

## Cognitive Mechanisms of English Proverbs

### الآليات المعرفية للأمثال الإنجليزية

AGTI Abdelaziz اقلي عبد العزيز <a href="mailto:Agtus2001@yahoo.co.uk">Agtus2001@yahoo.co.uk</a>	Linguistics and translation	Batna 2 University / Algeria
DOI: 10.46315/1714-012-002-036.		

Received:23/ 09/ 2022 Accepted: 01/ 04/ 2023 Published : 16/ 06/ 2023

#### Abstract (English):

This study aims to deal with proverbs related to nature from a cognitive viewpoint. The focus is on understanding the nature of proverbs which reflect intelligent behaviour based on information processing capacities of the human mind. It also attempts to show the complexity of the mental processing involved in nature-based proverbs. Understanding proverbs requires higher order cognitive abilities. Mental mechanisms working in the production and comprehension of proverbs are investigated. Data for the present study are collected from Internet and dictionaries and analyzed, using descriptive qualitative method to determine the cognitive structures and conceptual mechanisms that underlie proverbs. The results reveal that proverbs combine knowledge of natural phenomena with people's social experiences displaying the conceptual connections between source and target domains.

**Keywords:** Nature proverbs, Mental mechanisms, Production, Comprehension.

#### ملخص باللغة العربية

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معالجة الأمثال الإنجليزية المتعلقة بالطبيعة من وجهة نظر معرفية. ينصب التركيز على فهم طبيعة الأمثال التي تعكس السلوك الذكي القائم على قدرات العقل البشري لمعالجة المعلومات. كما أنها تحاول إظهار مدى تعقيد المعالجة العقلية المتضمنة في الأمثال المتعلقة بالطبيعة. يتطلب فهم الأمثال قدرات معرفية عالية المستوى. يتم فحص الآليات العقلية التي تعمل في إنتاج وفهم الأمثال. يتم جمع بيانات الدراسة الحالية من الانترنت والقواميس وتحليلها باستخدام الطريقة الوصفية النوعية لتحديد البنية المعرفية والآليات المفاهيمية التي تقوم عليها الأمثال. تكشف النتائج أن الأمثال تجمع بين المعرفة بالظواهر الطبيعية والتجارب الاجتماعية للأفراد التي تبين الروابط المفاهيمية بين مجالات المصدر و الهدف.

كلمات مفتاحية: أمثال الطبيعة الآليات العقلية ؛ الإنتاج؛ الفهم.

\*\*\*

### 1- Introduction

This study focuses on processes and mechanisms that underlie nature-based proverbs. It is important to understand the nature of their production and comprehension. The way people conceptualize the world is determined by the environment in which they live. They tend to use elements that are part of their surroundings when interacting with each other. So, it is worth

understanding how they conceive the world. Proverbs as figurative expressions are based on conceptual metaphors which establish the link between proverbs and their figurative meaning. Their understanding is based on world knowledge that makes it possible to identify the intended meaning. The analysis of conceptual metaphors is of paramount importance to understand the way people mentally construct abstract domains. Hence, it is essential to understand figurative language. The conceptual metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon by means of which an abstract concept is made more readily comprehensible thanks to the mappings which are transferred, usually from a concrete source domain onto an abstract target domain. Analyzing proverbs with reference to conceptual metaphors reveals mental processes. Natural phenomena are used through proverbs to represent the source domain through which other human experiences are conceptualized as target domain. Nature proverbs facilitate the understanding of human affairs in the light of nature elements. The metaphoric comparisons employed can be described as highly cognitive-analogical processes. Nature-related proverbs emerge from building up complex images of objects and situations.

In most cases, abstract subjects are generally talked about using metaphors. In other words, the way people talk about abstract ideas is impregnated with metaphor. Metaphor is a process of understanding one concept through another. This research work deals with the conceptual mechanisms that serve as a basis of proverbs. It attempts to shed light on cognitive aspects of proverbs which tended to be overlooked. Cognitive aspects of proverbs remain a thorny issue in parasitology. With reference to what has been said so far about proverbs, the problematic issue that is worth tackling in this regard is the following: Is the difficulty of understanding the nature of proverbs due to the cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying them? The questions that may be raised to investigate and explore the issue under study are: Is the use of proverbs based on metaphor-city as a cognitive operation? Can proverbs be explained with reference to cognitive processes that determine their use? What do proverbs use and understanding reveal about people's way of thinking? Why is the understanding of proverbs in terms of comprehension and production important? The hypothesis that may be put forward as a possible answer to the raised research question is: The difficulty of understanding the nature of proverbs is due to the cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying them. The analysis of proverbs from a cognitive perspective helps understand the complexity of the mental processing involved in communication in general. The analysis shows that the use of proverbs related to natural elements is motivated by cognitive mechanisms. From the standpoint of

cognition, they are characterized by their metaphorical meaning. The working mechanisms of proverbs as indirect modes of communication are worth understanding.

## **2- Methods**

The present work takes as an example proverbs based on elements in nature. A descriptive qualitative method is used to investigate cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying them. The investigation of the issue of cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying proverbs is based on a corpus of 32 proverbs (see the appendix) taken from Internet and dictionaries. We opt for a judgment or targeted sample, selecting important and relevant proverbs to the study. The sample depends on the personal assessment of the researcher in terms of selection. The sample of our study is deliberately selected. The analysis of data focuses on the cognitive dimension of proverbs which is the most interesting and difficult aspect to deal with. It starts by extracting nature-based proverbs from various sources and analyzed attempting to display the cognitive mechanisms behind people's production and comprehension proverbs.

## **3- Results and Discussion**

The present study falls within the field of cognitive psychology that studies the functioning of thought focusing on describing mental operations used in processing information. It is based on a corpus of 32 proverbs based on elements in nature, taken from Internet and dictionaries. The analysis of these proverbs focuses on the difficulty of understanding the nature of proverbs which may be ascribed to the cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying them. At the end of our analysis of proverbs from a cognitive perspective, a number of considerations are reached. Our hypothesis with reference to the complexity of understanding the nature of proverbs is due to the cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying them. It is found that cognitive processes and mechanisms that underlie nature bound proverbs are related to their production and comprehension.

Proverbs based on elements in nature arise from man's observation and attempt to understand elements in nature as a concrete natural phenomenon (source domain) to be used later to talk about abstract situation (target domain). It remains necessary to understand the conceptual connections between source and target domains. Man creates proverbs speaking about societal issues (abstract situations- source domains) which are based on his observations of nature (concrete situations- source domains). This may be illustrated through this proverb: "there's no rose without a thorn" taken from the nature proverbs corpus of the study. The expression in its literal meaning refers to an object or element in nature which can be observed: a

flower usually red, pink, yellow, or white and is often fragrant with stems that have sharp points (thorns) on them which prick (source domain). The proverb may be understood metaphorically in the sense that it denotes the fact that there is no pleasure without pain or enjoyable situation without trouble or difficulty (target domain). This proverb tells us that man observes concrete objects around him in nature and tries to understand them to use them later as schematic representations to talk indirectly about abstract things related to aspects of his social life. A person who uses this proverb makes the link between the literal meaning of the expression denoting that there is no rose (a plant in nature) without a thorn (sharp point on plant stem) and metaphorical meaning referring to the fact that there is no pleasure or agreeable situation without pain or difficulty. A person interacts with his environment and continually constructs and construes concepts accordingly. He uses proverbs to express his understanding of surroundings. A person who does not know much about nature or live in contact with natural elements may not understand nature-based proverbs properly. Man tends to speak indirectly about things, i.e., speaking about something to mean something else. Finding similarities between concrete phenomena in nature and abstract situations in life is complex cognitive operation. So, a proverb offers its user the possibility to conceptualize indirectly what he has to communicate. It is a flexible instrument of reasoning in social interactions in spite of its fixity as traditional mode of thought.

The results reveal that the reader may not understand the figurative meaning of the proverb if he limits himself to the literal meaning. Figurative meaning requires deeper processing than the comprehension of literal meaning. The competence in figurative language is characterized by the ability to process language beyond the literal interpretation of individual words. It relies on inferencing skills based on analogical reasoning. The reader understands something by virtue of its relation to something else. That's why, figurative language can be even more demanding in terms of processing. It describes something by reference to something else. The difficulty lies in finding connections between what is abstract and what is concrete. Explaining the conceptual metaphoric relationships among different elements in most of the proverbs reveals the significant conceptual processes that lie beneath them. In other words, it is important to be able to identify source and target domains and distinguish figurative words from non-figurative. Literal meaning is related to the source domain which should be clearly understood as something that may be observed and described to find out its relationship to the figurative meaning target domain which requires certain cognitive abilities. Metaphor is a cognitive mechanism. It is a very important cognitive tool for human beings to conceptualize and

express abstract meaning. Metaphor forms the basic processes of human mind in comprehension. Human thought and conceptual processes are metaphorical.

English proverbs make use of nature metaphors to convey specific message to the audience. They are generally used as a metaphor and their meaning is indirect. Proverbs about nature mean both literally and metaphorically. For instance, the proverb “the head of a fruity tree is inclined” as part of the corpus of the study refers to the fact that the branches hang down to the ground in real life because the trees have difficulty carrying the fruits. It also means that great people tend to be humble as it is said in Arabic “full ears bow humbly and the empty ones have their heads up”. Nature proverbs are obtained as a result of observing nature carefully. The proverb “one swallow does not make a summer” is based on observing the migration of swallows that happens in early summer.

The proverb is used to mean that one piece of evidence does not mean that something is definitely the case or is going to happen. Every society has proverbs where it describes the functioning nature of its own nature. Nature proverbs analysis shows that they share a common underlying schema of cognition. Apprehension of physical objects is used to apprehend other more complex abstract domains. Metaphors are used from the speaker’s known world to conceptualize an item. The results show that the mapping of natural elements in proverbs contain images of positive or negative meanings. Proverbs which arise as a result of human observations of natural phenomena indicate clearly man’s intelligent interaction with the environment trying to understand things to be used to talk about abstract situations in life. The Generic is Specific metaphor thus allows us to understand situations in terms of one particular situation. Thanks to the Generic is Specific metaphor, proverbs give access to general situation through the expression of a particular situation. It is therefore a means of grasping the general through the particular.

Proverbiality is the way in which proverbs break the norm of the language. An example about this is the following proverb: A rolling moss gathers no moss. Many proverbs use elements in nature as a source of inspiration to conceptualize human behaviour. Besides, the results reveal an important cognitive operation which is required in proverbs use which is analogical reasoning and this demonstrates the fact that speech is analogy. Proverbs entail analogical reasoning which is an implicit inferential pattern that underlies the utterance of most proverbs. They are more often metaphorical and the logical structure underlying metaphor is analogy. Proverbs comprehension is found to be associated with analogical reasoning. Analogical reasoning is a kind of reasoning that is based on finding a common relational system between two situations,

or domains. When such a common system can be found, then what is known about one situation can be used to infer new information about the other. Analogy refers to expressing an idea by comparing it to something else. It expresses an abstract idea in terms of a familiar one. Analogy is a comparison between two things. Analogies function to describe or explain one thing by examining its similarities with another thing. The two things may be very dissimilar and the analogy forces the reader or listener to understand the connection between them in relation to a particular aspect. The results support the view that analogical reasoning is a key to proverbs comprehension. Nature-related proverbs understanding involves detecting the underlying analogy. Metaphor is a type of analogy. Understanding proverbs is more a matter of processing of metaphorical/inferential thinking. Thus, interpreting proverbs is a mental function, through which man perceives the world around him and can understand abstract concepts. The results demonstrate the contribution of verbal intelligence to the interpretation of proverbs. Proverbs comprehension rests upon mapping the similarities between two widely divergent domains of knowledge, one familiar and experiential, the other more remote and abstract. Furthermore, the study reveals that the persuasive force of proverbs and their ability to create mind-adherence stem from the argumentative mechanisms involved which are of cognitive nature related to cognitive background. The authority of proverbs is based on common sense or experience. That's why, proverbs are used as an effective argument to persuade or convince the interlocutor. The speaker tries to make the interlocutor accept what he puts forward by means of an argument. The creation of proverbs makes it possible to establish general principles on which our reasoning is based. It is worth mentioning that proverbs are metaphoric expressions, because there is at least a projection to a situation in which the proverb can be applied. Nature-based proverbs are concrete proverbs containing words that refer to physical entities which are used to talk about abstract situation containing words that refer to psychological entities.

#### **4- Conclusion**

With reference to the discussion of proverbs related to elements in nature, it can be concluded that proverbs still have a generic meaning; context only gives them their specific meaning. Nature-based metaphorical proverbs are related to meaning transfer from something concrete to something abstract. People's conceptualization of the world is reflected through the proverbs they use in relation to their environment. The study provides insights into the universality of cognitive processes that underlie nature bound proverbs. The cognitive view permits to access the universal principles that underlie the cognition of proverbs. Therefore, an

additional necessary mechanism for perception and interpretation of proverbs is analogy. Proverbs remain a cognitive phenomenon which requires reflection to understand how they work. Nature-related proverbs investigation from cognitive view permits to understand the universal principles that underlie the cognition of these proverbs. Proverbs are viewed as a mirror by which we can know the way people think, process experience and perceive the world. Nature-based proverbs are a conceptual phenomenon that is worth understanding. Dealing with processing proverbs provides insights into how we think and understand the world around us. As proverbs say things metaphorically about the world, they are supposed to be understood metaphorically. Metaphoric systems are a striking feature of our language in terms of cognition. So, understanding how proverbs function metaphorically is a cognitive operation that underlies them. Proverbs have important cognitive functions in relation to conceptualizing objects and events, and facilitating language comprehension and production. Finally, it should be emphasised that this study of environmental elements proverbs from a cognitive perspective explores cognitive mechanisms for a better understanding of the nature of these proverbs. Nature-based proverbs are associated with conceptual representations. These representations are transmitted from generation to generation to become universal generalities. Proverbs belonging to the collective conscience express common knowledge. The use of these proverbs is not intended to provide information but serves as a reasoning framework. In fact, proverbs constitute an argument of authority based on human observations. Well-spoken proverbs close the debates. Further studies can be carried out to deal with different thematic fields proverbs to generate additional insights into the cognitive operations involved in understanding proverbs and their use.

\*\*\*\*\*

## 5- The bibliography

- Acher, T. (1931). *The Proverbs*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.
- (2003). *The Proverb, Proverbs and their Lessons*; In Wolfgang Meider (ed.) *Supplement Series of Proverbium* 13. University of Vermont. Vermont.
- Apperson, G. L., & Manser, M. H. (2007). *Dictionary of proverbs*. Wordsworth Editions. Hertfordshire, Great Britain.
- Cacciari, C. and S. Glucksberg. (1994). *Understanding Figurative Language. Handbook of Psycholinguistics*. Ed. M.A. Gernsbacher. Academic Press. New York.
- Eco, U. (1985). *The Semantics of Metaphor in* (ed.) Robert E. Innis *Semiotics*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington.
- Evans, V. and M. Green. (2006). *Cognitive Linguistics. An Introduction*. University Press Ltd. Edinburgh.
- Fauconnier, G. (1997). *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge University Press. New York.
- Flavell, Linda. (1997). *Dictionary of Proverbs and their Origins*. Kyle Cathie. London.
- Gibbs, R. and G. Steen. (1999). *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*. John Benjamins. Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & Colston, H. L. (2012). *Interpreting figurative language*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Honeck, R. (1997). *A proverb in Mind: The Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom*. Erlbaum. Mahwah, NJ.
- Julie, M. (1998). *Dictionary of Comparative Proverbs English-Arabic*. al-mourad Publishers. Beirut.
- Kövecses, Z. (2002). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- (2003). *The Scope of Metaphor*. In Barcelona, A. (ed.), *Metaphor and metonymy at the crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*. Mouton de Gruyter. Berlin and New York.
- (2016). *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. In Semino, E. Z. Demjén (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. Routledge. Oxford.
- Kovecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford University Press. US.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*. In A. Ortony (ed.). *Metaphor and thought*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Lakoff, G. (2006). *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*. In *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*. Mouton de Gruyter. Berlin and New York.
- Marmaridou, S. (2000). *Pragmatic Meaning and Cognition*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. London.
- Mieder, W & Dundes, A (eds) (1981). *The wisdom of many: Essays on the proverb*. Garland. New York.
- Mieder, W. (1989). *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts*. Peter Lang. New York.
- (1993). *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- (2004). *Proverbs: A handbook*. Greenwood Press. London.
- Norricks, N. (1985). *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*. Mouton Publishers. Berlin.
- Ortony, A. (Ed.). (1993). *Metaphor and thought*, 2nd Ed. Cambridge University Press. New York.
- Paivio, A., & Walsh, M. (1998). *Psychological Processes in Metaphor Comprehension*. In A.
- Ruiz, M., Francisco, J., and Alicia G. (2014). *Cognitive Modeling. A Linguistic Perspective*. John Benjamins. Amsterdam and Philadelphia.
- Semino, E. (2008). *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Sperber, D. and D. Wilson. (1995). *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*. 2nd. ed. Basil Blackwell. Oxford.



- Ungerer, F. & Schmid, H-J. (1996). An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics. Longman. London.
- Way, E.C. (1991). Knowledge Representation and Metaphor. Kluwer Academic Publishers. Oxford.
- Whiting, B.J. (1932). The Nature of the Proverb Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature. New York University Press. New York.
- (1977). Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- (1989). Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings. Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Massachusetts.
- Wolfgang, M. (2004). Proverbs. A Handbook. Greenwood Press. London.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Appendix

### Nature-Based Proverbs Corpus of the Study

- Thunder clouds do not always give rain.
- Big thunder little rain.
- A rolling stone gathers no moss.
- There's no rose without a thorn.
- Where there's smoke, there's fire.
- Lightning never strikes twice (in the same place).
- Make hay while the sun shines.
- After a storm comes a calm.
- After clouds comes clear weather.
- Every flow must have its ebb.
- An old ox makes a straight furrow.
- The tide must be taken when it comes.
- Still waters run deep.
- Every cloud has a silver lining.
- The early bird gets / catches the worm.
- Don't make a mountain out of a molehill.
- One swallow does not make a summer
- A bird is known by its song, a man by his words.
- An old dog barks not in vain.
- An apple never falls far from the tree.
- What you sow, you will reap.
- Birds of a feather flock together.
- Calm seas don't make good sailors.

Green leaves and brown leaves fall from the same tree.

A fish rots from the head down.

A leopard never changes its spots.

A barking dog does not bite.

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.

Small rain lays great dust.

A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.

Kindle not a fire you cannot put out.

Little strokes feel great oaks.

The head of a fruity tree is inclined.