

Conceptual Metaphors of Light and Darkness in Iraqi Arabic Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the conceptual metaphors of light and darkness in Iraqi proverbs within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). The research adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine how abstract concepts are structured through embodied and culturally grounded metaphorical mappings in Iraqi folk discourse. The data consists of eight widely used Iraqi proverbs that explicitly or implicitly employ the imagery of light and darkness.

The analysis focuses on identifying the source and target domains of each proverb, classifying the types of conceptual metaphors and uncovering the underlying cognitive patterns that shape meaning construction. The findings reveal that Iraqi proverbs consistently rely on a

fundamental binary opposition between light and darkness, reflecting deeply entrenched cognitive schemas. The dominant conceptual metaphors identified include GOOD IS LIGHT, BAD IS DARKNESS, KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT and IGNORANCE IS DARKNESS. These metaphors function as primary and universal patterns while also exhibiting culture-specific nuances influenced by the Iraqi socio-cultural and experiential context. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that metaphorical expressions in these proverbs are not merely stylistic devices but serve significant pragmatic and communicative functions such as moral instruction, social evaluation and the reinforcement of collective values. The recurrent use of light and darkness imagery enhances the persuasive and mnemonic power of

proverbs, making them effective tools for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Iraqi Proverbs, Light and Darkness, Cognitive Linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

1- INTRODUCTION

Cognitive linguistics provides a pioneering approach to the processes involved in creating and interpreting meaning with a particular focus on how conceptual metaphor influences and determines understanding (Fillmore, 1987, p. 22). The concept of metaphor has been extensively studied since the publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Cognitive linguists contend that metaphor is a fundamental aspect of human language involving the systematic structuring of one conceptual domain through the lens of another (Evans and Green, 2006, p.38).

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 4) argue that metaphor is intrinsically integrated into our everyday lives. It affects our language, thoughts and actions. Metaphor is not just a matter of words but rather a property of concepts. Their work in cognitive linguistics illustrates this point because how we create and use

language is fundamentally based upon our understanding of the semantic concepts. Various elements including semantic primitives, metaphorical concepts and conceptual primitives represent one method through which we have cognitive structures to convey meaning in language. These cognitive structures serve as a basis from which we convey meaning through language. All of the meaning that an individual conveys to another through language is conveyed through grammatical and lexical elements found in every language. The conceptual system is made up of a set of basic human concepts that can be found across various cultures. These metaphorical concepts can be understood with examples such as "up is good" and "down is bad." The development of basic concepts in the conceptual system is impacted by both human cognition and actual physical experiences in the real world (Wierzbicka, 1995, p. 34)

Metaphorically one concept is experienced or understood through the experience of another concept for example the ARGUMENT ARE WAR metaphor. Although "argument" and "war" refer to distinct phenomena verbal discourse and armed conflict, respectively arguments are conceptualized,

interpreted, conducted and discussed using the framework of war. This metaphorical mapping shapes not only the concept and activity of arguments but also the language used to describe them. (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p.5)

2- CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

In his book "Poetics" (1962, p. 46), Aristotle discusses how metaphor functions by transferring the name of one thing to another, this transfer may occur in either direction (from genus to species or vice versa). The process of metaphoric transfer can take place within the genus or species category (from one kind of thing to another) or there may be an analogy made between two things. Metaphor, according to Aristotle, is a word that has a different meaning than that which it has in its ordinary sense (Gibbs, 1994, p. 210). There are several interpretations of metaphor according to Aristotle's definition. First: metaphors occur at the "word" level as the transfer from one meaning (that is the literal meaning of the word) to the other (that is the metaphoric meaning) does occur through language, second: metaphors are a "literal usage" since they involve assigning the name of one object to another object and third: the transfer occurs through a "similarity"

between the two objects being compared. The classical view of metaphor is captured in these three concepts.

According to Deignan (2005, p. 2), the classical theory of metaphor is that metaphors are "ornamental and rely heavily on literal language." The classical view of metaphor does not explain why (in terms of semantics) there are commonalities between different metaphorically related words which is what occurs between the words associated with plants for example "flower", "cultivate" and "grow" (as in an economic project) are all commonly used as metaphors to describe the success or failure of a particular economic project. Moreover, conventional metaphors are routinely and systematically used in a way that can't be accounted for by the traditional view of metaphor. These metaphors remain significant as treating them as peripheral linguistic phenomena does not account for their consistent and systematic application in language.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 16) metaphor is so ingrained within our everyday life through language as well as thought and action that it's a metaphorical basis for all of our reasoning and behaviour. The metaphorical conceptual system that motivates our

cognitive and behavioral activities encompasses all of our activities on a daily basis even those most mundane.

Metaphors also provide a means for making sense of new concepts and/or reinterpreting aspects of existing concepts. As such they are certainly conceptual in nature (Moura, 2006, p. 82).

The conceptual metaphor theory has garnered significant attention from contemporary linguists worldwide. Rooted in the framework of cognitive linguistics, this theory is founded on the following principles: -

- 1- Conceptual structures emerge from human sensorimotor experiences.
- 2- These structures are shaped by image schemas and motor schemas.
- 3- The organization of concepts incorporates various types of prototypes.
- 4- Conceptual systems are inherently pluralistic rather than monolithic. Abstract concepts, in particular, are typically defined by multiple conceptual metaphors which often exhibit inconsistencies (Arcimaviciene, 2007, p.12).

Wilson (2008, p. 57) describes metaphor as a way of expressing one concept in terms of another while Semino (2008, p. 5) views metaphor as a phenomenon through which

people speak and possibly think about one thing in terms of another. However, both definitions overlook the foundational element of similarity that underpins the structure of metaphor. In contrast, Dickin (2005, p. 328) defines metaphor as a rhetorical device in which a word or phrase is used in a non-literal sense, implying a similarity or analogy with its literal meaning. This definition does not necessarily distinguish metaphor from simile.

3- CLASSIFICATIONS OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

Conceptual metaphors can be categorized based on the cognitive functions they serve. Accordingly, three distinct types of conceptual metaphors have been identified by Lakoff and Johnson (2003):

3.1 Structural Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p.7) refer to the structural metaphor as "Cases where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another". Similarly, Knowles and Moon (2006, p. 17) explain that in this type of metaphor the source domain provides a conceptual framework for the target domain, shaping how individuals conceptualize and discuss abstract entities and activities associated with the target domain. This process is interpreted as a conceptual mapping

between element (A) and element (B). For instance the concept of Time is organized in relation to Motion as demonstrated in the following example: -

TIME IS MOTION

The concept of TIME can be understood as a physical object with specific locations and movement. Consequently the following mapping occurs: -

- 1-Times are things
- 2-The passing of time is motion.

3.2 Ontological Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, P. 25-26) argue that "Ontological metaphors arise when people's experiences of physical objects and substance provide a further basis knowledge for understanding the concrete ones". Understanding experiences through the lens of objects and substances enables individuals to identify specific aspects of their experiences and perceive them as distinct entities or uniform types of substances.

3.3 Orientational Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 14) explain that the cognitive role of this type of metaphor is to create coherence among target concepts within the conceptual system. Most orientational metaphors are associated with spatial orientations such as up-down, in-out, front-back

and off-on. The following examples provide illustrations of orientational metaphors:

HAPPY IS UP.

SAD IS DOWN.

This implies that the physical foundations of personal well-being such as happiness, health, life and control are key factors that define what is considered beneficial for an individual. For instance: -

GOOD IS UP

1-I'm feeling up.

2-you are in high spirits.

4- METHODOLOGY

This research follows a descriptive analytical approach to study the metaphorical use of light and darkness in Iraqi proverbs based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). The focus is on identifying the Source Domain and Target Domain, classifying the type of metaphor and analyzing the reasons for its use within the Iraqi cultural and social context. Data was collected from Iraqi proverbs involving light and darkness from various sources such as Iraqi proverb books, online sources (websites and folk encyclopedias) as well as interviews and surveys with native Iraqi dialect speakers to gather commonly used proverbs.

The analysis followed three main stages: First: classifying

metaphors according to Lakoff and Johnson (2003) into Structural Metaphors, Ontological Metaphors and Orientational Metaphors. Second: identifying the relationship between the Source Domain (light and darkness as sensory concepts) and the Target Domain (such as goodness, knowledge, ignorance, evil, hope, fear, etc). Third: analyzing the reasons for using metaphors which include cultural influence (where light symbolizes knowledge and goodness while darkness represents danger and ignorance), psychological impact (light is associated with reassurance and darkness with fear) and rhetorical function (simplifying abstract ideas and enhancing the effectiveness of discourse).

This study aims to explore the conceptual and cultural significance of light and darkness metaphors in Iraqi proverbs within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Specifically it seeks to: -

- 1- Identify and analyze the metaphorical representations of light and darkness in Iraqi folk discourse.
- 2- Classify the types of conceptual metaphors used in Iraqi proverbs according to Lakoff and Johnson's taxonomy.

- 3- Investigate the relationship between the Source Domain (light/darkness) and various Target Domains (such as knowledge, ignorance, good, evil, hope and fear).
- 4- Understand the sociocultural, psychological and rhetorical motivations behind the use of these metaphors in Iraqi society.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions: -

- 1- How are light and darkness metaphorically represented in Iraqi proverbs?
- 2- What types of conceptual metaphors (structural, ontological, orientational) are most commonly used?
- 3- How do these metaphors reflect Iraqi cultural values and social beliefs?
- 4- What are the underlying psychological and rhetorical functions of using light and darkness metaphors in Iraqi discourse?

The findings revealed that the basic structure of Iraqi proverbs and their underlying cognitive patterns are based on the binary opposition between light and dark. This can be seen by the presence of the primary metaphors GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK along with KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT and

IGNORANCE IS DARK which are often found in these proverbs. Abstract concepts typically have ontological metaphors, they are treated as physical objects while structural and orientational metaphors are used much less so. The findings also point to the importance of sensory experience and an optimistic outlook that emphasizes light prevailing over darkness and human agency in helping to create an understanding of these ideas. The relationship between cognition and emotion as well as the dichotomy of a stable versus unstable existence are both evident within the Iraqi proverbs themselves.

5- DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Proverb 1

ظلام الليل ما يدوم والفجر لابد يصيح

The Darkness of night is transient and the dawn is bound to emerge.

This proverb exemplifies the conceptual metaphor as described by Lakoff and Johnson where natural elements such as night, darkness, dawn and light are used to symbolize human experiences. In this metaphor, night and darkness serve as the source domain, representing hardship, fear and uncertainty while dawn and light function as the target domain, embodying hope, renewal and new beginnings. The proverb primarily

employs an ontological metaphor, conceptualizing darkness and dawn as tangible entities with a life cycle, making abstract ideas more comprehensible. By portraying darkness as something that can pass and dawn as an inevitable force of change, the proverb personifies these elements, reinforcing an optimistic message that hardships are temporary and positive transformation is assured. While there is an orientational relationship between time and movement within both the source domain and the target domain in this instance, the ontological metaphor clearly indicates the relationship between humanity's feelings to a natural environmental object without complexity in the conceptual metaphor presented through the use of this ontological metaphor. In other words, it establishes ground for the understanding of abstract concepts by establishing them in an environment where those concepts are familiar to the average person and makes the proverbs' meaning more understandable and generates an emotional connection with the reader through a structured approach that emphasizes the certainty associated with continuous progress and the ongoing occurrence of renewal.

Proverb 2

الظلام ما يغلب النور, بس النور لازم واحد يشعله

Darkness can't overcome light but the light must be kindled by someone.

This proverb illustrates a conceptual metaphor as defined by Lakoff and Johnson using nature to represent the depths of society and philosophical meaning. This metaphor uses darkness to represent oppression, ignorance and evil while light represents knowledge, goodness and hope. The source domain of darkness and light maps onto abstract concepts of struggle where light signifies potential positive change that requires human action. According to Lakoff and Johnson, this proverb employs a structural metaphor as it not only contrasts darkness and light but also emphasizes the necessity of human agency in kindling light. Thus the proverb suggests that even though oppression and ignorance cannot ultimately extinguish goodness and knowledge, practical effort or intervention is needed for social change and reform. As a conceptual metaphor creates clarity by linking complex abstract notions to a simple daily image, this proverb sends an overall message of hope that goodness will eventually overcome all else. In addition to offering a

hopeful perspective on humanity, this proverb highlights the important role of people in effecting change and this is demonstrated through the use of both passive barriers and active transformation. Ultimately, this proverb provides a deeper cultural and philosophical understanding of human accountability to combat negative influences and enhance enlightenment.

Proverb 3

من شاف النور ما يرجع للظلام

Who witnessed the light will not revert to darkness.

This Iraqi proverb is a representative of conceptual metaphor as described by Lakoff and Johnson. by using light and darkness to symbolize cognitive and moral transformation. Light represents knowledge, awareness and enlightenment while darkness signifies ignorance and misguidance. The sensory experience of going from darkness (no knowledge or understanding) to light provides a metaphorical basis for understanding that once a person makes intellectual or moral progress, he/she cannot turn back. The ontological metaphor also treats knowledge as well as ignorance as something that is tangible, thus portraying the acquisition of knowledge as witnessing light (gaining knowledge) and losing

knowledge as going back to darkness. This ontological metaphor creates the perception that once one achieves awareness, it will be near impossible to revert back to the state of ignorance. Furthermore, this proverb's psychological perspective encourages/persuasively motivates individuals to seek knowledge as a highly valuable resource and the irreversibility of it. Also culturally, especially within Iraqi society, the metaphor aligns with the broader values of guidance and truth where light is a symbol of wisdom and progress while darkness represents backwardness. This particular proverb is an excellent example of how to use sensory experience to explain complex ideas and to illustrate the importance and permanence of intellectual/moral enlightenment.

Proverb 4

النور على الدرب ينور والظلام على الخوف يزيد

Light illuminates the path whereas darkness intensifies fear.

This proverb uses a structural metaphor as defined by Lakoff and Johnson where sensory experiences such as light, darkness and the path represent abstract concepts like guidance, security, fear and loss. In this metaphor, light symbolizes knowledge, clarity and safety while the path represents life's journey.

Thus light gives guidance and wisdom through life's difficulties. Conversely, darkness signifies ignorance, confusion and danger, reinforcing the idea that the absence of knowledge leads to fear and vulnerability. This metaphor is effective because it simplifies complex ideas by linking them to familiar sensory experiences, enhancing clarity and emotional engagement. This proverb also reflects cultural and religious issues in many countries. Historically, the Arabs and Iraqis have valued light and have seen it as a guide while the use of darkness has been seen as negative and associated with misleading therefore, this proverb reinforces the need to seek out knowledge while also warning about ignorance and fear. This proverb serves to merge the intellectual, emotional and cultural dimensions of an idea or thought into a strong vehicle for education, raising awareness of and promoting acceptance of ethical discourse related to knowledge as a vehicle for security and progress.

Proverb 5

بالنور يبين الطريق وبالظلام تكثر العثرات

Through light the path is revealed while in darkness stumbling blocks proliferate.

This Iraqi proverb uses a structural metaphor as defined by Lakoff and Johnson. Light, dark and path are sensory concepts and represent an abstract idea about what is honest, dishonest and what is challenging to navigate successfully in life. In this proverb light is the embodiment of knowledge and clarity while darkness symbolizes ignorance and uncertainty, increasing difficulties and the risk of mistakes. A path represents the journey through life and obstacles on the path represent the difficulty we encounter (without guidance) in overcoming obstacles. When abstract concepts are transformed into familiar sensory experiences through metaphor, the complexity of the concept is simplified and thus is easier to understand and has greater emotional resonance to us. Furthermore, it carries significant cultural and religious resonance particularly in Arab and Iraqi traditions where light is associated with guidance, peace and wisdom whereas darkness symbolizes misguidance and fear. Lastly, this proverb enhances our understanding of how to live with virtue by outlining what we should do to attain knowledge/clarity to successfully navigate the obstacles we face in life.

Proverb 6

نور القلب يغلب ظلام الدنيا

The light of the heart overcomes the darkness of the world.

"The light of the heart overcomes the darkness of the world" is an Iraqi proverb that expresses the idea that a person's inner purity and living conscience are capable of overcoming life's difficulties and evils. The "light of heart" represents all that is good, honest and leads one towards righteousness while the "darkness of the world" encompasses all that is corrupt, troubling and misleading. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Theory of conceptual metaphor, this proverb can be reduced to multiple overlapping metaphors with the strongest being GOODNESS IS LIGHT and EVIL/DIFFICULTY IS DARK. Within this framework, the "light" of human goodness serves as a source domain (clarity, positivity and light) and the "darkness" in the world represents a contrasting source domain (ambiguity, fear and degradation). The target domain in turn encompasses human moral and psychological states such as goodness and evil or hope and despair.

The perception GOODNESS IS LIGHT and EVIL/DIFFICULTY IS DARK is strongly rooted in Iraqi and Arab culture in general as

religious, social and literary contexts consistently associate light with guidance and reassurance. In Iraqi culture in particular, there is a tendency to employ sensory images drawn from everyday life to express emotions and inner experiences.

Proverb 7

اللي كلبه بالنور ما يغلبه الظلام

One whose heart is filled with light cannot be overcome by darkness.

This proverb is an Iraqi proverb that expresses the belief that no one who has inner purity and a living conscience with a solid foundation of morality will ever be defeated by the hardships and evils of life. Light represents goodness and guidance while darkness represents evil and misguidance. According Lakoff and Johnson (2003) theory of conceptual metaphors this proverb is classified as an ontological metaphor since it represents abstract ideas through concrete objects, goodness through "light" inside of one's heart while evil is construed as "darkness" confronting the individual.

The conceptual structure of the proverb is based on mapping the properties of light (such as clarity and guidance) onto moral values and the properties of darkness (such as obscurity and loss) onto evils while portraying the heart as a container that holds this inner light. It also falls

under a broader metaphorical pattern namely GOOD IS LIGHT / EVIL IS DARKNESS, a pattern deeply rooted in human cognition and in Arab culture which enhances the proverb's clarity and expressive power.

The use of this metaphor is a way to clarify ideas that can't be seen easily so they are easier to understand and more meaningful to people. Metaphor can also be used as a tool to persuade or direct someone to behave according to their moral standard. This is possible due to the fact that metaphor has different effects cognitively and psychologically as well as pragmatically as it influences how we think, builds hope and confidence and is often found in advice or encouragement which makes it an effective tool for expressing profound human wisdom in a concise manner.

Proverb 8

اللي يعيش بالظلمة ما يعرف النور

One who lives in darkness does not know the light.

The Iraqi proverb "One who lives in darkness does not know the light" expresses the idea that a person who becomes accustomed to ignorance, misguidance or adverse conditions is unable to perceive truth, goodness or to distinguish between them. Here "darkness" symbolizes ignorance, deviation or suffering

while "light" signifies knowledge, guidance and clarity. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this proverb is based on two basic metaphors: "ignorance is darkness" and "knowledge is light." This framework shows that "darkness" is a source of reference for lack of clarity, lack of vision and fear while "light" on the other hand is a source of reference for clarity, perception and guidance. The target for this framework is the individual's cognitive and mental state.

The conceptual mapping operates such that living in darkness corresponds to being immersed in ignorance or misguidance while the inability to perceive light corresponds to the failure to recognize truth or knowledge. These metaphors are ontological metaphors because they describe abstract ideas (ignorance, knowledge) as if they were tangible, sensory experiences (darkness, light). In addition, these metaphors have a structural quality because they define the relationship between knowledge and ignorance through the dichotomy between light and darkness. This metaphor is often used because it provides a simple way to convey abstract ideas that are difficult to grasp cognitively. It provides the audience with a familiar sensory image that facilitates comprehension.

The light versus darkness metaphor is also a cultural symbol in Arab and Iraqi cultures because it represents guidance versus misguidance therefore, this proverb's rhetorical and pragmatic effects are enhanced.

6- FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study reached several important findings that highlight the metaphorical use of light and darkness in Iraqi proverbs. The findings and conclusions revealed that: -

- 1- The analysis shows that all proverbs are organized according to one primary and often repeated binary opposition: light/darkness which highlights how great a part of Iraqis' cognitive realm is made up of these basic ideas of GOOD IS LIGHT / BAD IS DARKNESS as well as KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT / IGNORANCE IS DARKNESS
- 2- Ontological Metaphors emerged as the most frequently used type of metaphor. For example goodness, ignorance and fear are typically described using metaphors for concrete and material objects. Additionally, all of these proverbs also illustrate how structural metaphor can integrate multiple aspects into a single cohesive representation of life which can be considered as a journey.

3- Orientational metaphors appear in some cases particularly those associated with temporal progression (night → dawn) or movement (walking along a path), though they are less dominant than ontological metaphors. The findings further demonstrate that everyday sensory experiences especially vision, light and darkness serve as the foundation for understanding complex cognitive and psychological states, thereby enhancing clarity and communicative effectiveness.

4- A prominent theme is the inevitability of light's triumph (symbolizing hope, truth and goodness) reflecting an optimistic cultural orientation. At the same time certain proverbs (2, 6 and 7) emphasize human agency, highlighting the role of individuals in bringing about change rather than passively awaiting the disappearance of darkness.

5- Several sub-metaphors are identified including: -

TRUTH IS LIGHT

HEART IS A CONTAINER FOR LIGHT

LIFE IS A PATH

MISPERCEPTION IS DISTORTED VISION

6- The analysis confirm that conceptual metaphor in Iraqi proverbs is not merely a rhetorical

device but a fundamental cognitive structure that organizes human understanding of the world. The light/darkness binary constitutes a comprehensive conceptual system through which morality, knowledge, emotions and human behavior are interpreted.

7- Iraqi culture and Arab culture more broadly reinforces this model by associating light with religious and moral values such as guidance and truth. The proverbs also reflect a balance between two perspectives: a deterministic view in which light inevitably prevails and an agentive view in which human intervention is necessary to bring about light. This duality suggests a nuanced understanding of the relationship between fate and human action.

8- Metaphors serve not only a representational function but also play a persuasive and directive function by encouraging the search for knowledge as well as suggesting moral values. The frequent occurrence of these metaphors indicates that while they may be somewhat universal, they still refer back to their deep roots in the Iraqi cultural background.

6- Finally, the proverbs reflect a duality between stability and change:-

Light represents permanence,
truth and continuity

Darkness represents a
temporary and transient state

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