The Archetype Beneath the Saying: Archetype-Based Analysis of Arabic and English Proverb Translation

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***Abstract**:*

Proverbs are among the most challenging elements of language to translate, as their meaning is not anchored in their lexical form but in culturally accumulated associations. This paper examines the translation of proverbs between Arabic and English through Frye's archetypal analysis, combined with Baker's translation framework. As a diagnostic tool for proverb translation rather than treating each proverb as an isolated translation problem to be solved. It argues that what a proverb transmits across languages can be understood at two levels: the archetype it invokes, and the cultural vehicle used to encode it. Building on this distinction, the article develops a topology of archetype/vehicle convergence and divergence, and applies it to a corpus of paired Arabic and English proverbs. The analysis shows that a proverb's translatability is best predicted not by finding a matching expression but by whether the underlying archetype is shared and whether its vehicle is shared.

***Keywords**: archetypal criticism, Frye, Baker, equivalence, paremiology, proverb translation.*

1- Introduction

Translating proverbs represents a very challenging task for translators. Unlike ordinary language, their meaning cannot be rendered word for word as they are presented as inherited, tested knowledge, expression a culture has agreed is true often enough to preserve it in a fixed form. A translation must carry over that claim of collective authority, which is lost if the proverb is translated word for word into a language belonging to a distinct cultural sphere. Any translator who has worked on proverb translation, especially between Arabic and English, generally encounters the same reality: a sentence that is grammatically simple and syntactically unremarkable but it resists to substitution. What does a camel that cannot see the crook in its own neck mean to an English reader? The problem is not the vocabulary of course, it is the image that a proverb vehicle, a payload of cultural memory that its literal words do not disclose on their own.

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Translation studies have long treated this problem within the theory of equivalence, as a part of the historical diachrony between Lettre *vs Sense* (Berman,1999). In this context Nida (1964) distinguished between formal equivalence which conserves the form of the source expression, and dynamic equivalence which preserves its effect on the reader. This distinction remains particularly relevant, as a literal translation of a proverb achieves formal similarity but fails dynamically, since the target-language reader lacks the cultural knowledge to decode the image. This, in turn highlights the weight of cultural factors in the translation process. Consequently, the translator's task becomes complex as they must encounter myriads of difficulties in decoding cultural signs which, according to Gonzalez**,** *"can be more problematic for the translator than semantic or syntactic difficulties"* (2004, p.123). Newmark (1988) in turn drew a distinction between communicative and semantic translation, favoring the former for proverbial and cultural materials because literal translation often produces nonsense or results in an incomprehensible rendering. Along the same lines, Baker (1992) extended this idea by cataloguing the types of non-equivalence arising from culturally specific concepts, concepts that are not lexicalized in the target language, or expressions with no clear figurative or image counterpart. She asserted that culture represents the major difficulty for translators when dealing with materials that are loaded with cultural implications. She proposed her model of cultural substitution strategies (CSS) in which she emphasized that:

> This [cultural substitution] strategy involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression with a target-language item which does not have the same propositional meaning but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader. The main advantage of using this strategy is that it gives the reader a concept with which s/he can identify, something familiar and appealing (2011, p.31**).**

She explained the dominant practice that favors rendering the effect rather than the form, in contrast to Venuti's (2004) approach to domestication and foreignization strategy, where he prefers the latter to encourage readers to learn more about other cultures. These are useful frameworks but they treat each proverb as an isolated expression without looking beneath the sayings as they tend to solve the translation issue merely by finding the nearest target-language expression. Although researchers in fields of translation and cultural studies have addressed this topic across various languages including Arabic, this does not preclude the value of adding the present work to these contributions. Rather, it aims to illuminate a novel dimension.

The study of proverbs, paremiology provides another complementary perspective. It draws on Mieder's (2004) analysis of the structural-functional properties of proverbs, such as their brevity and traditional authority, all of which highlight the fact that proverbs constitute a unique category of discourse. English and Arabic are used as case study languages, chosen for proverbial traditions that reflect distinct cultural, religious and environmental values. Arabic proverbs draw on pastoral and desert imagery, Quranic and Islamic references, and strong cultural codes of honor and shame. In opposition to English proverbs often reflect a natural, industrial and domestic perception and Christian inflected elements. Nevertheless, both addresses recognizable similar human concerns.

The objective of this study is to apply the archetypal criticism to proverb translation, seeking to utilize its conceptual framework to enrich the field of translation studies, and offer a novel analytical perspective of proverb translation through the archetypal lens.

2- Translating Proverbs:

In general terms, proverbs are linguistic devices used to express specific meanings through a fixed structure. As vehicles of wisdom, morals, or advice, they reflect accumulated human experience. As defined by Mieder (1994) a proverb is: "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (p. 38). Arora (1984) further highlighted the stylistic features that characterize proverbs such as alliteration, parallelism, rhyme and ellipsis. As independent, self-contained units, proverbs are deeply rooted in culture; they are based on accumulated experience expressed through an aphoristic and metaphorical style that symbolizes wisdom. Created originally as a response to specific circumstances, these expressions acquire a fixed linguistic structure and gain widespread societal acceptance.

Looking at the literature above, it is evident that the intersection between paremiology and translation studies presents a fascinating area of research. In the context of translation studies, translating proverbs involves challenges similar to those encountered when translating idioms, as both require navigating the space between culture and language. In identifying that proverbs are highly configurated items, Baker similarly recognizes the fixed nature of idioms and proverbs and points two main issues about their translation: "the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning" conveyed by an idiom in the TL (2018, p. 71). To address these challenges, she proposes a set of strategies. These strategies will constitute the framework directing our analysis of archetypes.

3- Archetypal Criticism

Archetypal literary critics believe that there is a realm of human experience expressed in myths that runs deeper than any rational or intellectual thinking. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung was the first to formulate the theory of archetypes based on the collective unconsciousness. Jung's theory of archetype suggests that certain patterns, symbols and, images --such as the wise old man, the trickster, the great mother, and the shadow-- recur across unrelated cultures because they are inherited patterns of the collective unconsciousness shared by all humans. Etymologically, the word "archetype" is derived from the Greek *arche* meaning original and *topos* meaning model. Thus, an archetype refers to an original model that represents a common pattern hidden in the collective unconscious of human beings (Jung,1968). Whether one accepts this theoretical claim or not, there is no doubt that the descriptive observations of this framework have proven durable in literary and cultural analysis, where specific narrative and symbolic patterns recur with consistency across cultures that are geographically and historically isolated from one another.

Northrop Frye (1957) adopted the concept of the archetype from psychology and applied it to literary criticism, arguing that literature is organized around a number of recurring patterns. Archetypal criticism, as developed by Frye, is particularly useful for this study because it deals with

archetypes as patterns identifiable through comparative textual analysis rather than through a psychological apparatus. It can be said that proverbs are a natural fit for this kind of analysis since they are like myths compressed into a single sentence. Treating them as compressed archetypal narratives, rather than fixed units to be rendered against a target-language units, is what allows the comparison in this article to proceed at the level of pattern rather than only at the level of wording.

4- Archetypal Criticism as a Comparative Tool

Bringing the two theories outlined above together, which are rarely brought into direct contact, despite discussing the same topic from different angles, enables us to describe what happens when translating proverbs and, more importantly, what a translator must identify before any rendering decision can be made.

On the one hand, paremiology and Baker's framework tell us what a translator should do recognizing the distinct nature of proverbs. Archetypal criticism, as developed by Frye, on the other hand, tells us what that nature consists of. Read side by side, the two frameworks help us understand what the practical choices available to a translator are when dealing with proverbs, while archetypal criticism offers a way of explaining why a given proverb requires a specific choice, and which option is likely to succeed.

Baker (2011) identifies two issues facing the translator of fixed expressions: the first is the ability to recognize and understand them, the second is the ability to transfer their meaning into the target language. All four of Baker's strategies are the answer of the second problem, as she presupposes that the first problem-grasping the proverb meaning- has already been solved. It is precisely for this prior problem that the archetypal criticism is helpful because to understand a proverb in its fullest sense is to see what recurring pattern of human experience it is drawing on. From this perspective, archetypal analysis serves as a complement to Baker's model, as it supplies the initial diagnosis step that must occur before any of the four strategies can be applied.

The proposed two-level model implies that every proverb can be understood as the combination of an archetype and a vehicle. The archetype represents the underlying pattern of human experience that the proverb encodes, while the vehicle is the cultural reference used to carry that pattern into a memorable, fixed form. It is crucial to emphasize that the vehicle is rarely a neutral or interchangeable container; rather, it is what gives a proverb its unique local color and its rootedness in a distinct material, social or religious context. However, it should be noted that a translator who overlooks the vehicle and treats it as if it were the entirely of the proverb's meaning will either render it literally that produces a mistranslation that makes no sense for the target reader, or select an equivalent simply because a sematic match exists, without investigating whether that match carries accurately the same archetype. It is in this second case that the archetypal analysis serves as safeguard against such superficial approach to proverb translation.

Thus, relying on Baker's framework, translators can deploy one of the above-mentioned strategies: using an equivalent matching proverb when both archetype and vehicle align; replacing the vehicle if the archetypal pattern is the same in the target language and culture; paraphrasing if the archetype itself has no equivalent; or resorting to omission, which can, in some cases, be a

highly responsible choice, if translating the proverb would mislead rather than inform. In this last case, archetypal analysis becomes a useful tool because a shared vehicle is no guarantee of shared archetype. On the contrary, the absence of an equivalent proverbial vehicle does not imply that the translation is problematic; when its archetype is recognizable in the target culture, either paraphrase or substitution can succeed.

5- Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and close comparative methodology. A corpus of Arabic and English proverbs was selected thematically across a sample of selected archetypes such as the wise elder, the trickster, animal symbolism, the mother-the nurturer, the Hero journey, and the shadow/duality. Each proverb pair was analyzed according to the following steps: first, identifying the vehicle (image, animal, symbol, etc.); second, identifying the archetype that the vehicle is used to express; third, comparing the translation strategies applied across both dimensions; and finally, classifying the pairs into one of the four typological categories: shared vehicle/shared archetype; shared archetype/differing vehicle; differing archetype/shared vehicle; culture-specific archetype.

This procedure is both diagnostic and illustrative. It was designed to generate analytical insights into the translatability and examine how different strategies function, aligned with the objective of the study to demonstrate the analytical purchase of the archetype/vehicle model.

6- Comparative Study

In this section, selected Arabic-English proverb pairs are categorized and classified according to the archetype/vehicle typology. It is worth noting here that the proposed target-language equivalents for each proverb are not, in any way, the sole viable translational options.

6-1- Proverb Pair 1

Arabic: الدهر أخبر من الكتب (*ad-dahru akhbaru mina al-kutubi)*

Literal translation: Years know more than books

English equivalent: Experience is the best teacher.

Analysis: The Arabic proverb states that time and the passage of ages help one know more than books, which represent formal of knowledge and understanding. The English proverb makes a linked but a narrower claim about personal experience as the most effective means of instruction. In Baker's terms, this is a translation with a similar meaning but dissimilar form. The Arabic vehicle *Ad-dahr* (time/age) is a loaded pre-Islamic and Islamic concept. Time is personified as an active, sentient sage, expressing a fatalistic metaphysical epistemology. The English proverb personifies experience as a pedagogue, stressing an empiricist, individual-centered epistemology with no cosmic agent behind it.

Archetype: Wise elder, embodying the concept that wisdom is vested in lived rather than in formal instruction.

Typology: Shared archetype/ differing vehicle. Both proverbs invoke the same underlying wisdom-pattern; however, the Arabic proverb uses a personification through *Ad-dahr*, while the English proverb abstracts it into *experience* as teacher.

6-2- Proverb Pair 2

Arabic: الأم مدرسة إذا أعددتها أعددت شعبا طيب الأخلاق (*al-ummu madrasa idha a'adadtaha, a'adadta sha'ban tayyiba al'a'kh'laqi*)

Literal translation: The mother is a school, if you prepare her well, you prepare a virtuous nation.

English equivalent: The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

Analysis: the Arabic proverb, derived from Hafiz Ibrahim's poetry, frames the mother as *madrasah* (school) and relates her role to nation-building (*sh'ab*) and moral virtue (*tayyiba al'a'kh'laqi*) reflecting a collectivist, pedagogical, Ummah-centered worldview. The English counterpart's vehicle is domestic and kinetic (cradle, hand) with its telos oriented to power (ruling the world) rather than morality, reflecting an individualistic, power-oriented frame. In terms of translation procedure, this represents a translation with a similar meaning but a dissimilar form.

Archetype: The mother/the nurturer, where maternal influence extends beyond the domestic sphere to have collective and civilizational consequences.

Typology: Shared archetype / differing vehicle. Both proverbs agree on the pattern of maternal formation and its role in shaping collective outcomes. However, in Arabic, the vehicle is an institutional, public image, whereas in English, it is a domestic intimate one.

6-3- Proverb Pair 3

Arabic: الطبع يغلب التطبع (*at-tab'u yaglibu at-tabbu*)

Literal translation: Inherent nature overcomes acquired behavior.

English equivalent: The fox may grow gray, but never good.

Analysis: The Arabic proverb asserts that innate, inborn nature (*at-tabu*) prevails over acquired or cultivated behavior (*at-tabbu*). Arabic employes an abstract antithetical pairing (*muqabala*: *at-tab'/at-tabbu*) two words that share the same root, morphologically mirroring each other to enact the idea that the surface behavior cannot overcome its roots. The English proverb, by contrast, deploys the fox, the Western vehicle for the trickster figure, combined with a temporal aging marker (gray) and added moral judgment (never good). This proverb emphasizes that time changes one's appearance, yet fails to change what lies beneath. Translationally, it is a rendering of a similar meaning with a dissimilar form that accommodates a shift from general, fixed human trait to a specific, unreformable moral character.

Archetype: Both proverbs share the trickster archetype of nature overriding nurture. However, while the English proverb explicitly utilizes the fox as cunning animal symbol, resisting moral reformation, the Arabic proverb uses a more neutral statement applicable to any inborn trait, whether virtuous or vicious.

Typology: Shared archetype (nature overrides nurture) /differing vehicle (abstract vs Fox), though the English proverb attributes this resistance to change to a trickster-coded nature.

6-4- Proverb Pair 4

Arabic: ربّ ضارة نافعة (*Rubba darratin nafi'ah*)

Literal translation: Perhaps a harmful thing is beneficial

English equivalent: Every cloud has a silver lining.

Analysis: this proverb expresses the idea that apparent misfortune can conceal a hidden benefit. The Arabic proverb uses an abstract antithesis (*darra-harmful/nafi'ah-useful*) echoing the Quranic principal that "you may dislike a thing which is good for you" grounding the concept in a theological framing of hardship. The English equivalent achieves a similar meaning with a dissimilar form; it renders the meaning through meteorological, visual metaphor (cloud, silver lining), embedded in English-British whether-culture and secular optimism.

Archetype: The shadow duality, the presence of hidden benefit within misfortune.

Typology: Shared archetype (hidden good coexisted in apparent harm) / differing vehicle (an abstract concept in Arabic versus a concrete visual image in English).

6-5- Proverb Pair 5

Arabic: لكل جواد كبوة (*Likulli jawadin kabwa*)

Literal translation: for every noble horse, there is a stumble.

English equivalent: Every horse may trip.

Analysis: The Arabic proverb states that even a thoroughbred, noble horse (*jawad*) is subject to a stumble (*kabwa*). It suggests not that any horse trips, but that even the best of them trips, meaning that the most excellent and skilled individual is bound to err occasionally. The English translation makes the same claim that any horse, however is capable is immune from tripping, and by the same logic, any person, no matter is skilled, is immune from occasional failure. The translation strategy used for this example employs a similar meaning with a similar form. It represents the most direct equivalence case in the corpus, since both the vehicle (horse/stumble) and the moral message (even the best falter) are preserved. The only loss is connotative (horse/ *jawad)* rather than structural.

Archetype: The hero, noble, exceptional, both proverbs show the hero vulnerability.

Typology: this example showed the clearest correspondence of the corpus, shared archetype/shared vehicle. Both proverbs retain horse as vehicle, even if English uses a generic word, and convey identical moral that excellence does not mean infallibility.

6-6- Proverb Pair 6

Animal symbols

Arabic: الجمل لا يرى عوج رقبته (*al-jamal la yara iwja raqabatihi*)

Literal translation: The camel does not see the crookedness of its own neck

English equivalent: The pot calling the kettle black

Analysis: The Arabic proverb draws on the camel, a pastoral, desert animal deeply tied to the culture of Bedouin life. The proverb states that the camel does not see its own hump (or neck), whose visible crookedness becomes a metaphor for a defect obvious to others yet invisible to its bearer. This proverb is used for someone who criticizes other for fault they themselves possess, remaining blind to their own defects. The English proverb expresses a related, but not identical, idea. It draws on a domestic, household setting (the pot and the kettle) belonging to early industrial or agricultural context, where both objects, though blackened by the same fire, reproach each other for the blackness they share. This pair of proverbs demonstrates a difference in logic of the analogy, not merely in the vehicle: the Arabic proverb is about individual's blindness to a personal fault, whereas the English one is about two parties sharing the same fault and hypocritically accusing one another. This translation prioritizes fluency, and admits the shift from self-blindness to mutual hypocrisy; however, a paraphrase like "He criticizes in others the very fault he cannot see in himself" would be better suited this case, as it preserves fidelity to the original logic

Archetype: Both under the Shadow archetype; however, the Arabic proverb depicts the self-blind fool, whereas the English archetype represents the hypocrite.

Typology: Culture-specific archetype with partial archetype mismatch and vehicle mismatch. The archetype shifts from individual self-blindness to mutual hypocrisy, and the vehicle similarly diverges from pastoral and desert environment to domestic and industrial context with no shared imagery.

7- Conclusion

This article has proposed that archetypal analysis offers translation studies a diagnosis tool of Arabic-English proverb translation. It argues that proverb translatability depends on the relationship between a proverb's underlying archetype and its cultural vehicle rather, than solely on lexical and semantic comparisons. This approach provides a framework for asking, prior to making stylistic or wording decisions, whether the archetype pattern beneath the proverb is shared between the source and target cultures, and subsequently whether the vehicle carrying that pattern is shared.

Through the analysis of selected sample archetypes, four possible relationships between source and target proverbs were identified: shared vehicle and archetype; shared archetype with a differing vehicle; differing archetype with a shared vehicle; and a culture-specific archetype. The dominant pattern in the corpus was a shared archetype with a differing vehicle, primarily because Arabic favors abstraction and personification, while English favors concrete visual imagery. The camel / pot and kettle case represents the most significant findings, as it illustrates how a surface-level functional equivalence can hide an underlying concept of psychological shift. Conversely, the

"noble horse" (*jawad)* pair provides the cleanest case of a matching shared archetype and shared vehicle, demonstrating how certain symbols remain culturally convergent across both languages.

Because the archetypal categories employed in this study were applied through close reading rather than an operationalized coding scheme, a larger study with multiple independent coders and a more systematically sampled corpus would further strengthen the typology's reliability.

Future research could test this framework against a larger and more constructed corpus, featuring a broader and less selectively curated set of proverbs, as well as examine whether explicit training in archetype and vehicle recognition improves the consistency of proverb translations produced by students and professional translators alike.

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