

BETWEEN PROVERB AND SKETCH  
DIRECT SPEECH AND DIALOGUE IN THE *MATĀL*

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The subject of this contribution is the presence of direct speech in ancient *amṭāl* and the different ways in which we may find it. *Amṭāl* containing direct speech show a connection with a dramatized background, with a sketch, that can be either evoked or represented. I will examine first the *amṭāl* constituted by famous sayings. This kind of *amṭāl*, based on a 'historical', or pseudo-historical reference, gives us the opportunity to consider several aspects peculiar to the Arabic proverb in general. In the second place I will consider the *amṭāl* in which we find the insertion of direct speech, and finally, the dialogue proverbs.

If we consider the large amount of the ancient Arabic proverbial literature we can observe, at a first glance, that, besides *amṭāl* working on a mechanism of literal and figurative application, there are *amṭāl* based on a 'historical', or pseudo-historical reference.

Before proceeding, I will briefly recall some features of proverbs, maxims and idiomatic sentences in general that describe their peculiar behaviour inside discourse and that, of course, apply to the *matal*.

Every *matal* is an item of what has been called 'repeated discourse', 'already spoken discourse'<sup>1</sup>; it is a proverb, an idiomatic sentence or expression for which the linguistic tradition has the exact interpretation already available. Moreover it represents and recalls an already experienced situation for which tradition offers the 'right' solution sanctioned by the experience of the fathers. The *matal* helps the individual to interpret the present in the light of the past, that is to say it works through the application and superimposition of something old onto something new. It thus has the function of persuading, explaining, admonishing, commenting, demonstrating. It is a way of reconducting what is unknown to what is known. The force of the *matal*, other than being sustained by an attractive and effective formal dressing, lies in the authority of the past and in the authority of the community over the individual.

If this stands true for the *amṭāl* that have a literal meaning and for those that make use of standard metaphors and images, it is even more transparent for *amṭāl* that contain historical or pseudo historical references, or anyhow references that have

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<sup>1</sup> "Le discours répété", "le déjà parlé" according to the terminology coined by Coseriu 1967. For a paremiological definition of the *matal* and for a bibliography concerning the linguistic status of the proverb, see Pagnini 1998.

been felt as belonging to a common past, no matter here how much historical or legendary<sup>2</sup>.

Let's give an example<sup>3</sup> for each of the three categories just mentioned: 1) the literal *matal*, 2) the figurative, 3) the 'historical':

1) (n. 2402) *'ayyun ab'asu min šalalin* = 'A stammer is more miserable than a cripple';

2) (n. 3754) *mā yuqa'qa'u labu bi-š-šināni* = 'He is not frightened by (the noise of) dry water skins'.

This *matal* means: he can't be easily frightened and it refers to the image of a camel rider that, in order to make his camel go, frightens the animal by shaking behind its back a dry water skin with stones inside. The noise produced makes the camel run.

3) (n. 1061) *Hida'a Hida'a warā'aki Bunduqa* = 'Hida', Hida', behind you there is Bunduqa!'

Hida' ibn Namira ibn Sa'd was a tribe of Kūfa, while Bunduqa ibn Mazza was a tribe of Yemen. Hida' had made a predatory incursion on Bunduqa and sacked it, but afterwards Bunduqa assaulted Hida' and destroyed it completely. The meaning of the *matal* is clearly that of a warning.

As the examples show (most evidently the ones belonging to the last two categories) the *matal*, in order to carry its meaning, has to be uttered inside a community that, other than the language, shares the same values, the same customs and manners, is able to decode the same metaphorical images and shares the same references in the knowledge and memory of the past.

### *Amṭāl* containing 'historical' or anecdotal references

The quotation of a proverb or of an idiomatic sentence takes place inside a linguistic community and, at the same time, it witnesses the speaker's belonging to it. In ancient Arabic proverbial literature we can observe a quite abundant amount of *amṭāl* with an historical, legendary or anecdotal reference. This feature appears revealing the nature and function of ancient *amṭāl* as connected in their origin to an oral tradition culture. As in ancient poetry, that has been so meaningfully defined *dīwān al-ʿarab*, the *amṭāl* too, in their power of remaining imprinted in the minds of the speakers and of being repeated through time, enclosed and ensured the memory of the past. Proverbs and maxims, in general, contain paradigmatic examples of situations or of behaviour: in these 'historical' and anecdotal *amṭāl* a paradigmatic past has been fixed.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the reliability of the anecdotes concerning the *amṭāl*, see Pellat 1976.

<sup>3</sup> The quotations of ancient *amṭāl* are all taken from which has been described as the widest and the most representative of ancient collections that we possess, that is the *Mağma' al-amṭāl* by al-Maydānī.

The reference to the past in *amtāl* appears mainly into two ways:

a) the *maṭāl* contains proper names of 'historical' or legendary characters and facts<sup>4</sup>, as in example (3) and as we can observe in the following:

4) (n. 1103) *ḥaddit 'an Ma'nin wa-lā ḥaraġa* = 'Tell about Ma'n, with no restriction!'

Ma'n was, according to the commentator, Ma'n ibn Zā'ida ibn 'Abdallāh aš-Šaybānī that the tradition counts among the most generous of the Arabs. The *maṭāl* means: when you tell about the good virtues of a generous person, don't be afraid of exaggerating.

If the above mentioned *maṭāl* is in the form of the imperative, the form in which we more often find proper names is the *aḫal min* pattern, that bears the proverbial comparison and is the clearest way of expressing and establishing a paradigm. For instance:

5) (n. 2028) *aš'amu min al-Basūsi* = 'More unlucky than al-Basūs' (the *maṭāl* hints at the aunt of al-Ġassās ibn Murra, involved in the sparking of the famous tribal war of the *ġābiliyya*).

#### 'Famous sayings-*amtāl*'

The second way in which we find the reference to the past is the way in which: b) the whole *maṭāl* consists of a sentence in direct speech attributed to a specific person that is supposed to have uttered it on a certain occasion. The collectors of the *amtāl* were particularly concerned in collecting also the *ḥabar* that is supposed to have originated the *maṭāl* and that is necessary to comprehend its meaning. The meaning of the *maṭāl* being, in this case, the ultimate meaning of the whole *ḥabar*. The sentence works as a symbol for the whole anecdote being the last cue of a sketch, the last phrase of a dialogue, or a particularly significant one in it, or constituting a comment uttered by one of the actors of the scene about the whole fact. Let us consider an example:

6) (n. 2741) *fa-lima rabada l-'ayru idan?* = 'Why then is the onager lying?'

These words are supposed to have been uttered by Imru' l-Qays, the poet, that after having worn the poisoned dress given him by Justinianus saw his onager lying and interpreted it as a bad omen. To his companions reassuring him that the dress would not have done him any harm, he answered "Why then is the onager lying?", this answer became a *maṭāl* used when there is evidence contrary to somebody else's words.

It is typical of these *amtāl* that the narration of the *ḥabar* illustrating them ends with the words: *fa-šāra maṭalan* or *fa-arsalahu maṭalan* or *fa-dāhaba qawluhu maṭalan*. The anecdotes explaining those 'famous sayings' have in many cases entered the ancient Arabic historiography, as considered traces of the 'history' of ancient Arabs.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the allusion to the *ḥarb Dāḥis wa-l-Ġabrā'* in n. 2925.

Their authenticity has instead been questioned also because they sometimes seem reconstructed just in order to explain the *matal*: the ancient commentators themselves gave more than one explanation, thus showing their doubts. If the conclusive sentence has been chosen to represent and recall the whole anecdote, it happens that the sentence has a longer life than the anecdote itself. This obliged the informants of the *amtāl* collectors to make an effort in their memory in order to reconstruct it. But what happened is also, and here we find the paradox, that the informants were induced to invent a new anecdote shaped on the *matal* whose real story had been forgotten, thus betraying and frustrating the function of the *matal* as a witness of the past. In this case it is the conventional character of the meaning of the proverbial sentence to be pointed out.

### *Amtāl* as quotations

Leaving aside the degree of reliability of their anecdotes, this kind of *amtāl* originated in a specific situation and uttered by specific persons shows in the clearest way an important aspect of the linguistic status of proverbs, maxims and other genres of 'repeated discourse' in general. In these *amtāl* the 'quotational status'<sup>5</sup> of fixed forms appears most clearly. They are inserted into the discourse as a unit, as a direct quotation of someone else's speech. Before the quotation of every proverb, implicit or explicit, there is the introductory statement: 'as the proverb says'. These *amtāl* that are 'famous sayings' show more evidently their quotational status. They bear, in fact, the mark of the original context of quotation much more than the generic ones. They depend on it under two aspects: a) on the interpretation of their meaning, b) in the formal aspect. Let us consider an example of a generic *matal* and of a 'famous saying' - *matal*:

7) (n. 1946) *šarru r-rī'ā'i l-ḥuṭama* = 'The worst shepherd is the one who violently hits (his livestock)'

This *matal* applies to someone entrusted with a duty and that is not using his authority well;

8) (n. 2725) *fī ṣ-ṣayfi ḍayya'ti l-labana* = 'In summer you spoiled your milk'.

The story of the *matal* is that Daḥtanūs bint Laqīṭ ibn Zurāra was the wife of ʿAmr ibn ʿAmr ibn ʿUdas, that was an old man. Since the woman despised him, he repudiated her and she got married to a handsome young man. Then, needing food in a period of drought, she sent somebody to her old husband asking for milk, but the answer brought back to Daḥtanūs was: "in summer you spoiled your milk". The *matal* is used for someone who caused himself to miss something that afterwards he needs. This story continues creating another *matal*: when the person sent to ask for

<sup>5</sup> See Cram 1983.

milk came back and reported the answer, Daḥtanūs tapped on her young husband's shoulder saying: "this tastes better".

As we can see, *maṭal* (8) depends on the context of its origin both for its meaning and for its formal aspect: the verb is left at the second feminine singular person, the sentence remaining addressed to Daḥtanūs, whose name and identity are kept unexpressed. On the contrary, in example (7) there are no elements left out of the sentence and the context that generated the *maṭal* is unimportant for its comprehension.

There is one more difference between the generic *maṭal* and the 'famous saying-*maṭal*'. If what remains (or may remain) implicit before the quotation of a generic *maṭal* in a discourse is 'as the *maṭal* says', what remains implicit before the quotation of this kind of 'famous saying-*amṭāl*', besides this formula, may also be: 'as he who says', or 'as he to whom it has been said'.

The just quoted example (8) is implicitly to be preceded by 'as she to whom it has been said'. The following *maṭal*

9) (n. 2847) *qūdūhu bi bārīkan* = 'Lead it kneeling for me!' refers to a woman that had been raised on a kneeling camel. Surprised by the stillness of the mount she said: "Lead it kneeling for me!". This is to be applied to someone that, not being used to luxury, says silly words. What implicitly precedes the quotation of this *maṭal* is: 'as she who says'.

We can find, moreover, instances in which what remains implicit before the quotation of the 'famous saying' is: 'don't do as he who said'<sup>6</sup> as in

10) (n. 1783) *isqī ahāka n-namarī* = 'Let your brother the Namarī drink first!'

The comment to the *maṭal* says that a man of the tribe of the Namar ibn Qāsīt travelled with Ka'b ibn Māma. There was water shortage and they had to share the water, drinking by turns, but every time that the turn of Ka'b came, the Namarī gazed at Ka'b and Ka'b said to the cupbearer: "Let your brother the Namarī drink first!" and this until the end of the water, so that Ka'b died of thirst.

### *Amṭāl* containing direct speech

These 'famous sayings-*amṭāl*' are not the only way in which direct speech appears in *amṭāl*. Alongside these ones in which direct speech entirely covers the extent of the sentence, there are *amṭāl* in which we find the insertion of short portions of direct speech, substituting parts of the discourse. For example:

11) (n. 470) *bi'sa maqāmu š-šayhi amris amris* = 'How miserable the condition of an old man is: «put it back in its place, put it back in its place!»'

The image of this *maṭal* is that of the old man that, drawing water from the well and not being strong enough, lets the rope of the bucket slip from the pulley, so that

<sup>6</sup> Or 'pay attention not to behave like the one who says', see also the n. 2831.

it is said to him «put it back in its place, put it back in its place!». In the phrase of this *matal* there is, at the same time, something lacking and something exceeding: it lacks in grammar, for it should say *bi'sa maqāmu š-šayhi lladī yuqālu labu amris amris*, but it abounds in expressiveness, in fact the direct speech could also have been substituted by a simple adjective, like *bi'sa maqāmu š-šayhi d-da'if*. Like this we can find another example:

12) (n. 2232) *darabahu darbata bnatin uq'udī wa-qūmī* = 'He hit him with the stroke (given to) the maid «sit down! stand up!»'. The maid «sit down! stand up!» is the slave girl to whom it is ordered «sit down! stand up!».

Instead of a real 'direct speech' we may also find a 'direct cry' to animals like in:

13) (n. 2848) *qarrib al-ḥimāra min ar-radhati wa-lā taqul labu sa'* = 'Take the donkey to the drinking-trough and don't say to him: «sa'»'. «sa'» is the cry used to incite the donkey to drink. The *matal* means: the expert man knows how to manage.

Cries to animals may also take the place of nouns as following:

14) (n. 907) *ḡā'a bi-l-hay'i wa-l-ḡay'i* = 'He brought the «hay'» and the «ḡay'» that are two cries to incite camels to drink and feed. The *matal* means: he brought something to drink and to eat.

The insertion of direct speech is a very effective way of giving the *matal* a vivid and realistic flavour. Like in the *matal*:

15) (n. 3257) *la-qad kuntu wa-mā uḥāššā bi-d-dī'bi fa-l-yawma qad qīla d-dī'ba d-dī'ba* = 'When I was young I was not frightened by (the mention of) the wolf, but today they say: «the wolf! the wolf!»' (to get me scared).

We may also find a double insertion of direct speech:

16) (letter *yā*, *amtāl al-murwalladīn*) *yaqūlu li-s-sāriq isriq wa-li-šāḥibi l-manzil ihfaz matā'aka* = 'To the thief he says: «Steal!» and to the householder: «Pay attention to your property!»' and it means: he is a double-crosser.

If the insertion of direct speech is absolutely usual in prose, it is quite unusual in pithy and concise expressions, as proverbs are. In this sense its presence in Arabic *amtāl* is to be compared to its presence in ancient Arabic verses of poetry and in Quranic verses and its analysis in *amtāl* may help us in the understanding of its function in those contexts too.

Direct speech has the peculiarity of inserting a break in the normal discourse, introducing a shift in the speaker's perspective. The reporter speaker temporarily hides and calls upon the original speaker, thus connecting the original speaker to the listener. This has the effect of rendering the whole scene more realistic and at the same time of throwing the listener inside the scene, giving him the impression of being present on the stage. The communicative strategy of direct speech is actually more 'direct' than that of reported speech. This is the reason why direct speech has a theatrical effect and is quite powerful in its faculty of catching the involvement of

the listener. This is also the reason why jokes and funny stories are often shaped in direct speech or end with a cue in direct speech.

### Dialogue proverbs

*Amṭāl* that contain more than one insertion of direct speech, like the last one quoted, show more clearly how direct speech can transform a short expression, like the *matāl* is, into a lively sketch.

This leads us to examine the third way in which direct speech may appear in *amṭāl*. Other than 'famous sayings-*amṭāl*' and *amṭāl* that contain portions of direct speech, we can find *amṭāl* entirely constituted by a dialogue<sup>7</sup>. These proverbs have already been noticed by A. Taylor, the father of paremiology, that called them 'dialogue proverbs' (Taylor 1962:156) and that interpreted this proverbial form as a 'Levantine' and an 'Eastern' peculiarity: "In Western Europe popular wisdom sums up the situation in a general, didactic observation, while the Eastern proverb often shows a liking for a more concrete form. On the one hand we have a maxim and on the other an anecdote" (Taylor 1962:157-158). This remark is perhaps too generic to be agreed upon, considering that dialogue proverbs are only a narrow minority inside the total amount of Arabic proverbial literature. What we may observe is that dialogue proverbs witness a liking for a dramatic rendering of an assertion as in the following:

17) (n. 4086) *man sabbaka? qāla: man ballaḡanī* = '«Who insulted you?» He answered: «He who reported to me»' that means: Whoever reports to me something bad said about me is worse than the one who said it originally.

The message of this *matāl* could have been expressed without a dialogue, maintaining a very similar set, like this: *sabbaka man ballaḡaka* or *sabbanī man ballaḡanī*, having the form of a generic assertion, but the dramatic rendering of it emphasizes the non-obviousness of the message. The question: «Who insulted you?» induces an expectation of a proper name or of the mention of the insult itself, while this is reversed by the answer. The dialogue form has the peculiarity of creating pauses that let the hearer enter the situation.

Alongside of dialogue proverbs that, like the one quoted above, have no characterization of the actors or of the scene<sup>8</sup>, we often find contextualizing elements that enhance the narrative side of dialogue proverbs, like in the following<sup>9</sup>:

18) (n. 2922) *qīla li-l-baḡli man abūka? qāla: al-farasu ḥālī* = 'They asked the mule: «Who is your father?» He answered: «The horse is my maternal uncle»' and

<sup>7</sup> See 'Ābidīn 1956:182.

<sup>8</sup> See also n. 3916 and 4531.

<sup>9</sup> See also n. 2832; 2904; 3314; 4518; 4647 and 4663.

19) (n. 4647) *yā ġundubu mā yuṣirruka? qāla: aṣurru min ḥarri ġadin* = ‘Oh grasshopper, why are you chirping?’ It answered: ‘I’m chirping for the heat of tomorrow’.

The most common form of dialogue proverbs in ancient Arabic *amtāl* is that of ‘question-answer’, but we may also find other speech acts combinations as in the following example where we find a situational introduction, an exclamation and a rhetorical question (that has the function of another exclamation):

20) (letter *wāw*, *amtāl al-muwalladīn*) *waqaʿat aġurratun wa-labinatun fī l-māʾi fa-qālat al-aġurratu: wa-btilālāb, fa-qālat al-labinatu: fa-mādā aqūlu anā?* = ‘A baked brick and a raw brick were soaking in water. The baked brick said: ‘It’s so damp down here!’ And the raw brick said: ‘What should I say?’

Another combination is that of exhortation-statement like in:

21) (n. 2856) *qīla li-š-šaḳī: halumma ilā s-saʿādati fa-qāla: ḥasbiya mā anā fīhi* = ‘They said to a wretch: ‘Come to happiness’ He answered: ‘It suits me where I am’.

### Conclusive remarks

The presence of direct speech in ancient *amtāl* appears mainly in three different ways: firstly as the quotation of ‘famous sayings’; secondly as inserted inside the *matal* and substituting a part of it and thirdly in dialogue proverbs.

– The first and the third ways have in common the fact that direct speech entirely covers the extent of the *matal* but in the ‘famous saying’ direct speech is presumed as ‘real’, or as having an ‘historical’ or anecdotal ground, stemming from a paradigmatic situation, while in dialogue proverb it is completely fictitious. The second way differs from the first and the third in the fact that direct speech is just inserted in it and its presence in the *matal* is only partial. This second way has in common with the third the fact that direct speech is fictitious and not real.

– Direct speech in *amtāl* is always tied with a sketch, that is, it has a dramatized basis. In the *amtāl* of the first type the *matal* sums up a whole scene that has to be known by the listener, that is to say, the ‘famous saying-*matal*’ evokes a sketch, that is supposed to have had a reality in the past. In the second and third type the sketch is not evoked but *represented*.

– In *amtāl* of the second type, direct speech – being just a part of the *matal* – is put in particular evidence. Under the stylistic aspect, *amtāl* belonging to this type deserve a special attention in that they let us approach the same phenomenon as it appears in ancient Arabic poetry and in the Quran.

– The presence of direct speech, finally, reveals once more the multifaceted aspect of the *matal* and the complexity of its nature and brings us back to the extreme difficulty of its definition.

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