SOME CULTURAL AND ETHNIC ELEMENTS
IN MODERN STANDARD ARABIC IDIOMS

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Phraseology is a comparatively new field of research in modern linguistics. Idioms, which constitute its subject, are defined as a specific type of ready made expression "consisting of two or more words whose meaning cannot be simply predicted from the meanings of its constituent parts" (Trask 1993: 132). Being semantically and often syntactically restricted, they function as single units, and, from a linguistic point of view, form their own system, which can be studied from different aspects.

The problem of the national and international (universal) elements in idioms has been discussed a great deal recently and scholars are deeply interested in the "complicated dialectics of the relation between them" (Solodub 1992: 55).

On the one hand, idioms are linguistic units which bear the so-called "national cultural semantics" (Felitsyna 1990: 7) of language because they are related to external reality, which they express by referring directly to objects and phenomena which surround, or previously surrounded, men in a given society. As a specific type of expression, moreover, they have, besides this nominative function, the function of expressing relation, opinion, characterization, and emotional judgment in a way dependent on the image they convey. The pragmatic function of idioms, furthermore, can be called "essential and dominant" (Chernysheva 1977: 37).

Idioms reflect the general lines of human ideas, associations and reactions, so that it is always intriguing to look for the universal character and direction in the meanings of idioms, and to find the universal linguistic and extralinguistic aspects in the system that governs them (Dobrovol'skij 1992; Solodub 1992 and idem. 1982). A study of the specific, distinctive elements which determine the national and cultural identity of idioms, however, gives information about the mentality, way of thinking, and system of values of a nation, and reveals much about its spiritual and material tradition. Whatever the extent of the general cultural and ethnological information provided by idioms, a study of their cultural specificity is no less interesting from the point of view of linguistics.

In the present paper I intend to outline briefly certain problems and to discuss some elements of the structure and meaning of idioms, in Modern Standard Arabic which not only identify a given idiom as Arabic but which at the same time, to cite V. Kiuvlieva's characterization, can be considered as elements bearing "enormous information about an ethnic group's culture" (Kiuvlieva-Mishaikova 1986: 5).

The greater part of Arabic idioms reflect directly and spontaneously some stage in the development of the environment of the Arabs and their relationship to it. Simultaneously, they also encapsulate their attitudes and views on life, their social and historic experience, and their scale of values. They have important symbolic meaning and can be viewed as markers of national identity. It is possible to ascertain that Arabic idioms reflect national culture and specificity on the one hand "as a complex" (synthetically), with all elements of their formal and semantic structure together, and on the other hand, "element by element" (analytically) (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov 1990: 68). This view can be demonstrated by analysis of both structure and meaning, that is to say, the character, meaning, and syntax of the constituent words and the image they convey.

I consider that the verbal elements of idioms and their syntactic relations should be discussed first as constituents of the formal structure belonging to readily identifiable classes (parts of speech, names of persons and places, and the like). The formal structure is the framework which holds the huge treasure of both semantic and connotative meanings. Only after it is understood, should meanings and images, that is, the content of an idiom, be analyzed.

In these pages I will discuss the formal structure with reference to certain commonly used words and their contribution to the creation of images which demonstrate the cultural and ethnic specificity of Arabic idioms.

The character and meaning of the constituent words are significant tokens of the ethnic and cultural identity of idioms. The constituent words directly and analytically turn the hearer's attention to objects and phenomena which are, or have been, part of the reality surrounding the Arabs. Frequent use of certain words show the significance of the object or phenomenon expressed by these words. They also give some idea about modes of thinking and relating concepts. Through them, we can judge what kind of associations are made and how images are built so that they have a given emotional effect, and express a given opinion. Constituent words and their particular combinations in the metaphoric structure of idioms can help to identify some of the most fundamental concepts in culture.

Here are some relevant examples from Arabic tradition:

1. Animals and plants of the Arabian Peninsula
    tala'at 'alayhi ġazālatun — to go mad (lit., a gazelle appeared before him)
    lā nāqatī fī hādā wa-lā ǧamalī — I have nothing to do with this (I have neither she-camel in this nor he-camel)
    'amarru min al-ḥanzali — very bitter (lit., more bitter than colocynth)

2. Objects from everyday life
    tālitatu l-'atāfī — the last straw (lit., the third stone under the cooking pot)
    nafaḫa fī qirbatin maqtū'atin — to do s.th. in vain (lit., to blow in a torn waterskin)
    ḫālī l-wiṭābi — poor, empty-handed (lit., with an empty milkskin)

dassa s-samma fī d-dasami — to spoil everything (lit., to put poison in the fat)

3. Proper names
a) Names of persons

laysa lahu šay'un ḥattā wa-lā mismāru Ǧuḥā — he has nothing (lit., he has nothing, not even Ǧuḥā's nail)

raǧaʿa/ʿāda bi-ḫuffay Ḥunaynin — to return empty-handed (lit., to come back with Ḥunayn's shoes)

'aǧwadu min Ḥātimin — very generous (lit., more generous than Ḥātim)

waʿdu ʿUrqūbin — false promise (lit., promise given by ʿUrqūb)

Many of the idioms in which names of persons are used function like common nouns and can be used alone, preserving all the connotations they have acquired. Idioms containing names of persons constitute a very wide area and could be the subject of an independent study because of the strong Arabic tradition to pay a special attention and record a person's name and his or her deeds, behaviour and personal qualities[1].

b) Names of peoples and tribes

tafarraqa 'aydī Sabā — they were scattered to the four winds (lit., the hands of Sheba scattered)

al-fahmu l-ḥimyariyyu — misunderstanding, false understanding (lit., ḥimyarite understanding)

bi-kulli wādin banū Saʿdin — good and bad exists everywhere (lit., in every valley there is the tribe of Saʿd)

c) Place names

šarada min al-mawti wa-waqaʿa fī Ḥaḍramawta — get in big trouble (lit., to escape from death and end up in Ḥaḍramawt)

'arḫaṣu min at-tamari fī l-baṣrati — very cheap (lit., cheaper than figs in Basra)

'ālafu min ḥamāmi Makkata — very friendly (lit., friendlier than the doves in Mekka)

d) Names of stars

fawqa as-Suhā wa-t-Ṯurayyā — impossible (lit., higher than *as-Suhā* [the weakest star in the Great Bear] and the Pleiades)

'abʿadu manālan min Ǧawzā'a — impossible (lit., more difficult to obtain than Gemini)

'annā yaltaqī suhaylun bi-s-Suhā — impossible (lit., When will Canopus meet *as-Suhā*?)

4. Compound expressions from scriptural sources

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[1] Medieval Arabic dictionaries of proverbs and idioms, such as *al-Amṯāl al-ʿarabiyya* by al-Maydānī and *Timṯāl al-amṯāl* by aš-Šaybī, are full of expressions containing proper names.

Phrases from the Koran and the Hadith deserve special mention, since many of them have become idioms. A considerable number, being used out of the context, have acquired wider meaning and application. Some of them have provided grounds for creating new idioms, whose origin in Koran or the Hadith may be difficult to recognize, but they form a group of idioms that can provide rich cultural and ethnic information concealed in their metaphorical structure[2]. Here are a few examples:

ka-'asnāni l-mušti — equal, similar (lit., like the teeth of a comb)

ṭāhiru d̲-d̲ayli — innocent, having a good reputation (lit., with clean robe-tails)

fī s-sarrā'i wa-ḍ-ḍarrā'i — for better or for worse (lit., in happiness and distress)

wallā d-dubura — to flee, run away (lit., to turn one's back)

Some Koranic expressions should be studied in a broader geographical and cultural context, since their nature, the images they convey, and the underlying concepts are specific not only to the Arab world, but in general to the area we nowadays refer to as the Middle East.

5.   Other ready-made compound expressions

Among other compound expressions we should consider idioms which consist of phrases from or about Pre-Islamic poetry, medieval Arabic poetry, or other early literary sources. Thus:

ya'tīka bi-l-'aḫbāri man lam tuzawwidī — News will reach you anyway, you do not have to ask (lit., News will be brought to you by a messenger whose journey you have not provided for)

'ašharu min qifā nabkī — very famous (lit., more famous than "let us stop and weep," the beginning of one of the most celebrated Pre-Islamic odes, attributed to Imru' l-Qays)

Idioms stemming from these sources, as well as from the Koran or Hadith, are interesting primarily because of their derivation and metaphoric structure. Few of them are used in Modern Standard Arabic.

The words used as constituents of Arabic idioms are the "building material" for the images (inner form) conveyed by idioms. These images together with the connotation are the most important elements demonstrating the national specificity of Arabic idioms since they reflect the material, social, and spiritual life of the Arabs, and their historic experience. But they reflect this reality indirectly, in a figurative, metaphorical way. This is why the most characteristic feature of Arabic idioms (and idioms in general) is the extensive use of metaphorical imagery to conceptualize and

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[2] A comprehensive study of the types, structure and semantics of the idioms in the Koran is given in: Ushakov 1996.

express social and moral messages. And this is what makes some idioms very difficult, sometimes impossible to understand, while at the same time other idioms appear familiar and their meaning is quite easy to guess. If the metaphor (or metonymy) used is beyond our culturally inherited everyday mode of cognition and relating concepts, or our background knowledge is insufficient, the idiom will not be understandable. To understand the meaning of such an idiom, we must try to understand and relate the real meanings of the constituent words. In most cases the meaning when translated is familiar, but the metaphor itself poses the difficulties. Consider the following examples:

rafaʿa ʿaṣāhu — to set off, leave (lit., lifted his stick)

nāʿimu l-ʾazfāri/aẓ-ẓufri — young (lit., with soft nails)

qāla wāḥidan wa-sittīna — to run away (lit., he said "sixty-one")

laʿiqa ʾuṣbaʿahu — to die (lit., to lick one's finger)

On the other hand, for many idioms, if we wish to understand what is said and what the target is when the idiom is uttered, we must be aware of the underlying assumptions, the specific Arabic cultural virtues referred to, and other background information. Consider these examples (the first two have been mentioned above in other contexts).

ʾašaru min qifā nabkī — very famous (lit., more famous than "let us stop and weep")

laysa lahu šayʾun ḥattā wa-lā mismāru Ǧuḥā — he has nothing (lit., he has nothing, not even Ǧuḥā's nail)

baytu l-qaṣīdi — the main point, the core of the matter (lit., the principal verse of the *qaṣīda*)

ʾašharu min nārin ʿalā ʿalamin — very famous (lit. better known than a fire on a hill [made for travellers lost in the desert])

ʾalqā ḥablahu ʿalā ġāribihi — to give a free hand (lit., to put the rope on the camel's neck and let it pasture at freedom)

In such cases as these, the cultural models and background knowledge we have inherited are of little help in understanding the meaning and the moral or social message. Native speakers inherit this knowledge with their "mothers' milk" and immediately understand the message. They do not need to know the etymology of the words in a given idiom or how it came into being. It is for this reason that I maintain that these idioms with their metaphoric images and connotations reflect Arab reality and an Arabic understanding of life. They are created, over time, by people sharing the same milieu and the same values, and they exist in order to exercise some influence over those who share this milieu and these values. Such idioms constitute a significant group within the system of idioms in Modern Standard Arabic.

Another group of Arabic idioms, although culturally specific and also demonstrating culturally determined modes of relating concepts, consists of

metaphors which are understandable or recognizable by the non-native speaker and the meaning of which his or her intuition, mode of cognition, and background knowledge make it possible to guess. Thus:

taqīlu d-dami — unpleasant, disagreeable (of a person) (lit., heavy-blooded)

'aswadu l-kibdi — vicious, envious (lit. with a black liver)

lā yusāwī qišrata baṣalatin - worthless (lit., not worth the skin of an onion)

How the images (the inner form, the metaphors) of idioms were created, whether by slow development and metaphoric changes of free collocations (as elements and as a whole) or the adoption of ready-made metaphoric expressions, is beyond the scope of this paper. Here we are concerned with the fact that idioms, with their meaning and images, have to meet special needs in communication and fulfil certain emotional, pragmatic, and didactic functions. In a very specific way, idioms have to respond to confirmed, established standards, principles, and values, by pointing out what is wrong and unacceptable or what is good and most worthy of praise. These processes cannot be independent of conscious human influence and modelling, because it is the mechanism of relating the meanings of the idioms with already established values and cultural models that produces the content of the so-called "national cultural connotation" (Teliia 1996: 219). Revealing the national cultural connotation of Arabic idioms makes it possible to trace important information concerning the ethnic and cultural identity of the Arabs. The following idioms, though as individual concepts they may be found in other cultures, may perhaps, taken together, serve to demonstrate these assertions:

ʿalā kaffi ʿifrītin — very bad (of work or a job) (lit., by the hand of a [desert] demon). Poorly done work is condemned as resembling that of the mischievous and malicious desert demon.

'akala muḫḫahu — to deceive (lit., to eat his brain). An Arab man should always maintain control of his own thoughts and never let anyone dupe him.

ḥafiẓa ʿan/ʿalā ẓahri qalbin — learn by heart (lit., to preserve on the back of the heart). The heart is the most important part of the body, the container of all feelings and emotions. If a man wants to learn something and preserve it, he has to engrave it on the back or outer side of this most significant organ.

ṭāra ġurābuhu — his hair became white (lit., his crow flew away). Black hair among the Arabs, who are generally black-haired, is a symbol of youth, health, and strength. When man grows old, these things, like a black crow, fly away.

daḫala l-ǧannata bi-ṯiyābihi — to go to heaven right away (lit., to enter Paradise with one's clothes on). This may be said when a very pious person, or a martyr, dies. He piety makes him acceptable to God without the traditional preparation, which includes the body of the deceased person being undressed, washed, and wrapped in a shroud prior to interrogation in the grave.

To continue, if we consider the concept of impossibility, we notice that it includes the idea "not worth trying", and is often expressed by idioms which have as a component the name of a star or stars.

fawqa as-Suhā wa-t-Turayyā — impossible (lit., higher than *as-Suhā* [the weakest star in the Great Bear] and the Pleiades)

'abʿadu manālan min Ǧawzāʾa — impossible (lit., more difficult to obtain than Gemini)

'annā yaltaqī suhaylun bi-s-Suhā — impossible (lit., When will Canopus meet *as-Suhā*?)

ka-l-farqi bayna t-Tarā wa-t-Turayyā — miles apart, like the sky and the earth (lit., like the difference between Earth and the Pleiades); variant with a slightly different stylistic usage: *'ayna t-Tarā min at-Turayyā* — What has the earth to do with the Pleiades? (of things of disproportionate value)

All these idioms convey the image of something very far away or impossible to reach, the connotation being clearly that it is useless to attempt or to seek to obtain the thing described. The concept of impossibility is connected with the concept of being far away, and the image has its foundation in the everyday experience of the Arabs, who, living in the desert, could observe the stars and their movement and often knew their names. As a rule, a precise star is mentioned in these idioms.

The colour blue in some Arabic idioms constitutes a metaphor expressing great fear or describing a dangerous person or enemy.

ʿaduwwun 'azraqu — a great enemy (lit., blue enemy)

hawfun 'azraqu — great fear (lit., blue fear)

ʿaraqun 'azraqu — cold sweat (lit., blue sweat)

huwa 'azraqu l-ʿayni — he has an evil (malicious) eye (lit. he has blue eyes)

The fact that the concept of enemy in Arabic includes the blue colour metaphor as a very important constituent has its roots in the far past of the Arabs. The metaphor has a real reflection in Arab history, since many of the enemies of the Arab tribes had blue eyes.

To take another example, one of the most highly praised qualities in a man in Arab society is his generosity, while stinginess is the quality most reproached. All the following idioms mean "to be stingy," and the images conveyed by them have the connotation of not giving.

ġullat yaduhu 'ilā ʿunqihi — very stingy, tight-fisted (lit., his hand is tied to his neck)

lā tasqutu hardalatun min yadihi — very stingy (lit., not a mustard seed falls from his hand)

ǧamadat yaduhu/kaffuhu — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., his hand became stiff)

dayyiqu l-ʿatani — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., with a narrow resting-place for camels)

dayyiqu l-bāʿi — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., with a short distance between his stretched hands)

ǧaʿdu l-yadi/l-yadayni — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., with curled hand/hands)
yaduhu nāšifatun — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., his hand is dry)
yaduhu māsikatun — stingy, tight-fisted (lit., his hand is tight)

With these examples perhaps I have been able to provide some indication of how information about cultural and ethnic specificity can be reflected in Arabic idioms and how this is possible because idioms reflect directly the cognitive activity of the native speakers of Arabic, their picture of surrounding reality, their place in it, and their relations to it. If we wish to proceed further in the study of the cultural information built into Arabic idioms, we can look at them as examples of a cognitive process which has become embodied in an explicit and stable structural form. Looking at the matter in this way can help us to find those concepts in Arab culture that define its identity and its unique nature. According to George Lakoff, "the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 22). The system of idioms is one of the best fields in linguistics in which to investigate this assertion.

The problem of the meaning and imagery structure (inner form, metaphor) of idioms has many different and interrelated aspects. In order to discuss the meaning we have first to look for the metaphor and then go on to the concept and its relation with established standards, principles, beliefs, and values, which, taken together, constitute established cultural models. It is these same cultural models that both define ethnic and cultural identity and demonstrate the universality of human nature and thought.

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