idioms with a number are one of the most common linguistic phenomena and are often of particular interest, because each character denotes a certain concept. The use of numbers in idioms and proverbs reflects the development of digital counting in humans since ancient times. Analysing the use of numbers in proverbs and idioms in Arabic and English may give a glimpse of the historical and digital development of these two nations. The data show that Arabic and English proverbs and idioms contain different numbers which range from zero to ten. The following section is a cross-linguistic discussion and analysis to comprehend the Arabic and English proverbs and idioms in which numbers are used.

1. Kill two birds with one stone

ضرب عصفورين بحجر واحد

Dharab a'sfureen bihajar wahed

Hit two birds with one stone

The two proverbs are verb phrases. Both languages, Arabic and English, agree on the number of the birds (two) and the stones (one) that are used for hunting them, but they differ in the verb that shows the hunting of the birds, as the Arabic proverb uses the verb *hit*, while the English one uses the verb *kill*. From a social point of view, we can comprehend that the two proverbs express the same meaning which is to achieve two things together by using only one object/instrument/strategy. The two proverbs reflect a traditional and primitive method for hunting birds (using a stone) in both cultures and environments, which shows a similarity between the two societies. From the two verbs, it can be understood that getting tangible and intangible things can be achieved by using material tools.

2. A bird in a hand is worth two in the bush

عصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة

U'sfor fi alyad khairun min a'asharatin a'ala alshajarati

A bird in hand is better than ten on the tree

The two proverbs agree on showing the idea that it is preferable to be satisfied with what already exists and is available rather than with something that does not exist or that is hard to get. The two proverbs agree on using the number one for the bird, the tree, and the hand, but they differ on the number that expresses the goodness of the non-existent birds that they

compare to the bird in the hand. As for the Arabic proverb, it uses the number ten, whereas the English one uses the number two. The two proverbs are nominal sentences. A connotative meaning can be comprehended from the two proverbs which show the importance of birds as a source of benefit for the human being in the two cultures. It can also be comprehended that it is preferable to have a small quantity of something than a bigger amount of something which is not within our grasp. It is a metaphorical invitation to contentment by using tangible and material objects that reflect human life.

3. Zero hour

ساعة الصفر

Sai't alsifir

Zero hour

This Arabic and English common idiom refers to a decisive time or hour that is set or determined in order to start a vital action or key event. Linguistically, the idioms share the same number and the word *time*.

4. Zero point

نقطة الصفر

Nuqtat alsifir

Zero point

Although this idiomatic expression linguistically has the same number, *zero*, and the same noun, *point*, in both Arabic and English, it slightly differs in the functions. In Arabic it means starting from the beginning (from the base to the top), returning to the first beginning, or the starting point of something, whereas in English it has several meanings, for example the point on a scale that denotes zero and from which positive or negative numerical quantities can be measured or made, the point from which progress can be charted, or the location of the centre of a burst of a nuclear weapon at the instant of detonation. The aforementioned two idioms, *Zero hour* and *Zero point*, share the number, which urges us to investigate its cultural importance. Zero is "nothing", but this "nothing" is strongly present around us. As a measure in itself, it may be an expression of worthlessness, but it is included in the measurement of values, and the greater its presence, the greater the value which makes us realise its significance in increasing the value of things and events. Our comprehension of the value of zero makes us understand the importance of using it as the starting point for important and dangerous things.

5. At sixes and sevens

ضرب أخماس بأسداس

Dharab akhmas biasdas

Hit fifths in sixths

The idiom is used in Arabic and English to show the situation or the state in which an individual or a group of people are confused, uncertain, disorganized, or in a difficult situation and are unable to distinguish between two or more people or things. In spite of the social functions of the idiom in the two languages, its concretisations differ in their linguistic components and numbers. Only the Arabic idiom uses a verb: *dharab*, which means "hit".

While the English version uses the preposition *at*, the Arabic one uses the preposition *bi* i.e., “by”. The English idiom also uses the conjunction *and*. They differ in the numbers used as the Arabic idiom uses the plural numbers *fifths* and *sixths*, but the English one uses the plural numbers *sixes* and *sevens*. The use of large numbers in arithmetic operations may exhaust the brain in the thinking processes involved, which leaves the person confused and somehow unable to distinguish between things clearly. This allows us to understand the importance of using these numbers in this idiomatic expression in the two languages.

6. A cat has nine lives

زي القطط بسبع أرواح

Zai alqutat bisabi' arwah

Like cats with seven lives

This proverb is related to cats showing their ability to survive a close encounter with death because of their light weight and fast speed, which enable them to escape danger. To exaggerate this feline ability, the Arab and English cultures have used a large number of lives in the idiom, expressing this survival skill through the cat's possibility of losing a soul and still having another one to spare. This proverb is used to reflect a person's ability to survive dangerous situations and misfortunes as if he came back to life again, being able to stand on his feet one more time. In spite of the similar social function, the two proverbs differ in the number of cats and lives. The Arabic proverb uses the cat in a plural form while the English one uses a singular noun. They also differ in the number of lives, which are seven in Arabic, but nine in English. Saying that cats have seven or nine lives is a popular belief among people although there is no real and scientific basis for it, so where did this myth about cats come from? Surely, no one knows even though it has been around for a long time. In ancient Egypt, cats were sacred animals that people worshiped as deities. The ancient Egyptians believed that cats were divine creatures with supernatural spiritual powers, which might have given origin to the myth of their multiple lives, and thus to the proverb in question.

7. Two peas in a pod

فوله وانقسمت نصين

Fulih winqasmat nussean

A bean split into two halves

Despite the fact that the two idioms share the same meaning and social function, they differ in their numbers and the legume that is used to express the similarity between two elements. The two idioms mean that two people or things are very much alike in their physical appearance or behavior. The Arabic idiom uses the number *two halves*, whereas the English one uses the number *two*. Although in both idioms a legume is mentioned, in the Arabic one *bean* (in the singular form) is used while in the English one *pea* (in the plural form) is employed. The Arabic idiom portrays the image of similarity by having a single bean split in two equal halves whereas the English one shows similarity by having two peas that belong to the same pod. In both cases the legume is either the same, though divided, or part of the same plant.

8. Caught between two stools

واقع بين نارين

Waqii' Bain narean
Fall Between two fires

This shared idiom shows the inability to decide between two things. Although the two idioms have the similar social function, they differ in their linguistic structure as the Arabic idiom uses the noun *fire* in a dual form which means “two” in Arabic, while the English one uses the noun *stool* with the number *two*. Both idioms share the use of the same preposition. Understanding the fact that sitting on two stools is impossible, or at least difficult, clarifies the situation of being unable to take a decision or a course of action. The urgency of being caught between two fires would not let us think clearly either. While decision making is hindered in both situations, it is caused by different reasons. In the English case it would be because of a positive reason, to sit and relax on one stool or the other, whereas in the Arabic case it would be due to a negative one, imminent danger from two sources.

9. Back to square one
رجعنا "عدنا" للمربع الأول
Rajaa'na lalmurabba' alawwal
Back 'return' to square one

The idiom socially means returning back to the beginning, or the starting point. Linguistically, it has the same words and number in both versions. In Arabic there are two options of verb with the same meaning. There are three possible reasons why the square was chosen in this idiomatic expression instead of other geometric shapes, such triangle, rectangle or circle. It can be speculated that this idiom is related to the time when football matches were listened to on the radio, the playground was divided into a grid of imaginary squares and the commentator would refer to a ball that missed the goal or a footballer who made a pass back. Another speculation is that the use of the first square has a relation with the board game *Snakes and ladders*, in which the board is divided into squares with rewards and forfeits that can make players advance or go back, in the worst of cases to square one. Another speculation is associated with the children's game *Hopscotch* whose playground is divided into numbered squares; each player must drop a stone inside a square and advance hopping without stepping onto the lines, which would result in going back to square one.

10. Perfect ten
على سنجة عشرة
A'ala singit a'asharah
At top ten

The two idioms have number *ten* to mean that someone's appearance is totally stylish, or that something has been fully made. It comes from the rating system used in beauty pageants or in some educational systems, where one is the lowest score, and ten is the highest one. The Arabic idiom is often used to describe a man who wears the *Fez*, a traditional hat, tilted to the right, this slight inclination implying prestige, elegance, confidence and self-esteem. The word *singit* was distorted over time as it was derived from the word *sinja*, which is one of the tools that were used to weigh gold, and which weighed 10 milligrams. The purpose of using this idiomatic expression is to show that perfect elegance is weighed by the scale of gold.

11. Fifty-fifty

النص بالنص

Alnus bilnus

Half-half

Despite the fact that the Arabic idiom uses the repeated number *half* and the English idiom uses the repeated number *fifty*, both of them show the same social notion of dividing something equally. Using these numbers enables us to understand the meaning of the idiom which refers to having the same share or portion between two individuals or two groups of people because these numbers denote equality.

12. Four-eyes

أربع عيون

Araba' I'uon

Four-eyes

The two versions of the idiom are used as a mocking, derogatory, or insulting expression of someone who wear eyeglasses. They share the same number in the two languages and the same linguistic structure. To understand the idiom, it should be noted that glasses are considered as another pair of eyes which with the original ones add up four.

13. Of two minds

بعقلين

Iba'aqlean

Of two minds

Both the Arabic and English equivalents use the same number and the same part of the body to serve the same social function of describing someone as undecided to make a choice because of having two opinions or ideas about it. Clearly, two heads cannot lead a single body, so having two minds would make a person feel confused.

14. Slip (one) five

مخامسة

Imkhamasih

Slip (one) five

Both the Arabic and English idioms mean the action of shaking hands. The Arabic idiom uses the word *imkhamasih* which has the connotative meaning of handshaking by using the right hand. The meaning of the idiom becomes clear when associating the number *five* to the five fingers needed to grab someone else's hand and shake it as a way of greeting.

15. Two heads are better than one

رأيان أفضل من رأي واحد

Ra'yan 'afdal min ray' wahid

Two opinions are better than one

The two idioms show the social function of collaboration and sharing opinions and views when solving a problem or before taking an important decision. From a structural view, the two versions share the comparative adjective *better* and the same numbers, but differ in the nouns that accompany those numbers. The Arabic idiom uses the intangible noun *opinion* whereas the English idiom uses the tangible body part *head*. However, opinions are formed in the speakers's minds, i.e., in their heads. Therefore, both concretisations of the idiom hold close relation.

16. Love at first sight

الحب من أول نظرة

Alhub min awal nadhrah

Love at first sight

The two idioms show the experience of falling in love with someone from the very first moment one sees the other. The two idioms have the same words and the same ordinal number. This number is key in depicting the beginning of the lover's infatuation.

17. Rome was not built in a one day

الدنيا خلقت في سبعة أيام

Aldunya khuliqat fi saba'at 'ayaam

The world was created in seven days

The two idioms show the importance of taking the necessary time and not rushing in order to do things well. The two idioms agree on the social purpose, but they differ in the number of days and in the words which show deliberation. The Arabic idiom uses the number *seven*, while the English idiom uses the number *one*. The Arabic proverb uses the words *created* and *world* while the English idiom uses the words *built* and *Rome*. In the Arabic expression number seven has a religious dimension indicating the time it took Allah to create the world, his biggest feat, according to the Islamic religious belief. In the English idiom, which refers to the construction of the city of Rome, the capital city of a great empire, the statement is expressed in the negative form as it holds that such action was not completed in one day. Both idioms highlight that creating or constructing something important takes time as well as effort and patience.

18. These four walls

بين أربع حيطان

Bain arba' heatan

Between four walls

The two idioms share the same number and noun to refer to the room where a person feels sheltered or where a secret can be kept. To understand the purpose of using the number *four*, it should be noted that an ordinary room has four walls which make it an enclosed place to keep things safe.

19. Half an eye

بنص عين

Ibnus ean

With half an eye

The two idioms share the fraction *half* and the body part *eye* with the same social function of not paying full attention to a person, object or a situation. In Arabic the idiom also means that someone is gazing at another one with one eye as a symbol of ignoring or threatening them. The eyes are the organs for seeing; when both eyes are used, it means that the observer pays full attention to what is being observed, but if he is deliberately using one eye to look at someone or something, this implies such look is ignoring, neglecting or threatening.

Conclusion

Proverbs and idioms reflect the experiences and cultures of different nations and their ability to formulate such experiences in brief words in the form of popular linguistic templates to portray the conditions of former generations and record their events, feelings and views of life. Such case gives these proverbs and idioms the opportunity to become an important source of the linguistic, cultural and social heritage. They encourage positive behaviours and prevent negative ones. The Arabic and English languages, like other languages, are full of proverbs, sayings and idioms that reflect both different and shared views of life. Understanding the way in which such idioms and proverbs were formed gives us a close look at the mentality of those who created and use them. The present article aims to report on a comparative research study on Arabic and English proverbs and idioms containing numbers. Besides, exploring the linguistic structure and the social functions of these proverbs and idioms, an attempt was made to discover the way in which they were formed. The study showed that there is a similarity between the two languages as the numbers used in most of the idioms coincide or, in the cases in which they differ, they express the same social function. Understanding how these proverbs and idioms were formed clarifies their meaning. The study expects that it has shed a glimpse of light on this linguistic, cultural and social aspect between the two languages, with the hope that it might be a motivation for more similar studies.

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