

PHRASEOLOGICAL MODELS OF ARABIC IDIOMS

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From a formal point of view an idiom¹ can be defined as the existence of a given content (meaning) in a given form of syntactic structure (model). The syntactic structure may be current or archaic, in effect any structure that existed in the period when the idiom was created. Thus it is possible to ask such questions as to what extent the meaning of an idiom is anticipated by its syntactic structure and vice versa. How much "independence" from each other can they have? How much does the nature of the word-constituents of an idiom influence the relation between meaning and model? Since the semantics of idioms cover specific semantic fields, does this mean that a limited number of syntactic structures can accommodate these more or less limited number of meanings? Are there syntactic patterns that are "preferred" by idioms? If the syntactic structure is considered the "skeleton" of the idiom, is it possible to find a general model both structural and semantic shared by various idioms? Furthermore if there is such a model, what are the reasons for the existence of the variants? In this paper I would like, despite limited space, to give answers to some of the above questions in relation to idioms in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

Today most scholars engaged in the study of idioms (phraseology) accept the fact of the existence of general models, both structural and semantic, shared by a number of idioms.

The idea of general models began to develop in the early 60s in Eastern Europe and had gained general acceptance by 1980 when the study of idioms in Slavic languages by V. M. Mokienko was published². For Mokienko there are two models which "mold" idioms. The first one is the *structural phraseological* model, and the second is the *phraseological* model. The *structural phraseological* model is defined as a "type of *syntactic* construction according to which a number of stable expressions

¹ As a simplified and common definition of an idiom I take the following: "An expression consisting of two or more words whose meaning cannot be simply predicted from the meanings of its constituent parts" (Trask 1993:132). This definition clearly needs to be refined, although to do so lies outside the scope of this paper. We obviously cannot accept "two or more words" to mean "two or more *orthographic* or *phonological* words", since highly inflected languages like Latin and agglutinating languages like Turkish can produce fixed "expressions" by means of a single orthographic or phonological word. Indeed the Arabic idiom *bi-hadāfirihi* (in its/their entirety), which consists of a preposition, noun, and suffix pronoun, represents a single orthographic word and, it may be argued, one or two phonological words".

² A review of the development of the idea of phraseological models is well presented by Chernisheva 1977:34-35; Nicheva 1978:14-15; Vapordjiev 1981:83-85; Mokienko 1980:40.

are formed"³. This model is the "skeleton" of the idiom; it is "one of the factors securing the stability and reproduction of the idiom and to a limited degree even regulating its semantic identity" (Mokienko 1982:42).

The *phraseological* model is defined as the "structural-semantic invariant of stable expressions and this model schematically reflects the relative stability of the form and semantics of these expressions"⁴. When examining these models attention should be concentrated mainly on the inner form, on the image created by idioms, because it is "the basis for grouping idioms in idiomatic [phraseological] series. Since the creation of an idiom is a process of putting a certain content into already existing language models, the inner form should be the basis for a practical moulding of the idiomatic [phraseological] series" (Mokienko 1980:44). In fact, the phraseological model is the union of the semantic and structural characteristics of a cluster of idioms. In such cases "the stability of the model is supported equally by structure and semantics" (Mokienko 1980:43). Mokienko points out that the structural-semantic models allow us "to penetrate deeply into the nature of idioms and show additional nuances in their semantics which produce a specific idiomatic [phraseological] expressiveness" (Mokienko 1980:44). He also shows that these models can be a helpful tool to reveal the inner form (image) in the synchronic and diachronic analysis of idioms⁵.

The phraseological model is a notion corresponding to the notion of frame⁶ in the western theory of idioms. According to R. Moon lexicogrammatical frames are examples of variation since "clusters of fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs) share single or common structures, but the realizations of one constituent vary relatively widely, though usually still within the bounds of a single lexical set. The meanings of individual FEIs within the clusters are often identical or very similar" (Moon 1998:146). Moon produces extensive lists of frames for English idioms⁷. In her book, Moon also makes the point that phraseological patterning can be a powerful device to reconstruct the structure of some synchronically "peculiar" but "diachronically well formed" idioms (Moon 1998:80). She is right to compare frames with the formal idioms of Charles J. Fillmore, Paul Kay, and Mary Catherine O'Connor, who make a distinction between substantive or lexically filled idioms and formal or lexically

³ Mokienko 1982:42. Italics mine.

⁴ Mokienko 1980:43. Italics mine.

⁵ More on models and diachronic analysis of idioms is given in Mokienko 1980:62-71. See also Mokienko 1973 and Moon 1998.

⁶ See Moon 1998:145-150.

⁷ Moon 1998:145-150. Similar studies have been made of Bulgarian idioms by K. Nicheva and V. Vapordjiev. See Nicheva 1982 and Vapordjiev 1980. Cf. also other articles by the same two authors dealing with idioms that represent various phraseological models.

open idioms. The definition for formal idioms is that they "are syntactic patterns dedicated to semantic and pragmatic purposes not knowable from their form alone" (Fillmore *et al.* 1988:505).

The idioms presumably belonging to MSA which I have collected from different sources⁸ can be easily molded after structural idiomatic models, since they have syntactic structures not different from those of MSA. There are series of idioms created after a certain syntactic pattern and meaning which normally relate to people. Thus for example the syntactic pattern of the genitive construct with first element adjective or participle accommodates the meaning of characteristics or features of people; the syntactic pattern of the comparative form of an adjective with the preposition *min* and a noun also accommodates the same semantic range. These syntactic structures convey a limited number of meanings. Thus the syntactic pattern "anticipates" the general meaning of an idiom before the actual meaning is described. This is more true for idioms with noun phrase structure (without verbs). The predictability of the meaning from the syntactic structure is less in idioms with verb phrase structure and sentence structure. There the possibilities are wider and given patterns will accommodate more semantic meanings.

It should be remarked that the phenomenon of structural idiomatic models was observed by medieval Arab scholars such as al-Maydānī. Thus for example in his famous dictionary of proverbs and idioms al-Maydānī after every letter puts a special chapter he calls "*mā ḡā'a 'alā af'ala min hādā l-bāb*" (the cases on [the model] *af'ala* [adjective in comparative form] in this chapter).

Although the phenomenon of structural idiomatic models is common and easy to perceive, it nevertheless requires a deep and careful study if a detailed picture of the correspondences between syntactic model and meaning is to be drawn.

As far as phraseological models or frames are concerned, a number of clusters of idioms in MSA satisfy Mokienko's definition given above. A wider corpus including idioms from different dialects would undoubtedly give a better overview of the function of these phraseological models in Arabic.

An interesting group is formed by idioms which are structurally and semantically "open" with regard to one of their components. They are ready-made models or frames where there is a stable part and an unstable part which can take a certain paradigm of words. The meaning of the whole idiom will vary according to the meaning of the varying component but often the variants have closely related meanings. Consider the following examples:

⁸ Sieny *et al.* 1996, Taymūr 1970, Arabic-Russian, Arabic-English dictionaries of MSA; *Al-Munḡid*.

- rakiba markaba l-ḥamāqati* – to do something stupid
(lit., to ride the boat of stupidity)
- rakiba markaba t-tayši* – to do something inconsistent, frivolous
(lit., to ride the boat of inconstancy, frivolity, levity)
- rakiba markaba l-hawsi wa-l-ḡunūni* – to do something foolish and insane
(lit., to ride the boat of folly and insanity)
- rakiba markaba l-ḥatali* – to talk nonsense
(lit., to ride the boat of idle talk, prattle)

- asātīnu l-ʿilmi* – great scholars
(lit., columns [masters] of knowledge)
- asātīnu l-adabi* – great writers
(lit., columns [masters] of literature)
- asātīnu l-fanni* – great artists
(lit., columns [masters] of art)

- ʿalā s-saffūdi* – anxious, agitated, upset
(lit., on the skewer)
- ʿalā l-miqlāti* – anxious, agitated, upset
(lit., on the frying pan)
- ʿalā nārin* – anxious, agitated, upset
(lit., on a fire)
- ʿalā r-radfi* – anxious, agitated, upset
(lit., on heated stones [for boiling, frying, etc.])

The following group of idioms have the verb *ahada*, to take, as a stable component:

- ahada bi-raqabatihī* – to harass, oppress, subdue, have power over someone
(lit., to take, grab someone by the neck)
- ahada bi-anfāsihī* – to harass, oppress, subdue, have power over someone
(lit., to take, seize someone's breath)
- ahada bi-ḥināqihī* – to harass, oppress, subdue, have power over someone
(lit., to take, grab someone by the throat)
- ahada ʿalā yadihī* – to harass, oppress, subdue, have power over someone
(lit., to take, grab someone by the hand)

The following cluster of idioms, which represents the biggest phraseological model or frame found in the corpus I have used, can be treated as representing one of the “ideal” frames; since they have (1) a stable part (negation *mā*, preposition with pronominal suffices to indicate the “owner”, then the copula *wa* with negation *lā* - this be-

ing a kind of parallel negation) and (2) an unstable part (word-components from one semantic field inserted into the stable framework).

- mā lahu nāṭiqun wa-lā šāmitun* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has neither animate nor inanimate property.)
- mā lahu tāḡiyatun wa-lā rāḡiyatun* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has neither a bleating [sheep] nor a grunting [camel].)
- mā lahu šādirun wa-lā wāridun* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has no animals coming up from the water hole and none going down.)
- mā bi-hi diyārun wa-lā nāfiḥu nārin* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has neither house nor bellows for fire.)
- mā lahu sabadun wa-lā labadun* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has neither [camel's / goat's] hair nor wool.)
- mā lahu nāṭiḥun wa-lā ḥābiṭun* – He has absolutely nothing. He is deprived of all resources.
(lit., He has neither thruster [ram] nor stamper [camel].)

Consider another similar cluster of idioms. The stable part of the frame is the negative form of a verb with meaning *not to know*, *not to distinguish* and the preposition *min*, from. The two word-components, which are inserted into the stable framework, vary and have opposite, antonymous meanings:

- lā yumayyizu l-ḡatta min as-samīni* – ignorant, stupid
(lit., not to be able to distinguish the lean from the fat)
- lā yaʿrifu l-kūʿa min al-būʿi* – ignorant, stupid person
(lit., not to know one's knee from one's elbow)
- lā yaʿrifu l-ḥayya/l-ḥawwa min al-layyi/l-lawwi* – to be ignorant, not to know truth from falsity
(literal meaning obscure)
- lā yaʿrifu l-kāʿa min al-bāʿi* – ignorant, stupid person
(lit., not to know an elbow from outspread arms)
- lā yaʿrifu l-hirra min al-birri* – ignorant, stupid person
(lit., not to know a tomcat from a she-mouse)
- lā yufarriqu/yaʿrifu qabīlan min dabīrin* – ignorant, stupid person
(lit., not to know the front side from the back side)

In fact, as the examples show, the possibility to organize idioms in MSA according to phraseological models is closely related to another phenomenon—the lexical variation of the word-components. This type of variation is the most interesting and significant as far as the capacity of an idiom to remain more or less identical in a limited semantic field is concerned. The semantic nuances in most idioms within a single phraseological model are not substantial for communication and it is for this reason that lexical variation is possible. Replacement of word-components of idioms by other lexemes in MSA, as the examples above show, can be by a close synonym or by a word the meaning of which denotes a notion close to the notion denoted by the word-component.

Thus the idioms presented above in different groups according to phraseological model can be viewed as lexical variations in the framework of one and the same structural pattern, and the images created remain within the limits of some general idea. On the other hand, images are in fact the essence of idiomaticity, and the variations, while preserving the meaning of the idioms, produce different effects. Used in speech or text the different idioms may have slightly different stylistic and emotional connotations. These differences, however, do not confuse the identity of the idioms as members of the particular series. This identity demonstrates itself through multiple facets.

Idioms formed after the pattern of the genitive construct (*idāfa*) phrase, and especially those with first component adjective, are clearly based on *syntactic* models according to Mokienko's definition but not necessarily on *phraseological* models. Consider the following examples.

- ḍayyiqu l-ʿatani* – stingy, tight-fisted
(lit., with a narrow resting-place for camels)
- ʿarīdu l-qafā* – stupid
(lit., with wide back of the head)
- tāhiru d-ḍayli* – innocent, having a good reputation
(lit., with clean robe-tails)
- sāriḥu/munsariḥu l-fikri* – distracted, absent-minded
(lit., grazing, roaming freely with the mind)
- munḥafīdu l-ḡanāḥi* – not proud, humble
(lit., with a low wing)
- mamlūʿu l-wifāḍi* – rich, with full hands
(lit., with a full milkskin)

Idioms with the structure of an *idāfa* phrase and first word-component adjective virtually always have a meaning relating to some quality, feature of character of people. Whether this quality will be positive or negative depends to a great extent on the semantics of the adjectival first component in the phrase. The second component,

a noun, specifies the meaning, namely what this quality is. Very often the noun has the meaning of a part of the human body or something related to it. Perhaps some universal factors or cultural symbols will have to be sought here as well.

Some genitive construct idioms possess a constant element with the other element being variable. These do satisfy Mokienko's definition of a phraseological model, although in a larger corpus we would hope to find more and larger clusters. The following are some examples from the corpus with which I have worked.

ṭawīlu r-rūhi – long-suffering, forbearing, patient
(lit., with a long soul)

ṭawīlu l-bāli – long-suffering, forbearing, patient
(lit., with a long mind)

or

ṭawīlu l-bāci – mighty, powerful; capable; generous, openhanded
(lit., with long span of the outspread arms)

ṭawīlu l-yadi – 1. mighty, generous; 2. thief, robber
(lit., with a long hand)

and the opposite

qaṣīru l-yadi – powerless, impotent, helpless, weak, incapable
(lit., with a short hand)

qaṣīru l-bāci – powerless, impotent, helpless, weak, incapable
(lit., with short span of the outspread arms)

ṭaqīlu r-rūhi – unpleasant, disagreeable (of a person)
(lit., heavy-spirited)

ṭaqīlu z-zilli – unpleasant, disagreeable (of a person)
(lit., with heavy shadow)

ṭaqīlu d-dami – doltish, dull, unpleasant person; a bore
(lit., heavy-blooded)

While the existence of only two idioms of this type establishes the existence of a phraseological model, the insufficient number of such idioms in our corpus does not allow us to assess the extent of the function and productivity of the phraseological models we have identified or to identify others. Tentatively it is possible to suggest that the genitive construct structure is "preferred" by idioms relating to some inner quality or feature of character, perhaps because of the ease of creating idioms on both sides of the positive-negative scale simply by replacing the constant element

with a word of opposed meaning. In some cases, however, it is the variable element which determines the positive or negative image conveyed by the idiom. Thus

- ṭawīlu l-yadi* – 1. mighty, generous; *but also* 2. thief, robber
(lit., with a long hand)
ṭawīlu l-lisāni – slanderous, impertinent, saucy
(lit., with a long tongue)

More material needs to be collected to investigate phraseological models in Arabic to the extent that they have been studied by Mokienko for Slavic languages or Moon for English. Nevertheless it is clear that we may speak of phraseological models in Arabic and of the semantic and structural identity of idioms forming a cluster. To this contribute both the syntactic structure (model) and the meaning (content). The model, with its relative stability, restricts substitution of word-components which do not correspond to it, and the content has to remain identical or faithful to the idea expressed. Thus the "independence" of the meaning from the syntactic structure is limited to a certain extent, which makes it possible to arrange idioms in series sharing one general model both structural and semantic.

The origin of the variations on particular phraseological models lie for the most part lost in history. But they may be seen as an example of a similar way of perceiving reality, and of expressing attitudes, opinions, and qualifications. Underlying this may be conjectured a similarity of conceptual system and especially the metaphorical aspects of it. Of course the variations may also be considered the results of word play and demonstrations of wit when individuals attempted to vary or improve on a given set expression by giving it a new or more colorful wording.

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