

**Language as a Mirror of Cultural Identity  
The Case of Proverbs in English and Algerian Arabic**

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**Abstract**

The question of the interrelationship between language, culture and identity has caught the interest of many sociolinguists and cultural researchers. As is well-known, language, culture and identity are closely connected and influence each other. Language reflects culture; it also serves to maintain one's identity and sense of belonging. Among the prominent expressions that are culture-bound representing part and parcel of every society are proverbs through which a given social group identity is embodied as well as constructed. This paper is an attempt to shed light on the correlation between language, culture and identity, especially by comparing and contrasting some proverbs in English and Algerian Arabic. Such popular sayings are taken as a sample of the study to see to what extent they are shaped by their speakers' underlying cultures and in what way they mirror their identities. Therefore, the more a proverb is universal, the more uniqueness of a people it brings out, and the more culture-bound it is, the more diversity of cultures and identities it displays.

**Key words:** language, culture, identity, proverbs

**الخلاصة**

لقد أثارَت مسألة العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة والهوية اهتمام العديد من علماء اللغة والباحثين الثقافيين. كما هو معروف، لأن كل من اللغة والثقافة والهوية يرتبط بالآخر ارتباطاً وثيقاً ويؤثر في بعضه البعض. فاللغة تعكس الثقافة كما أنها تعمل على الحفاظ على هوية الفرد وشعوره بالانتماء. ومن بين التعبيرات البارزة التي تمثل الثقافة جزءاً لا يتجزأ من كل مجتمع الأمثال التي يتم من خلالها تجسيد هوية جماعة اجتماعية معينة وصنعها. وهذا المقال محاولة لإلقاء الضوء على العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة والهوية، لا سيما من خلال مقارنة بعض الأمثال باللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية في الجزائر. وقد تم أخذ مثل هذه الأقوال الشعبية كعينة للدراسة لمعرفة إلى أي مدى يمكن أن تتشكل هذه الأمثال من خلال الثقافات الأساسية للمتحدثين وكذا الطريقة التي تعكس بها هوياتهم. لذلك، كلما كان المثل عالمياً، كان تفرد الشعب به أكثر، وكلما زاد ارتباطه بثقافة ما، زاد تنوع الثقافات والهويات التي يعرضها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اللغة، الثقافة، الهوية، الأمثال

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## I. Introduction

Understanding the relationship between language, identity and culture is of a paramount importance so that foreign language learners can develop their cross-cultural communication. As stated by Kramersch (1993), the purpose of foreign language learning is “cultivating international understanding, responsibility and effective participation in a global age” **(as cited in Hang Zou, 2012, p. 465)**. As a matter of fact, it should be noted that language and culture are inextricably related, since the most important ingredient that constitutes culture is undoubtedly language. For many linguists and even anthropologists, it is thanks to the medium of language that culture can preserve and transmit its beliefs, values, norms and the like. Culture, then, cannot be acquired and shared by the members of a given speech community without the existence of language. Moreover, another crucial component that characterizes language is its connection to meaning. According to Hall (1997) “language is the privileged medium in which we “make sense” of things in which meaning is produced and exchanged” **(Ibid)**.

Therefore, this meaning constructs one’s own identity. As claimed by Hall (1997), “meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we belong” **(Ibid., p. 466)**. Interestingly, identity and culture are closely linked as well, since cultural differences construct different identities. Thus, language forms a particular identity which creates meaning that belongs to a specific culture which by its own differentiates one group member from another.

Among the many linguistic elements through which meaning is culturally constructed are proverbs which are the core aspect of this paper. Proverbs are parts of everyday society that create a sociolinguistic reality and a unique identity among its group members. In the Algerian context, people, especially the eldest, make use of proverbs as a way of expressing wisdom, teaching lessons related to different topics such as tolerance, happiness, hard work, honesty, jealousy, sorrow, etc. For this reason, this paper examines the cultural identity by comparing and contrasting the English and Algerian proverbs. Thus, different interpretations of the same proverb illustrate people’s various identities and cultures.

This paper aims to answer the following question:

In what way do proverbs reflect our cultural identity?

### **1.1. Language, culture and identity**

It is well known that language plays a crucial role in our life. When acquired during childhood, it helps us discover ourselves as social human beings and facilitates our inclusion within a given society. Hockett (1985), for example, sees language as “the most valuable single possession of the human race” **(Hockett, 1985, p.1)**. Language enables us to interact with other people, share with them

our knowledge experiences, etc. On this basis, one may encounter several definitions about language.

Hall (1997) regards language as a representational system. He contends that “we use signs and symbols- whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects- to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings”( **Hang Zou, 2012, p.465**). Moreover, Noam Chomsky sees language from a cognitive point as being a psychological phenomenon, deeply related to the human mind. Language, in fact, does not stop at that level, but it transcends it to be associated with many social and cultural facts. Language, then, is a concept that is so vague, and intimately related to us as individuals, members of a particular society and also as participants in a given culture. Outstandingly, it is utmost a meaning-making anchor.

Furthermore, among the most ambiguous and controversial terms is that of culture. For the English anthropologist, Edward Taylor (1935) culture is defined as follows: “Culture or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (Taylor, 1935, p.1). However, through this definition, Taylor did not make any distinction between culture and civilisation. He also neglected the role of language which is the most important means by which culture is acquired and transmitted.

Succinctly put, Hall (1997) states that “the word culture is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the way of life of a people, community, nation or social group” (Op. cit., p.466). Manifesting itself in language patterns and ways of behavior, culture is formally defined to refer to the amount of social heritage of people, which involves knowledge, language patterns, ways of thinking, feelings and acting that are transmitted from one generation to the next. It includes both material culture (physical artifacts or objects like roads, houses, machines, clothes, arts) and non-material culture which contains creations such as customs, values, norms, beliefs, that guide one’s behavior and ensure adaptation to society.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the most important ingredient that constitutes culture is undoubtedly language. For many linguists and anthropologists, it is thanks to the medium of language that culture can preserve and transmit its beliefs, values and norms. Differently said, culture cannot be acquired and shared by the members of a given society without the existence of language.

The fact that language is culture-bound prompts people to have various interpretations and reactions towards it. The sentence, for example, “we stopped on the way home from class last night and had a couple of beers.” would be seen by an American student as no more than a depiction of past events that may receive a positive evaluation. The same sentence if heard by a Moslem student

would reveal a negative reaction due to the Islamic prohibition against drinking alcohol.

Therefore, through a given culture, one's identity is created. Identities are defined as "the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships that define who one is" (Oyserman et. al., 2012, p.69). Thus, these different aspects distinguish and preserve groups' cultural identities. More importantly, Hall (1997) defines cultural identity "in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Op. cit., p.465). Cultural identity is, then, transmitted, changed through time and history.

It is worth stressing that the relationship between language, identity and culture is of a significant value. It is through the medium of language that meaning is shared and understood, thereby the social world is created. Evidently, many identities are built up and form what we call "culture". More interestingly, among the most fascinating and interesting elements of language learning is understanding and interpreting the meaning of sayings that are part and parcel of every language and society.

### ***1.2. Proverbs as a Mirror of Cultural Identity***

One of the elements that reflect the individual's cultural identity is expressions of wisdom which are commonly referred to as proverbs. BBC English dictionary (1992) defines proverbs as "short sentences that people often quote to give advice or make general comments about life" (as cited in Usman et. al., 2013, p.47). A proverb is, therefore, a short pithy sentence usually in figurative statement, expressing well-known truths, social norms or moral themes in common use by a society or a social group. Many proverbs are rooted in a country's ancient cultural heritage or religion. They are part and parcel of the oral culture of any society. As stated by Dwivedi (2013): "proverbs are rooted in the reflections and perceptions of the self and other, in the history of language, in the memory of people, in religion, castes, space and geographical territory" (Dwivedi, 2013, p.9).

Moreover, Mieder (2004) defines it as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from one generation to generation" (Mieder, 2004, p.10). Therefore, a proverb expresses the beliefs, values and the lifestyles of the people generally transmitted from one generation to another. Besides, the observer of proverbs would notice that they contain witty statements that are the outcome of a long life experience. Generally speaking, people use proverbs to sum up situations, or pass judgments. People tend to quote them instead of being too long explaining or commenting on a given act or behavior. As the Chinese proverb says, "one proverb is worth ten thousand words".

In this connection, it is argued that “proverbs and sayings can be an insight into the culture and the society of the country they originate from or are used in” (Beacco, 2000 as cited in Usman et. al., 2013, p.48). Thus, they reflect the culture within which a given community lives and one’s intercultural communication is, then, made up. It should be noted that the Algerian wise sayings are indefinite as the Algerian dialects are outstandingly numerous and different. In Algeria, proverbs are used to show happiness, sadness, to mourn, to praise and to warn depending on the social context that determines their use and through which a cultural group constructs its identity.

The purpose of this study is to examine the cultural identity through proverbs by comparing and contrasting English and Algerian sayings. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to answer the following question: in what ways do proverbs shape and mirror the English and Algerian identities?

## II. Methods

Although one can never know when proverbs are generally created and by whom, there is no doubt that they are pervasive in almost all cultures. Their deeper meanings are the best indicators of the physical environment from which they arise and the beliefs and the social norms to which given people are associated. If we consider, for example, the Algerian proverb that says [Ixir mra wa far mra] (الخير مرا و الشر مرا) that one may translate into English as (good is a woman and evil is a woman), we deduce that such a proverb tells a lot about the role of women and their responsibility in the Algerian culture. In other words, this proverb suggests that women are the first to be responsible for everything that may take place, be it good or bad. For example, if a given couple lives happily with good relations towards their relatives, this suggests that the wife is a good one, but if things run in the opposite, this means that this wife is a bad one, ignoring her responsibilities towards both her husband and the other relatives.

In the same line of thought, if we dive into another Algerian proverb, mainly the one which goes [sɔg nsa ma jatabna] (سوق النساء ما يتبنا) (the market of women will never be built), one may notice that in the Algerian mentality females are downgraded and considered as being inferior creature lacking both the intellectual and the physical disabilities as opposed to their males counterparts, who are generally seen as the stereotype of superiority.

But it is worthy to mention that the idea of women’s inferiority seems to exist in almost all cultures, including the English one. This can be illustrated by the English proverb which says “when an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in a woman”. In this proverb, the inability of an ass to undertake an upward movement, due to his inherit stupidity is implicitly compared to the presumed inherit inability of women to acquire wisdom. In other terms, the proverb implies that as it is difficult to find an ass capable of climbing a ladder, so it is difficult to find a wise woman. Furthermore, the use of the word “may” in this proverb

suggests also that finding an ass able of climbing a ladder would be no guarantee for finding a wise woman. Thus, such a proverb implies that an ass maybe even wiser than a woman.

It seems that proverbs display a great deal of one's underlying culture and identity. That is, since proverbs are no more than a piece of language which is inextricably related to us as human beings, there is no doubt that they constitute a mirror image of our cultural identity, illustrating a great deal of our attitudes, world view and life experiences as a whole. If we consider, for example, the English proverb "east or west, home is the best", we would recognize that for the English people, wherever one may go, still his home is the best place where he can find both his rest and privacy. However, since human experiences vary from being cognitively determined by dint of one's membership to the human race, to others who are widely influenced by the society or the culture in which one is raised, one may distinguish different types of proverbs: universal and culture specific.

### **II.1. Comparing Some English and Algerian Proverbs**

It is well-known that each country has its own repertoire of proverbs. Yet, it is noteworthy that some proverbs fit neatly together because they are the outcome of human experiences, which is identical everywhere. They derive from sources like religion, wise sayings, and scientific facts; the existence of similarities between them is out of question.

"Lies have short wings" is an English wise saying that can be universal because people –all over the world- agree that lying is a bad behavior that cannot last long and it will soon be discovered by people. Equally, in the Algerian culture, similar proverb exists and it goes [ trig lkaddab gšira ] (طريق الكذاب قصيرة) ( the road of the liar is short). This suggests that both cultures reveal a negative attitude towards lying and prohibit such a vice because of their association with the Islamic and Christian religions respectively.

Additionally, it happens that many people across cultures cannot bear the truth or the reality of facts due to its extreme harshness. Therefore, they mirror this through proverbs they usually quote. In English, people say "even the truth may be bitter". In the same way, the Algerian's [ aššah jadzrah ] (الصح يجرح) conveys the same idea.

Furthermore, since every single mother on earth is gifted by the instinct of motherhood, one may come across many proverbs that highlight motherhood and its pervasiveness across cultures. To illustrate, when English people adore their children, they say "every child is swan" to mean that every child is so lovely and graceful to the point that it can be compared to a swan, the most important bird in their culture. Similarly, when Algerians express their admiration to children, they say [kol xanfous ʕand mmu yzal] (كل خنفوس عند مو غزال) ( every beetle is a gazelle in the eyes of his mother). This proverb implies that even an ugly child –

who can be compared to a beetle- is seen as beautiful as a gazelle, the symbol of beauty and gracefulness in the Algerian culture.

Besides, if we consider the English proverbial expression “a barking dog never bites” and the Algerian one “

فوت على الواد الهرهارو ما تفوتش على الواد الساكت

[fʊt ʕla lwad alharhar wmatfʊtʃ ʕla lwad assakat] that can be literally translated into English as (pass by the rough river and not by the calm river), we will notice that though differently expressed, these proverbs pour into the same vessel. That is both of them imply that one has to be more careful and prudent not from those people who are excited and violent all the time, but from those who are often silent and calm but harm other people covertly.

### 11.2. *Contrasting some English and Algerian Arabic Proverbs*

Despite the similarities that may exist between different societies in terms of their world views and experiences, there is no doubt that each society has its own cultural specification that distinguishes it from others. This can be illustrated by several proverbs that denote contrary meanings. If we consider the English proverb “time is money”, we will recognize the English people as so aware of the importance of time that it is compared to money. However, when analyzing the Algerian proverb [ kʊl taʕtɪla fiha xira] (كل تعطيلة فيها خيرة) which means (the later, the better), we observe that in the Algerian culture very little attention is paid to time to the extent that the later somebody is, the better things will be.

In addition, the observer of the English proverb “there is no accounting for taste” and the Algerian one [kʊl ma ya ʕadʒabak wa lbas ma yaʕdʒab annas

(كول ما يعجبك ولبس ما يعجب الناس)

(eat what you like, but wear what other people like) would realise that they are, indeed, contradictory. While the former indicates that in the English culture, each one is free to eat and wear what he desires, since everyone has the right to be different from the other, the latter, however, suggests that the Algerian culture stresses that each individual should conform to the norm of his society, especially in his way of dressing.

In the same connection, the analysis of the English proverb “you cannot judge a book by its cover” may imply that one has never to give his opinion about people or things on the basis of their appearances. Nevertheless, this meaning seems to contradict totally with the Algerian proverbial expression [alʕam yban man xrifʊ] (العام يبان من خريفو) (the year is known by its autumn). Unlike the first proverb which suggests that the way both people and things appear can never give you a full image about their reality, the second one, however, implies that everything can be judged and discovered on the basis of its appearance or beginning as each year can be predicted to be either rainy or dry depending on its first season, autumn.

### III. Discussion

From the above mentioned examples, one may deduce that proverbs have deeper relationship with a given people's identity. One major reason why proverbs are analysed and studied even nowadays is that proverbs convey different cultural pictures. Since they contain observations of everyday life, display people's traditions, customs and way of thinking, such sayings can also be said to expose interesting pictures of diverse cultural identities.

Notwithstanding, contradictory proverbs such as the already mentioned ones appear not only across unrelated cultures. Even within one single culture, one may encounter several opposing ones. If we consider the English language, we find many proverbs that contradict with each other, like "absence makes the heart grow fonder" versus "out of sight, out of mind". While the former means when people are apart, they can feel more affectionate towards each other, the latter means that when someone is far from you, he is also far from your mind. Another contradictory proverb includes also "time and tide wait for no man" as opposed to "all good things come to those who wait". The first proverb illustrates the importance of time, while the second one stresses the value of waiting to get all that is good. Some examples and many more show that people do not remain using the same wise sayings, but change frequently especially when shifting from situation to another, and from period to another to adapt them to the new changes that occur within their society.

### IV. Conclusion

To conclude, one may say that an intimate correlation seems to exist between the language one speaks and his cultural identity. Indeed, in analyzing the previous English and Algerian proverbs one realises that such popular expressions give a mirror-image of their corresponding cultures and identities. Mainly through their word choice and imagery, such wise sayings transmit a great deal of their speakers' customs, beliefs, traditions as well as their whole philosophy of life.

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