



## A study of pragmatic processes in most commonly used Iraqi proverbs

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### Abstract

Proverbs are traditional and cultural sayings exchanged by people of certain society for the purpose of giving advices, criticizing and conveying information with a specific cultural touch. The focus on the concept of culture here indicates the fact that each society, thus a social dialect, has its own set of proverbs. Some of those proverbs are more commonly used than others. Further, one of the most obvious features of proverbs is the indirect style used in constructing the meaning and, thus, the deeper impact they leave on the listener. This study, therefore, aims at investigating the pragmatic processes involved in constructing such proverbs and conveying such implicit meanings. The study tries to present a systematic and explanatory account of the modified meaning established in a set of common Iraqi proverbs following a lexical pragmatic approach.

**Keywords:** proverbs, pragmatic processes, Iraqi dialect, lexical pragmatics

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### 1. Introduction

Lexical pragmatics builds its interpretation on information driven from semantic meanings, conventional implicatures, contextual clues and a set of encyclopedic knowledge (Wilson D lectures, 2006:1). This means that lexical pragmatics explains the more complex meaning established via the use of a semantic lexicon. This kind of meaning modification is of a great interest to today's world and studies. Therefore, the analysis of such cultural proverbs provides the literature with a wealth of data on the way different languages and dialects communicate such implied meanings. Such a study, thus, gives an account on the pragmatic use of lexical items, the cultural touch in certain dialects and the culture of certain society (namely Iraq).

Accordingly, the current study aims at investigating the pragmatic processes involved in the construction of some of the most commonly used Iraqi proverbs and investigating the way implicit meaning is established in Iraqi proverbs and culture. Adopting a modified version of Wilson and Carston (2007) <sup>[10]</sup>, the study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main pragmatic processes utilized in the construction of the set of the selected most common Iraqi proverbs?
2. How implied meaning is communicated in Iraqi Arabic dialect?
3. What pragmatic changes should be taken into consideration in translating and interpreting Iraqi Arabic proverbs into another language?

### 2. Lexical Pragmatics

Pragmatics as a main branch of linguistics enables us to understand the implicit meaning of the utterances. That is, it enables us to interpret the meaning that is not directly mentioned by the speaker (Birner, 2013: 6-7) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Lexical pragmatics as a sub-branch of pragmatics is defined as a field of study that attempts to give an explanatory and systematic account of the pragmatic phenomena associated with the semantic indeterminacy of lexical elements in utterances or sentences (Bulter, 1998:115). It combines restrictive (constrained-based) semantics with a conversational embedding mechanism (conversational implicature) in order to come up with an explanatory representation of the implicit meaning conveyed (ibid). In other words, lexical pragmatics aims at bridging the gap between what one says and what s/he intends. The intention is usually culturally (on the base of common knowledge) established.

### 3. Pragmatic Processes

One of the established models in the literature of lexical pragmatics is the one presented by Wilson and Carston (2007) [10]. The model investigates a set of processes by which word meanings are specified in use. That is, it investigates the modifications of lexical meaning in use. Those processes and a set of others are explained below.

#### 3.1. Lexical Broadening

Lexical broadening is the process by which the sense of a word is extend. That is, the meaning conveyed is changed into a more general one from the original one. This process undergoes non- linguistic changes (Factors outside the meaning) as it occurs when a word is repeatedly used in an expanded sense as a response to the change in psychological, cultural, social factors and needs. For example: the word “model” is originally used to refer to fashion models, but now it refers to fashion models and furniture models (Jackson, 2010:2) [6].

#### 3.2. Lexical Narrowing

Lexical narrowing is the process of specialization or restriction as it makes the meaning of word less general or comprehensive. That is, it is the use of a general word to convey a more specific meaning. Narrowing can occur due to several factors, including cultural, social and psychological ones (Jackson, 2010:2) [6].

#### 3.3. Reduplication

Reduplication is a process of creating a new word by repeating existent words. There are many types of reduplication: total, partial and rhyming. The new word is called (twin-words) like (okay -dawky) (Bäck, 1996:210).

#### 3.4. Approximation

Approximation is a process that explains the concept of approximating a specific fact or object and describing it with something else that is not quite the same but similar to it to some degree (Allenberg and Aijmer, 2013: 146) [1].

#### 3.5. Metaphor

The word metaphor comes from Greek. It means to carry across or beyond, where “meta” refers to (behind) and “phor” refers to (to carry). So, metaphor is a figure of speech that changes the traditional way of referring to ideas or situations in the literal sense and establishes the style of referring to something as something else in order to make the speech sound more descriptive and imaginative. In other words, it is a rhetorical tool that adds more details and complexity to meaning (Semino and Demjen, 2016:11) [8]. Trask (1994:43) defines metaphor as “a figure of speech based on a perceived similarity between distinct objects or actions”. Its purpose is to draw reader’s attention to specific idea. For example: (Stars are like a diamond in the sky).

#### 3.6. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a process used to overemphasize a particular situation by not taking the meaning literally but using it in a symbolic way. Hyperbole is a higher degree of broadening by reflecting a greater departure from the lexical meaning (Kachula, 2013:17). For example, “I almost died of thirst”. Here, in this example, the speaker does not mean actually dying of thirsty, but rather an exaggeration in describing the need for water (Linville, 2018) [7].

### 3.7 Neologism

Neologism refers to the insertion of a new word to a language which has not been common before. The word can be a mixture of two words which already exist in the language or a shortened form of a long word (Cambridge Dictionary).

### 3.8 Analogy

Analogy is a comparison done between two things for the purpose of providing better explanation (ibid).

### 4. Data Collection and Methodology

Data selected for this study is a set of Iraqi proverbs. The proverbs are randomly collected on the base of common use. Twelve proverbs are going to be analysed. The analysis is going to be mainly based on Wilson and Carston’s (2007) [10] model of pragmatic processes. However, some modifications are done in terms of the process investigated.

### 5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of each proverb is done separately. The literal translation, the transliteration and the explanation/ interpretation of each proverb are provided before identifying the pragmatic processes apparent in them.

Table 1

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
من قلة الخيل شدو على الكلاب سروج	miñ qilāṭi alkhayl shadwu ala alkilāḥib surūj

This is a very common Iraqi proverb. It literally can be translated as: For the lack of horses, dogs are saddled. Horses occupy an important place in the Arab culture in general and in Iraqi culture in specific. This is mainly because horses are known as being very thoroughbred animals for their special social and physical features. So, in some eras, Iraqi people establish a close friendship with them and rely heavily on them. Dogs are known as being opposite to horses, that is, they are known to be less special and less thoroughbred. The two words “horse” and “dog” are metaphorically used. The use of these two animals pictures two different kinds of people in life. The proverb, by means of this pragmatic process, establishes a connection between the semantic lexicon and the conventional implicature to convey an implied meaning like: for the lack of good people (like horses), people are forced to establish social relations with less qualified people (like dogs). So, the process of “saddling” dogs instead of horses reflect metaphorically the activity of building social relationship with less qualified people as if they are qualified.

Table 2

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
الطول طول النخلة و العقل عقل الصخلة	alṭūwl ṭūl alnakhla wa al’ aqīl ‘ aqīl alṣakhla

The literal meaning of the proverb is: the tall is as a palm tree tall but the mind is as a goat mind.

In Iraqi Arabic, this proverb is commonly used to communicate sarcasm or criticism in situations where there is no match between appearance and maturity or common sense of a person. That is, when a speaker uses this proverb to address someone, s/he does not actually mean that the person is actually as tall as a palm tree, nor does s/he has

anatomically a mind as exactly as that of a goat mind. The speaker rather establishes an exaggeration in describing the person addressed. The implied, i.e. pragmatic, meaning reads as: the person is very tall (which is a feature that normally reflects prestige and maturity in Arab culture- a positive appearance characteristic), but s/he is not as smart as they must be. The meaning here is established by means of the pragmatic processes of hyperbole (via exaggerating tall) and metaphor (goat mind standing for a stupid person's mind).

Table 3

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
تيتي تيتي مثل مارحتي جيتي	tīty tīty mithl maruḥty jītī

The proverb means: Tity (name of a hypothetical person), Tity: as you went, as you came.

In Iraqi Arabic, The word (tity) is not common by itself as a name. A word with a slight difference in pronunciation (Taty) is commonly used in Iraqi culture when a child is about to take his/her first steps in walking. Tity, in this proverb, is said as might be possibly taken from the word "taty" and reduplicated to sound like "tity". However, the proverb is used to describe a situation where someone seems to try very hard and gets tired but without getting anything good in return or the promised result. That is, it is used in a situation where a failure occurs after a big effort. It pragmatically communicates disappointment. The proverb is obviously constructed by means of two pragmatic processes: 1. Reduplication 2. Analogy. Analogy is established between two different states: a positive start and a negative ending in a helpless situation.

Table 4

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
الي تلده الحية يخاف من جرة الحبل	alī taldaghu alḥayā yakḥāf min jarāṭī alḥabl

This proverb literally means: a person who is bitten by a snake becomes afraid of a pulled rope.

Analogy is a common pragmatic process in the Iraq proverbs. In this proverb, analogy via simile is established. The implicit meaning in this proverb communicates that some people who are bitten by a snake are going to be afraid to deal with anything that resembles it in shape or move. Therefore, when a person bitten by a snake sees a rope being pulled, s/he thinks it is a snake and becomes afraid. Further, the idea of getting bitten by a snake metaphorically implies any bad situation that a person goes through. So, a person gets through a bad experience might live insecurities from situations that are similar to some degree.

Table 5

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
الجيب خالي والخشم عالي	aljīb khālī wa alkhshim `ālī

The literal meaning in this Iraqi proverb reads as: the pocket is empty but the nose is high.

In Iraqi Arabic language, this proverb is used to express the arrogant and cocky person who likes to show off in front of people all the time while he is empty and does not have anything worth showing off. Therefore, in this proverb, "an empty pocket" symbolizes the empty person who has no money. So, "an empty pocket" stands for someone poor while

"high nose" refers to the state of being arrogant and very cocky. The process by which pragmatic meaning is conveyed here is called approximation.

Table 6

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
احاجج يابنتي واسمع ياجنتي	aḥajj yabnty wasm `j ya jnty

This proverb literally means: I talk to you: my daughter, and you hear: my daughter-in-law.

In Iraqi culture, this proverb is used when a person directs certain speech to someone, but in an indirect way. So, the speaker makes themselves as if s/he is talking to a third person so that the second person can hear them and receive the indirect message. The analogy made between daughter and daughter in law in this proverb implicates the sensitive kind of relationship that each one of them hold with mothers and the kind of attitude that mother adopts when directing a speech to each of them. This complexity of the relationship here also resembles a complex relationship between three people or group of people where they are not able to criticize, advice or tell something to one another in a direct and open way.

Table 7

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
غراب يگول لغراب وجهك اسود	ghurāb ygwl lighurāb wajhak ašwad

Literally, this Iraqi proverb means: a crow says to a crow: your face is black.

In Iraq, this proverb is used a lot. It is used to address and criticize a person who keeps criticizing and reproaching people while s/he herself/himself is full of faults and red flags. It is used to address the person who sees and listens to the faults of neighbors, friends and family, but does not look at himself and abandon his own faults. The proverb is also used when two people criticize each other and blame each other while they are both full of flaws- non is better than the other. In this proverb, a metaphorical analogy is established. A word and a phrase are metaphorically used in this proverb. Those are: a crow (an animal standing for a person with bad lack and low qualities) and black face (a phrase indicating bad luck and low qualities).

Table 8

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
ابو طبع ما يغير طبعه	abw ṭab mā yghayir ṭab`uh

This proverb literally means: The person with certain temperament does not change it.

The English translation of this proverb might sound somehow odd. But, in Iraqi Arabic dialect and in Iraqi culture, this proverb is very commonly used. It means that it is difficult and impossible for a person to give up the character and the temperament s/he is known for. That is, people cannot be changed easily. So, it is in most cases useless to try changing others. An example for a situation where this proverb can be used involves a person who is imprisoned for stealing; once he gets out of prison, it happens that he steals again; such a person is described by Iraqi people with the mentioned proverb implicating: this is the temperament of thieves and it cannot be changed. The pragmatic process involved in the

construction of this proverb is lexical narrowing. A general word is used to implicate a specific feature. Even more, the specific meaning in this case is context-determined.

Table 9

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
امشي شهر ولا تبتير نهر	aimshī shahr wa la t'br nahr

This proverb reads as: walk a month but do not cross a river. In Iraqi Arabic, this proverb is used to advise a person to not rush matters and let things take the required time in order to reap the desired fruit, i.e. to get a positive result. The idiomatic advice also implicates that a person must choose the appropriate way and method to approach her/his goals even if it costs her/him more time and energy. It further implicates the necessity of avoiding risky ways. All these implicit meanings can be interpreted from the metaphoric meaning of the two words “walk” VS “cross river”. The meaning is definitely not literal. The two words stand for two methods or ways of doing things – a tiring but safe one VS. a short cut but risky one. This also leads us to analogy. The two words are also linked by means of analogy. Another pragmatic process in noticed in this proverb which is approximation. The use of “walk a month” is an approximation where month stands for any long time, not necessarily a month.

Table 10

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
يامن تعب يامن شگة يا من على الحاضر لگة	Yā man ta'ab yā man shga yā mañ 'ala alhādir lga

This Iraqi proverb means: a person worked, but another got the credit (in certain rhythmic way that fits Iraqi dialect). In Iraqi Arabic, this proverb is used to describe people who work sincerely hard but another person comes to get the credit of their work- usually one who does not work or get tired. The pragmatic process of Neologism is seen in this proverb. The word (Shukah) means a higher level of tiring (with extreme fatigue and sweaty forehead). It implicates a different level of hard work than the usual.

Table 11

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
اجه يخطها عماها	ajha ykahlhā 'amāhā

This proverb literally means: Instead of applying eyeliner for her, s/he blinded her.

In Iraqi culture, this proverb is used to implicate the unintentional negative consequences or damages of doing something good because of – in most cases- less of awareness or lack of knowledge or stupidity. In other words, the proverb describes the person who unintentionally makes a mistake in fixing something, thinking that s/he will get the best outcome. So, the word “eyeliner” stands hyperbolically for a good action while the action of “blinding” stands for the bad consequences.

Table 12

Iraqi Arabic Proverb	Transliteration
نايم ورجليه بالشمس	naym warajīlīh bialshhāms

This proverb means: sleeping with his feet in the sun. In Iraqi Arabic, this proverb is one of the popular proverbs told to the person who does not know what is happening around him, or who has no knowledge of what is happening in general. It is a metaphoric expression where sleeping with feet in the sun implicates the highest level of ignorance and mind-freshness.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has arrived at the following conclusions:

- In Iraqi proverbs, there are many kinds of meaning modification where the linguistically conventionalized meanings of lexical items are socially modified into implicit ones by means of certain pragmatic processes.
- The following kinds of meaning modification are apparent in Iraq proverbs:
  - Meaning specification by means of lexical narrowing as in proverb No.8
  - Meaning generalization by means of lexical broadening and hyperbole as in proverbs No.2 and No.11
  - Meaning emphasis by means of neologism and reduplication as in proverbs No.3 and No.10
  - Approximating meaning by means of approximation as in proverb No.5
  - Meaning resemblance in terms of quality or shape similarities (by means of metaphor) and in terms of quality or shape differences (by means of analogy) as in proverbs No.12 and No.6
- The pragmatic process which are more commonly employed in Iraqi Arabic proverbs are metaphor, hyperbole and analogy.
- The process of figuring out the pragmatic processes in Iraqi Arabic proverbs is useful in clarifying the exact meaning of each proverb in other languages such as English.
- The complexity of Iraqi proverb constructions makes them difficult to translate and interpret in other languages. Detailed explanation triggered via the understanding of pragmatic processes is, thus, the best way to reflect meaning accurately.

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