

Semantic Transformations in Algerian Folk Proverbs': From Words to Cultural Connotations

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Abstract:

In social communication, human beings use various expressive methods to convey messages clearly and accurately in a concise style. Proverbs are one such method that has been used since ancient times to convey intentions across different peoples and nations. Proverbs are distillations of long human experience and true representations of societal conditions. They are concise sayings characterised by strength and semantic density, eloquence of expression, rhetorical vividness and a profound impact on people's souls.

Therefore, Almighty God used proverbs in His definitive revelation; the Arabs adopted them and non-Arabs adopted them too. No culture is devoid of proverbs, as they constitute a record of human civilisation, encompassing its hopes and sufferings.

Algerian folk proverbs are one of the most important linguistic and cultural phenomena, preserving collective memory and reflecting patterns of popular thought. They do not merely convey direct lexical meanings, but also encompass profound symbolic and cultural connotations, making them a discourse with multiple functions: teaching, guiding, correcting and criticising through rhetorical style. Thus, the proverb transforms from a simple verbal formulation into a cultural symbol charged with values, customs and collective perceptions. This transition from direct to figurative and suggestive meanings highlights the significant role of proverbs in consolidating cultural identity, demonstrating how oral heritage shapes a collective consciousness that transcends generations. Studying this transformation provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and culture, confirming that the folk proverb is a multidimensional cultural text, not merely a tool of communication.

Keywords: Semantic Transformations, Algerian Folk Proverbs, Word, Cultural Connotations

INTRODUCTION:

The folk proverb is a distinctive form of folk literature that reflects society's view of life, storing collective experiences and accumulated knowledge within its structure over time. Proverbs are not just sayings that circulate among people; they are also cultural and social discourses that are charged with connotations which extend beyond the literal meaning of the words to deeper symbolic and suggestive dimensions. This transition from the literal to the figurative turns the proverb into a means of guidance, correction and criticism, while also serving as a tool for preserving collective memory and shared values.

Studying the semantic transformations of folk proverbs reveals the extent to which popular language can reproduce and adapt meaning according to the community's needs and the context's requirements. Rather than merely employing lexical meaning, the folk proverb reshapes it in a manner consistent with the needs and circumstances of the community. In doing so, it becomes a renewed cultural text with diverse functions, combining eloquence and conciseness with cultural depth.

Accordingly, we raise the following research question: How do Algerian folk proverbs transform from their direct lexical meanings into multiple cultural connotations that reflect collective consciousness?

This article therefore seeks to trace the trajectory of the Algerian folk proverb from its direct lexical meaning to its cultural connotations, highlighting its symbolic dimensions, communicative functions and role in expressing Algerian cultural identity.

Firstly: The concept of the proverb

Linguistically:

The word 'mathal' (proverb) is derived from the root 'م-ث-ل'.

Mathil, with a kasra on the letter mīm, is a word denoting equivalence. It is said: 'This is his mithl or mathal', just as it is said: 'This resembles him' or 'is similar to him', which have the same meaning. Ibn Barrī stated that the difference between mithl (similarity) and mathal (equality) is that the latter applies to things that differ in kind as well as to those that share the same kind, because it means equivalence in quantity, with neither increase nor decrease. However, similarity applies only to things that agree with one another. We say: 'His manner is like his manner, his knowledge is like his knowledge, his colour is like his colour, and his taste is like his taste.' When we say that someone is the counterpart of another person, it is to suggest that both people are insignificant. Al-mithl means resemblance. The words mathl, mathal, shabah and shabāh are used with the same meaning.

The word mathal has also been used to mean 'counterpart' or 'equivalent'. In Ibn Faris's standards of the language, it is stated: 'The letters mim, tha' and lam form a root sound indicating the correspondence of one thing to another.' This is the counterpart of that, meaning its equivalent." Al-mithl and al-mithal have the same meaning." Sometimes they use mathil, meaning 'similar'. The Arabs say, 'The ruler amthala so-and-so,' meaning that he killed him in retaliation, or did to him what he had done. Al-mathal also means 'counterpart', as do shabah and shibh. This proverbial expression is derived from this meaning.

The word mathal may also mean a characteristic or description. It is said: 'The mathal of a thing also means its description.'ii' God Almighty says, 'That is their description in the Torah and in the Gospel' (Surat Al-Fath, part of verse 29).

Some Arabic linguists, such as Al-Zamakhshari, have also included the word mathal in their dictionaries with the meaning of a lesson or sign based on God's saying: 'And We made them predecessors and an example for those who came later' (Surat Ar-Ra'd, part of verse 56). The meaning of His saying "an example" (mathalan) is "a lesson from which those who come later may learn"iii. God also says, 'We made him an example for the Children of Israel' (Az-Zukhruf 56), meaning 'a sign indicating his prophethood'iv.

Thus, linguistically, the word mathal conveys equivalence and resemblance between two things, eventually becoming an established expression circulated among people.

2. DEFINITION OF THE PROVERB IN TERMINOLOGICAL TERMS

The proverb occupies an important position in the Holy Qur'an and the noble Prophetic Sunnah because its purpose is to raise awareness and guide people in matters relating to their religion and their lives in this world. Its rhetorical value has also enabled it to become one of the forms of Qur'anic inimitability. The noble Prophetic Sunnah has also used proverbs to clarify meanings and convey messages to the general public.

Proverbs appear in many chapters of the Holy Qur'an and the noble Prophetic Sunnah. Below, we mention some of the Qur'anic verses in which they occur in various contexts. For instance, Almighty God says, 'And he presents to Us an example and forgets his own creation. He asks, 'Who will give life to bones when they are disintegrated?'" (Surat Ya-Sin, verse 78).

Similarly, Almighty God revealed the following verse: 'Indeed, Allah is not ashamed to use the example of a mosquito or something smaller' (Surat Al-Baqarah, verse 26).

The noble Messenger relied on various oral methods to convey the message he had been commanded to deliver, including proverbs, which he employed on different occasions. For instance, to encourage people to memorise the Holy Qur'an, the noble Messenger likened those who do so to tethered camels. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: 'The example of the Qur'an is that of tethered camels: if their owner continually attends to them and keeps them tied, he retains them; but if he releases them, they go awayv.'

3. AMONG ARAB SCHOLARS

The proverb has attracted the attention of Arab scholars in both ancient and modern times. Consequently, numerous and varied definitions have been proposed. The following are some of them:

A. Among the classical scholars:

Ibn al-Muqaffa' defined the proverb as follows: 'When speech is made into a proverb, it becomes clearer in expression, more pleasing to the ear, and more expansive in the topics of discourse^{vi}.'

Al-Fārābī wrote the following in his book *Dīwān al-Adab*, as quoted by Al-Suyūṭī in *Al-Muzhir*: 'A proverb is accepted by both the common people and the elite in terms of both its wording and its meaning. They use it freely among themselves and utter it in times of both prosperity and adversity. They use it to achieve difficult things, reach distant goals, and find relief from distress and hardship. It is one of the most eloquent forms of wisdom

because people do not collectively accept anything that is deficient, lacking in quality or falling short of the highest degree of excellence and preciousness"^{vii}.

In the introduction to his book *Al-Amthāl*, Al-Khwarizmi stated the following about proverbs: 'They are easy to understand, pleasant on the tongue and acceptable to the heart. They are familiar to ordinary people and are not disdained by the elite. Most of them are transmitted anonymously, as the passage of time has obscured their authors.^{viii}'

Al-Marzūqī defines the proverb as follows: 'A concise statement extracted from its original context or transmitted independently. It is characterised by acceptance and becomes widely known through circulation. It is then transferred from the context in which it first appeared to every situation in which it is intended to be used, undergoing changes in wording and extending beyond its original meaning to include similar ones. This is why it is cited as a proverb, even when the circumstances from which it originated are unknown.^{ix}'

Thus, we can conclude that, according to classical Arab scholars, a proverb is a concise expression uttered in a particular situation and admired by people, which is then circulated orally as evidence in similar situations until it becomes widespread and well known.

B. Among contemporary scholars

Rushdi Saleh defined the proverb as follows: 'A proverb is a short rhetorical expression, widely transmitted through oral tradition and illustrating a principle of popular taste, conduct or opinion.' Its wording does not have to be grammatically complete, and it can include traditional similes, metaphors and metonymies^x."

Despite its brevity, the proverb represents a rich heritage and conveys profound connotations and deep meanings with far-reaching dimensions. According to Masoud Jakour, it is: 'A well-known saying, brief in wording, containing a sound idea or rule of human conduct. It is uttered by an ordinary person under particular circumstances, and subsequently spreads among people who use it on various occasions resembling the situation in which it was first uttered^{xi}.'

Rabah Al-Aoubi stated: 'A circulating or inherited saying, whether factual or mythical, characterised by specific features and components.' In essence, it indicates the thing represented without any change in meaning, while its wording differs from that of the expression it replaces. It serves to compare the situation in which it was recounted with the situation for which it was originally formulated. This constitutes a comparison with a model upon which others may act^{xii}.'

Abdelmalek Mortad states that the proverb is the product of the environment in which it was first uttered. It is also the culmination of a long experience, reflecting various events related to social life as it connects to all aspects of human life. Important issues addressed include morality, wisdom, education, guidance, satire, mockery, wit, humour, admonition, lessons, love, hatred, anxiety, reassurance, fear, security, happiness, misery, fertility, drought, war, peace, life and death^{xiii}.

4. AMONG WESTERN SCHOLARS

Just as Arab scholars have done, Western scholars have also taken an interest in proverbs, studying and researching them. The following are some of their definitions:

Aristotle states that a proverb is 'an expression characterised by widespread use, brevity, unity of meaning, and correctness'^{xiv}.

Rivarol defines it as follows: 'Proverbs are the experience of peoples and the result of sound thinking, condensed into a miniature form^{xv}.'

John Russell states: 'A proverb is the intelligence of an individual and the wisdom of everyone^{xvi}.'

Cervantes states: 'Proverbs are short maxims derived from long experience, perhaps the experience of entire peoples since the earliest ages^{xvii}.'

From these statements, we can conclude that a proverb is a meaningful expression representing the culmination of a people's long experience. It conveys an opinion resulting from a past event and is cited in

similar situations. Proverbs take an artistic and rhetorical form, and are characterised by their ease of memorisation and retention in the recipient's mind. Proverbs also represent the cultural and civilisational heritage of peoples and nations.

5. THE CONCEPT OF THE FOLK PROVERB

The definition of the folk proverb does not differ from that of the proverb in general, except that it is associated with the language of a particular people rather than that of others.

Ahmed Amin states the following about folk proverbs: 'They are a type of literature distinguished by concise wording, excellent meaning, subtle similes and effective metonymy. Almost no nation is without them, and one of their distinctive features is that they emerge from all social classes^{xviii}'.

Talal Harb considers it 'a form of folk literature'. It is an idea and a way of thinking because it summarises an experience lived by the community. It is also a way of thinking because it embodies the community's beliefs and theories about its experiences^{xix}.

Azzedine Djelaoudji defines it as follows: 'It is a concise expression, subtle in wording and meaning, originating among the general population so that it becomes a true reflection of them. It expresses their cultural heritage, their lived reality, their hopes and their future aspirations. It is often associated with a story that occurred, whether its author is known or not^{xx}'.

Rabah Khadoussi also considers the folk proverb to be the finest of sayings, distilling the thoughts of generations throughout human history. It is the essence of the speech of eloquent speakers and wise people, and its accuracy is acknowledged by those who use it as evidence in arguments and various forms of discourse^{xxi}.

6. ALGERIAN FOLK PROVERBS

Algerian folk proverbs provide a clear picture of the history of human contributions, as well as the experiences, knowledge, joys and sorrows of generations, and the various associated ways of life. They also constitute an intellectual record encompassing social, educational, moral, political and other values. This enables researchers and scholars to explore the past and draw upon it in the present and future^{xxii}.

Due to its vast geographical area and cultural diversity, Algeria abounds in folk proverbs. These proverbs have received considerable attention from scholars and researchers, who have made remarkable progress in collecting and explaining them. Many works have been devoted to collecting, classifying and explaining them to help readers understand them and preserve the heritage and civilisational, cultural and social legacy of the Algerian nation. Examples of these works include Algerian Folk Proverbs by Kadda Boutarene, translated by the late Abderrahmane Hadj-Salah; Encyclopedia of Algerian Proverbs by Rabah Khadoussi; and Algerian Proverbs: Proverbs Circulating in the Village of El Hamra, Bordj Bou Arreridj Province, by Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga; Algerian Maxims and Proverbs, by Masoud Jakouz; and Algerian Proverbs in Sétif, by Ezzedine Djelali.

7. CHARACTERISTICS AND FEATURES OF THE FOLK PROVERB

Like other forms of folk literature, the folk proverb is distinguished by a set of characteristics and features, including the following:

The language used in the proverb is colloquial, reflecting the everyday speech of the population.

During its initial emergence, the proverb does not undergo a process of documentation. It is generally transmitted through oral tradition, relying on spoken language, with memory serving as its primary means of transmission. Oral language is characterised by flexibility and simplicity, and does not rely on grammatical inflection rules.

Popular Character and Anonymous Authorship: The folk proverb originates from an individual's personal experience, which subsequently becomes a collective experience.

- Rhythm: The presence of rhythmic elements, such as balance and proportion between parts, word order, rhetorical constructions, assonance and paronomasia, is one of the main factors that enabled most concise ancient proverbs to maintain their coherence and withstand the passage of time. The presence of rhythm makes a proverb more distinctive than ordinary speech. When a speaker uses proverbs in conversation, the listener recognises these proverbial expressions due to changes in the speaker's tone of voice; they are characterised by rhetorical, rhythmic and structural features^{xxiii}.

- Currency and widespread circulation: We consider widespread circulation to be the fundamental

defining feature of a proverb. This means that people accept a word, sentence or saying, use it frequently and pass it on from one generation to the next^{xxiv}.

- Concision: A small number of words convey a great deal of meaning. Proverbs consist of the fewest possible words while conveying the greatest possible amount of meaning. These words usually refer to an event that led to the expression becoming a proverb.

- Accuracy of meaning: A concise expression must convey the intended meaning directly, without addition or omission.

- Elegance of Simile: It is well known that elegance of simile is a rhetorical requirement. Ibn al-Mu'tazz began his celebrated work on *badī'* (rhetorical embellishment) by describing it as a form of eloquence.

- Excellence of metonymy: This gives the proverb its rhetorical value and its ability to convey the intended meaning or attribute^{xxv}.

8. FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBS AND THEIR CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS

Proverbs have fulfilled numerous functions, making them one of the forms of oral expression transmitted from one generation to another across various fields, including rhetoric, civilisation, education, aesthetics, and more.

The Rhetorical Function:

Proverbs have a rhetorical character and are more eloquent than ordinary speech, particularly when it comes to conveying the intended meaning. According to Émile Nassif, the nature of the proverb 'Your brother from your mother is like honey in your mouth' demonstrates that conveying a message through a proverb is more effective than conveying it through ordinary speech.

The civilizational function:

Folk proverbs enable us to study a civilisation and learn about its customs, traditions and other aspects expressed through proverbs. These proverbs portray society in all its facets, reflecting the civilisation and way of thinking of the people who created them.

The argumentative or persuasive function:

Most of the proverbs we use in our daily lives are used to support an opinion and provide an argument to convince others. This type of proverb is common in commercial transactions. When a buyer or seller is hesitant, mentioning an appropriate proverb may lead to the deal being concluded.

The alerting function:

This type is common in markets. For example, praise attracts the attention of listeners, and sayings passed down from earlier generations often serve to draw people's attention^{xxvi}.

The Aesthetic and Entertainment Function:

Proverbs are characterised by the beauty of their form and content, which has attracted people's interest and encouraged them to use them. A Lebanese proverb states, "The proverbs of ordinary people are the salt of speech". Similarly, an English proverb states that 'proverbs are the adornment of speech'.

The educational function:

Folk proverbs summarise other people's experiences, from which anyone can benefit at any time and in any place. Therefore, a proverb is a conclusion drawn from experience^{xxvii}.

9. THE MEANING OF FOLK PROVERBS LIES IN THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN WORDS AND SYMBOLS.

9.1 The Concept of Meaning

A. Linguistically:

The Intermediate Dictionary states: 'He indicated something or guided someone towards it', meaning that he guided him. It is said that he showed him the way, directed him towards it or guided him to it. Therefore, he is a guide and an indication means guidance^{xxviii}.

The Intermediate Dictionary states: 'He indicated something or guided someone towards it' (to guide/point [someone] to it), meaning that he guided him. Thus, he is a guide and the thing is that which is indicated or pointed out. A woman's *dalala* towards her husband means that she displays boldness towards him, acting as though she is opposing him, but there is no actual opposition. The expression '*adalla 'alayhi*' means that he trusted the person's affection and therefore displayed too much familiarity towards them^{xxix}.

The word *dallah* also appears in the Holy Qur'an, as in the Almighty's saying: 'And nothing indicated his death to them except the creature of the earth, which was eating his staff. When he fell, the jinn realised that if they had known the unseen, they would not have remained in humiliating punishment' (Surah Saba, 34:14).

From this, we can see that, in its linguistic definition, 'indication' falls within the meaning of 'guidance'.

B. Terminologically:

Al-Sharif al-Jurjani (d. 808 AH) defines it as follows: 'The state of a thing whereby knowledge of it necessarily leads to knowledge of another thingxxx.'

The closest terminological definition of *dalālah* is provided by al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 502 AH), who states:

'Indication is that through which one arrives at knowledge of a thing, such as the indication of words to meanings, signs and symbols, writing and numerical expressions in arithmetic. This applies whether or not the person who makes the indication intends it, as when one sees a person moving and thereby knows that they are alivexxxi.'

From this definition, we can see that every word, sign and symbol has a meaning. Everything through which something is understood constitutes an indication. Al-Isfahani gives the example of a person's movement indicating that they are alive.

9.2 Semantic Transformations in Algerian Folk Proverbs

Although folk proverbs are concise and carefully constructed, they carry both direct and implicit meanings that transcend language to take shape in symbolic and cultural images. Proverbs are based on the duality of words and symbols. Words are not intended in their literal sense, but rather in terms of the connotations they carry. In a

proverb, the word is the linguistic form, usually built on a brief rhythm and carefully constructed formulation to facilitate circulation, whereas the symbol is the hidden dimension that transforms the word into an expressive tool rich in meaning and reveals society's perspectives, values and conceptions of life.

Thus, the study of folk proverbs extends beyond the linguistic to encompass the cultural and semantic aspects that give them their pragmatic force and flexibility. For instance, incorporating an animal, plant, or place into a proverb does not merely involve the use of words; it represents a symbol onto which society projects attributes and meanings that transcend their material reality, embodying an attitude, value, or inherited wisdom. Thus, folk proverbs constitute a symbolic discourse that uses words as tools and symbols as means of suggestion. This produces a complex meaning that combines the direct and figurative, sensory and cultural, and individual and collective.

This will be illustrated through the following practical examples:xxxii

Proverb 1: Relatives are like scorpions.

This proverb expresses the view of those who believe that relatives treat one another like snakes and scorpions; people often say it when they are angryxxxiii.

Relatives are compared to scorpions, which are venomous and harmful. While relatives symbolise the people closest to an individual by kinship, scorpions symbolise harm, betrayal and unexpected stings.

This proverb refers to the idea that negative social experiences are passed down through generations. People believe that harm from relatives can be more painful than harm from strangers because it comes from someone you know and trust.

Proverb 2: A brother from the same mother is like honey in your mouth.

This could refer to a full brother, or a brother from either the father's or mother's side. A stepmother generally does not love her husband's son from a previous relationship as much as she loves her own children. For this reason, she encourages her stepchildren to show solidarity and form alliances, and warns them against their paternal half-brothers. This is how the proverb emerged, although this may not always hold true in realityxxxiv.

A maternal brother symbolises great closeness and natural affection, while honey in the mouth symbolises sweetness, pleasure and comfort.

This proverb reflects a fraternal relationship where a maternal brother provides affection, support and comfort, much like the sweetness and pleasure experienced when tasting honey. Here, honey is used as a cultural symbol of emotional sweetness, not just its taste.

Proverb 3: The lawyer defeats the lion.

It is said to encourage people to unite and cooperate in order to overcome life's difficultiesxxxv.

It is an expression of cooperation. It suggests that unity and collaboration can empower individuals,

even when facing formidable challenges such as a lion, the king of the jungle, which symbolises strength and ferocity.

Proverb 4: 'One hand claps only with the other hand' (or 'One hand cannot clap').

A person may be unable to accomplish alone what they can achieve with others.

This proverb is an expression of cooperation. One hand represents an individual acting alone, while clapping represents joint action^{xxxvi}. The proverb indicates that individuals alone cannot achieve much and need others.

Proverb 5: Whoever fears remains safe.

Caring fathers and mothers give this advice to their children, urging them to act patiently and cautiously so that they can avoid dangers and disasters^{xxxvii}.

The proverb highlights the importance of caution and avoiding haste. Prudence and caution are means of ensuring safety, and those who avoid recklessness survive. In popular thought, fear is not a sign of weakness, but a means of survival.

Proverb 6: Go out naked to the Lord, and he will clothe you.

'Go out' means 'appear'. The proverb means that if you are clear and direct when asking for what you need, you will find someone who can help you.

It is used in the context of honesty, truthfulness in speech and action, and directness^{xxxviii}.

It is an expression of honesty and frankness in speech and action.

Proverb 7: The needle clothes others while remaining naked itself.

This means that the needle sews clothes for others while having no clothes of its own. It refers to a generous person who puts others before themselves^{xxxix}.

The needle is compared to a person who is capable of clothing others. The needle symbolises a person or instrument that benefits others but does not benefit from what it provides. It clothes others, symbolising altruism and generosity.

The proverb refers to a person who sacrifices their own comfort or interests in order to serve others, thereby benefiting everyone without expecting anything in return. However, the proverb may also criticise people who exhaust themselves through giving without receiving anything in return.

Proverb 8: Choose a neighbour over a house.

The neighbour is compared to a commodity that is purchased^{xl}. This proverb is used when choosing a house or neighbourhood, emphasising that one must first inquire about the neighbours. It serves as a reminder that a place's true value lies not in its walls, but in its inhabitants and neighbours.

In this proverb, neighbours symbolise social security and psychological stability, while a house symbolises a physical place that remains incomplete without good neighbours.

Proverb 9: Forget your worries, and they will forget you.

In other words, smile at life and life will smile at you^{xli}; leave your worries behind. This proverb is used to encourage relief from worry and distress.

It encourages individuals to deal with adversity positively. Rather than becoming immersed in sadness, it is better to forget it. If a person does not allow worry to take root in their heart, its effects will fade away.

Proverbs 10: Ask an experienced person, not a doctor^{xlii}

This means you should seek the advice of someone who has learned from experience and can offer useful guidance. The proverb highlights the importance of experience and expertise over scientific knowledge acquired without practical skill. The experienced person represents wisdom gained through everyday experience, while the doctor represents theoretical and academic knowledge. This proverb does not diminish the value of science, but rather presents practical experience as being more reliable in everyday situations, particularly in social matters that are not governed by scientific rules.

Proverb 11: Listen to the one who makes you cry, not the one who makes you laugh.^{xliii}

This means that you should take genuine advice from a serious person, even if they are harsh. Crying symbolises sincere advice, even when it is painful, whereas laughter symbolises flattery, which may provide temporary comfort, but ultimately causes harm.

The proverb calls for reason to be given priority over emotion, and for bitter truth to be recognised as more beneficial than a beautiful illusion. It serves as a warning against people who offer false flattery. Harsh advice may be a sign of affection and sincerity.

Proverb 12: The father disciplines the children, and the mother protects them^{xliv}

This means that the father disciplines children through reward and punishment, while the mother shields them from shame out of tenderness. The proverb is used in the context of raising children and the role of parents.

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