

Metaphor and Values: a case study of metaphor in Arab and Western cultures in the light of Sitaram and Cogdell's value classification system

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Résumé

L'article ci-présent est un essai pour comprendre le fonctionnement de la métaphore en relation avec deux entreprises culturelles à savoir Arabe et Occidentale. Ceci est fait en conjonction avec le système de classification des valeurs avancées par Sitaram et Cogdell(1981). En effet, ceci a pour objectifs de montrer la manière dont laquelle la classification d'une métaphore sous la bannière de l'universalité ou de la spécificité culturelle est soumise aux éléments d'une culture, notamment celles des valeurs. De la même façon, les métaphores universelles sont connues pour y être plus traduisible que leurs équivalents culturellement spécifiques.

1. Introduction

Culture, with its ingredients that range from beliefs and values to prejudices and stereotypes and many more, contributes fundamentally into the make-up of the social labyrinth. Culture is, indeed, highly intricate as it varies from one community to another. Indeed, the perception and categorization of the world is the immediate corollary of cultural considerations at first place. Language along with culture, work in such a way of moulding our perceptions and our linguistic practices come to disclose cultural considerations. More appropriately, language and culture work in tandem to obtain a sort of patchwork which varies through cultures. Then, learning a second culture might be akin to learning a second language since in both cases such process must be filtered and screened through culture and language respectively. In addition, the learning activity per se is biased by incomplete sources. In this respect, Samovar et al (1981: 85) argue:

“Because we have seen pictures of tribal Africans in the National Geographic, watched old Tarazan movies or toured Africa via the African Safari ride at Disney land, we may have internalized images of all Africans wearing leopard shine, carrying spears, piercing their noses with bones, and living in grass huts.”

A significant variability in value systems is greatly felt in Arab culture in relation to the Western one. Arabs, for instance, may favourably adopt *social stability* and *group solidarity* and disavourably dismiss *arbitrary social change* and *individual freedoms*. Hence, any attempt to rid metaphor from its cultural badge would be doomed to failure. Indeed, Siatram and Cogdell chart their large *value classification table* in association with panoply of cultures, namely, *Western, Black, Moslem, Eastern and African*. The present work, however, is steeped in two cultures: *Arab* and *Western*. By the same token, it selects from the wide range of values three key ones: *individuality, motherhood* and *masculinity*. It should be recalled that Western is, here, referred to as basically secular, whereas Arab designates culture and religion altogether (which is essentially Islam) given its non-secularization until now.

2. Metaphor construal and values

A *value*, as its name indicates, is an evaluative estimating and assessing principle operating in a given culture. It is all about an attribute that is ascribed to one belief within the bonds of a certain culture. *Judgment value binaries* such as *good* and *bad, right* and *wrong, appreciated* and *depreciated, desirable* and *undesirable* are subjectively associated to the *orthodox*, and *unorthodox* beliefs respectively. Naturally, values differ relatively from one society to another. *Conversational non aggressiveness* and *reservation* in England, for instance, is much appreciated in

relation to *openness* and *showiness* which is disfavouredly judged as *uncouth*. In the same way, *polygamous marriages* are allowed in Moslem societies as opposed to the West where they are regarded as forms of adultery. It is worth recapping that values can be personal (microscopic) or cultural (macroscopic). Our focus, however, is on the cultural. Let us consider the following values and see how they would link to metaphor construal.

1. *Individuality*: in the Arab culture this value is relegated to the margins of the values working in such community. The negligibility of *individuality* is due to the fact that *collectivity* is championed and much reinforced. The opposite is true for Western culture however. In this connection, Samovar, L., A. et al. (1981, p. 44) contend:

“In Western culture, the individual is supreme and individualism is a primary positive value. This value probably is most dominant in the United States...People who exploit what they own are viewed as smart and successful... In non-Western cultures, the society comes first.”

Connectedly, after being introduced in a social gathering, the first question an American would ask another is *what kind of work do you do?* Whereas in an Arab context, questions on family and social backgrounds count for more, because *ancestry* ties are nuclear which means that personal individual achievements simply count for less. In a Western context, *individualism* is of a paramount importance. It follows that all duties, rights and values should originate in individuals. *Autonomy*, *responsibility*, and *self centeredness* are delicately nurtured at a very early age and children are extensively trained to problem solving, decision making and question asking.

On the other hand, in the Arab culture, the *family* is an extensively inclusive unit so that many newly married couples live with the husband's family. It is this immediate family that owes loyalties and obligations. By contrast, in Western culture, *rugged individualism* drastically contributed to the dissolution of the *big* family and severance of family ties. Attempts to restore such ties were of little avail even with highly appreciated television serials as *Little house on the prairie*. Following the same line of thought, Carter (2004, p, 30) underscores:

“Cultures characterized by individualism define the self as autonomous from the collective. More collectivist cultures stress the significance of the individual only in relation to the norms and expectations of a larger whole, such as the family or a social or national grouping.”

More interestingly, in the Algerian context (which derives from the larger Arab one), names of *in-laws* are significantly and metaphorically equated with notions of *gathering* and *protection*. Consider these kinship names: *brother-in-law* is metaphorised as /ʔalḥma/ meaning *protector*. Likewise, *sister-in-law* is termed /ʔal ḥmat/. Notice that the /t/ phoneme at the end of the word designates the feminine case. In this context, the metaphorical expression /lḥmia tuɣlab ʔassbaʕ/ comes to signify that collectivity defeats the lion (the strongest and the most ferocious among all animals). The term /ʔalḥma/, then, is twofold as it sends us firstly to the meaning of *protection* and hereby to *collectivity and kinship*. In English, the correlation between *protector* and *in-law* does not obtain nevertheless.

2. *Motherhood*: this value is prioritized in both cultures principally because it is naturally and instinctively appreciated. This can be instantiated in the English metaphor *Every child is a swan*. Every child – no matter how he is or looks like – is the

apple of his parents' eyes. Love blinds parents from seeing the *ugliness* and *disgracefulness* of their child, and therefore, the latter would appear as *beautiful* and *graceful* as *a swan*. In a corresponding way, Algerians tend to express admiration for their children by metaphorizing a *beetle as a gazelle* in its mother's eyes. This results in /kul xanfuus ʕand ʔammu ʔzaal/ (every beetle is a gazelle in its mother's eyes). Mind that the *gazelle* is one of the epitomes of *beauty* in Arab culture. This metaphor is widespread and universal mainly because *motherhood* as a value occupies pride of place in well-nigh all cultures.

3. *Masculinity*: this is proportionately important in both Arab and Western cultures, yet, is obtrusively felt in the former which is very *manly* and *masculine*. Another value which is inextricably tied up to *masculinity* is *equality of women*. The latter is very much emphasised in Western culture and de-emphasized or almost unacknowledged in the Arab one. Women, in such culture are not even able to think clearly and are socially cut for particular jobs or tasks only. It is often said that their decisions are instinctively and intuitionally arrived at, depending too little on rationality and cool reasoning. Women's task is nailed down to rearing and bringing up children. In the Algerian context, a well known metaphor assigned to women is /ʔaddar/ (house). Note its metonymic content too. We have for instance, /ʔaddaar marahumʃ hna/ meaning that the *wife is absent*. Oddly enough, if this metaphor were to be translated into English, we would obtain *the house are not here*. For a Briton, for instance, this would sound completely ridiculous and senseless. Yet, this is the way the vast majority of Algerians would report the absence of the spouse. The use of the term /ʔalmra/ which is the right equivalent of the English word *wife/woman* is very much proscribed. Our culture and society pose many constraints on any possibility of such use. If /ʔalmra/ (woman/wife) would be employed this would connote one's *intimacy*. More than that, it would disclose a sexual charge.

Besides, the use of the plural *are* instead of the singular *is*, is another detour purported to avoid any direct reference to the woman/wife. Another example of man's superiority in Arab culture is found in the metaphor /ʔarradʒal hiiba w lukaannah diiba/ (a man is authority / respectfulness even if he is a wolf). Mind that the final /a/ in *diba* is used for poetical licence. Even if a man is dishonest or cunning, namely, wolfish, respect and obedience are always duly paid to him. By the same token, single women are always underprivileged in the group and henceforth are vulnerably disreputable. Having a man around is always good for shielding one's dignity in society, even if such dignity is molested between the four walls of one's home, by the *wolfish* husband.

Another example is the metaphor /ʕaataq/ used for an *unmarried woman*. Notice that the Algerian Arabic word /ʕaataq/ stems from the classical Arabic one /ʕitq/ which means *set free* or *emancipate*. Relevant to this, we have the religiously loaded expression /ʕitq mina ʔannar/ (set free/save from hell). Unsurprisingly, the same term has another semantic charge relating to *slavery*. /ʕitq/, the argument would run, also means *set a slave free*. From a traditional outlook, as long as the woman is unmarried, she is free /ʕaataq/. Then, marriage, as it were, halts her *depreciated suspicion attracting freedom*.

The portrayal of *women* in metaphor substantiates best the way metaphor outlines beliefs, values and prejudices. The conception of *cool reason* and *rationality*, for instance, has been impinged on by metaphors on women. In any case, a good deal of such metaphors is pejorative. One such metaphor which relates to women's questioned solemnity is /ʕugʔannsa/ literally translatable as (women's market). This metaphor is used mostly to designate an *altercation* or a *noisy tempestuous* argument. In this respect, Rooney (1991, p.79) expounds this idea by underlining that the theme on *rationality* as aligned with *maleness* and *irrationality*

with *femaleness* emanates from ancient Greek philosophy, epitomised in the Pythagorean table opposites- the coupling of *one, rest, straight, light and good* with *male*, and *many, motion, curved, darkness and bad* with *female*. Under this spirit, metaphor on women has been rarely devoid of its sexual content. As an illustration, women are metaphorised as *chicks, tarts and bitches*. Similarly, in Algerian Arabic, we have the metaphors / laħma / and /habra/ translatable as (meat and lamb) respectively. On the other hand, another metaphor within this axis is *the Woman As Land* metaphor which has its roots in religious scripts such as the *Koran*. This is clearly spelled out in the Cow Surat (the Koran: the Cow Surat, verse 222) /nisa?ukum ħartun lakum/ literally translatable as (your spouses are your ploughed fields). Such metaphor for example engenders metaphorical readings related to *nature and fertility*

3. Conclusion

The aforementioned account of the value network operating in West and Arab cultures serves as the framework for the investigation on metaphor functioning in both cultures and that largely emanates from such enterprise of values. Metaphor use reveals about a whole cultural make up which becomes merely inaccessible to outsiders as it is keyed uniquely to the people pertaining to it. Still more, metaphorical discourse can be tantamount to an ideological one. In the same line of thought, Tilley (1999, p.10) writes:

“Metaphor is fundamental to all beliefs systems. Myth and ritual may be reasonably argued to have their entire basis in a networking of metaphors.”

Admittedly, metaphor comprehension across languages and cultures is very much amenable to its universality. Cross cultural metaphors are processed by having recourse to the knowledge that

the cultural and linguistic enterprises offer. Therefore, their processing effort might not be essentially maximised. Yet, culture sensitive metaphors can be problematic in the sense they set off very weak, if not at all, implications and then, the processing activity effort is very much slow. Consistent with this, in order to be successfully communicated, a metaphor hinges upon having enough commonality of experience between people and that the words they use or the messages they convey mean, basically, the same things. The wider and more divergent the cultural enterprises from which people come are, the more difficult communicating metaphor becomes. The specificity of metaphor, hence, is the result of a certain socio-cultural entourage which emerges as critical when dealing with culture -bound metaphors for more than helping us learn labels for things; culture teaches us to name experiences and feelings.

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