

Water jars do not go to the well themselves: shared universal wisdom in Darfurian proverbs*

Caroline Roset
University of Amsterdam

1 Introduction

When carrying out my field work on Arabic as spoken in Darfur (West Sudan) in the 2010s, many Darfurians came up with Darfurian proverbs spontaneously. Particularly some who I met for the first time, and to whom I explained that I was interested in the variety of Arabic spoken in their part of the country, instantly produced a number of proverbs in that language variety. A few would call their Darfurian mother or grandmother on the spot in order to deliver more examples of Darfurian sayings. Hence, it seemed to me that Darfurians love their proverbs and consider them typical of their culture and language. It may be a drop in the ocean (mind the proverbial expression) but this paper tries to present a snapshot of the linguistic and literary wealth of Darfurian proverbial images that display universal human values.

2 Definition and fields of study

Wolfgang Mieder, a productive and well-known paremiologist, defines proverbs as ‘short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals and traditional views in an [often] metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and that are handed down from generation to generation’ (Mieder 2012: 4).

Particularly the last part of this definition of proverbs reminds us of the nature of a native language. Some other characteristics of proverbs are shared with the characteristics of native languages: both proverbs and languages are dynamic and flexible in that they appear and disappear, they vary from time to time, from place to place, from person to person, from sentence to sentence and like the vocabulary of a language, proverbs can be polysemantic. Knowing and

*Many thanks to Khalid Abdallah Abker; Nizar Ibrahim Faransawi; Mohamed Saleh Abdallah; Hamid Ali Nur, Vereniging Darfur Union إتحاد أبناء دارفور بهولندا, and earlier in Khartoum Salaah Ibrahim, Al-Saadig Adam (and other Darfurian by-passers whose names I have forgotten) for their explanations, patience and enthusiasm.

understanding proverbs is useful for (second) language learners and vital for translators.

Besides these linguistic angles, proverbs are mini pieces of literature and oral creations of images. They can express (traditional) morals, wisdom, truth, humor, irony and satire and “indicate a strong intellectual, ethical and human bond between people” (Mieder 2012: 11). Therefore, proverbs also hover among the domains of folklore, cultural studies, religion, history, literature and art. Contentwise, proverbs have two seemingly paradoxical sides: they simplify a complex matter and render it to a well-known collective image – everybody knows that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ – but they can also require complex activities of the brain and a deep knowledge of their social and cultural setting. Knowing Arabic but not being Darfurian myself, I needed and still need a lot of explanation to understand most of the Darfurian proverbs that I collected.

3 Approach

I suspect that Kees Hengeveld’s main interest in proverbs is formulaic or phraseological; if so, I hope to defeat that expectation in this paper. My approach of categorizing Darfurian proverbs is semantic and slightly idealistic.

Proverbs have literal translations which display the image they contain. But they also have a semantic translation that needs context. For example, ‘big fish eat little fish’ has broken free from its figurative fishes when used to label a powerful group of people that oppresses, destroys or conquers another (no need for examples if you follow the news, and unfortunately also applicable to Darfur) or a large successful company incorporating a smaller one. While studying Darfurian proverbs, I recognized some of those meaningful interpretations in European or Western proverbs. This is what I want to focus on in this paper: do Darfurian proverbs use different images, while having the same *meaning* as European ones?

My semantic approach of Darfurian proverbs is supported by quotes from two famous paremiologists that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, Archer Taylor, more or less Mieder’s predecessor, states: “Oriental, African, Malay, Japanese or Chinese proverbs involve such widely differing cultural spheres and have in general so little connection with European proverbs that I have not hesitated to leave them out” (Taylor 1962: [s.p.]). On the other hand, Mieder claims “the wisdom expressed in proverbs is actually quite similar from culture to culture. That is why so many proverbs have found a wide distribution beyond national borders and there are so many equivalent proverbs that might have different images and structures, but that mean the same thing!” (Mieder

2012: 34). This encouraged me even more to try to add to the collection of types of proverbs that show universal bits of human wisdom.

4 Methodology and justification

I realize that presenting proverbs according to their meaning or interpretation, like I do in the following paragraph, is ‘tricky business’ because of their polysemanticity. Particularly metaphorical proverbs can be subject to ambiguity even more than other lexical elements because they display an image that can consist of many elements and have a story to them. References to images and stories are subject to endless interpretations depending on their own context, the person using the proverb and the addressee interpreting it. For an illustration of proverbial ambiguity, see Van der Geest’s twelve interpretations of an Akan proverb (1996).

Nevertheless, the following Darfurian proverbs were selected on the basis of their meaning as explained by my Darfurian informants and the way I understood the proverbs through them. I collected about 45 recurring proverbs during my fieldwork among Darfurians in Khartoum in the 2010s, transcribed and translated them according to their images as well as their meaning by verifying with several informants there. Some of the proverbs were also found on Twitter and in Ibrahim Adam Ishaq’s¹ works on Darfur Arabic. Some years later, back in Amsterdam, I had another two meetings of a few hours with a couple of male Darfurian Sudanese to re-check the Darfurian authenticity and meaning of the proverbs in that collection. Although most of the interpretations given were in line with those of the others, the various explanations and the varieties of the proverbs themselves confirmed how ambiguous proverbs can be and that they need context for a better understanding. Finally, I selected ten proverbs out of my collection, based on their re-occurrence in the sources (Darfurian informants, Twitter and Ishaq (2002)), and my recognition of their meanings in European proverbs.

In conclusion, the following selection of ten Darfurian proverbs is far from objective. These proverbs are definitely current and verifiably Darfurian, but their number is small, they are variable and presented without a direct context, let alone accounted for historically. So, I should note this selection is like a *dabanga*, *dardi'g-i bife:f* ‘handle it with care’ (see the first proverb below).

¹ Ibrahim Adam Ishaq is a Sudanese professor from Darfurian descent at the Omdurman Islamic University in Khartoum.

5 Selection of ten proverbs (including some varieties)

The following Darfurian proverbs are written in Arabic script by Sudanese informants, without the short vowels. Since there are no rules for writing spoken varieties of Arabic such as Darfur Arabic (as opposed to *فصحى* ‘Standard Arabic’), the orthography is idiosyncratic. Therefore, they are followed by a transliteration reflecting their pronunciation and morphemes but only partly representing the preceding Arabic script. The transliteration is followed by linguistic glosses (TR indicating an object marker) to show the proverb’s syntax; then a translation of the metaphor; and finally a proverb in English that agrees semantically, at least for a part of it. Most of those English proverbs are widespread and have close equivalents in other European languages, sometimes only in meaning, sometimes also in (part of the) metaphor used.

(1)² دنيا دبنقا دردقي بشيش.

dunja dabanga, dardi'g-i bife:f.
 world.SG dabanga.SG roll.IMP-TR carefully
 ‘The world is (like) a dabanga³, (so) roll it carefully.’
 ‘Mind your p’s and q’s.’

(2) شجراي كان هوززت يا أبلای یا هبوبای.

fadar-a:j ka:n ho:zaz-at, ja fabal-a:j ja habu.b-a:j.
 tree-SG if shake.PFV-F either monkey-SG either wind blow-SG
 ‘When a tree shakes, it is either a monkey or a blow of wind.’
 ‘Everything happens for a reason.’

(3) a. أبصلومبايتي ولا كدكاي أختي.

absalomb-ayt=i wala kidik-a:y axayt=i
 mouse-SG=1SG NEG rat-SG sister=1SG
 ‘My small mouse and not my sister’s big rat.’

b. كوليتك ولا تقلية أختك.

kawal-ayt-ak wala tagali:jjat axayt=ak
 kawal-SG-2SG not tagalijja sister=2SG
 ‘Your kawal⁴ and not your brother’s tagalijja⁵.’

² This proverb is also mentioned in Ishaq (2002: 323).

³ *dabanga*: very large earthenware jar.

⁴ *kawal*: wild plant found in Darfur, used for making sauce.

Both proverbs in (3) mean “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”.

- (4)⁶ ألمي حار ولا لعب قعونج.
almi ha:r wala li.ib gu.uyj.
 water hot NEG playing frog.SG
 ‘A frog does not play in hot water.’
 “Don’t skate on thin ice.”
- (5) ود الفار بطلع حفار.
wad al-fa:r 'ba-tal-a haf:a:r.
 son.SG ART-rat.SG 3IPFV-become-SG digger.SG
 ‘A son of a rat becomes a digger.’
 “An apple never falls far from the tree.”
- (6) كلاب كان داوسو بخت أرنب.
kila:b ka:n da:was-u baxit arnab.
 dog.PL if 3PFV.quarrel-3PL luck rabbit.COLL
 ‘When dogs fight, the rabbits are lucky.’
 “When the cat’s away the mice will play.”
- (7) a. أصبع واحد ما بختي وج.
asba wa:.id wala bi-xat:-i waj:
 finger.SG one NEG 3IPFV-put-TR face.SG
 ‘One finger does not cover a face.’
- b. أيد لي أيد تجدع بعيد.
i:d la i:d ta-ɟd-a ba.i:d
 hand.SG to hand.SG 2IPFV-throw.SG far
 ‘A hand plus (another) hand throw far.’

Both proverbs in (7) mean “many hands make light work.”

⁵ *tagalijja*: sauce with meat, more costly and better appreciated than *kawal*.

⁶ This proverb is also mentioned in Ishaq (2002: 56 and 323).

(8) a. دوانة ما بردي.

duwa:nɪ ma ba-rd-i
 water jar.SG NEG 3IPFV-fetch water-TR
 ‘A water jar does not fetch water (itself).’

b. دوانة ما بمشي لير.

duwa:nɪ ma ba-mf-i la bi:r.
 water jar.SG NEG 3IPFV-go-SG to well.SG
 ‘A water jar does not go to the well (by itself).’

Examples (8a) and (8b) show varieties of the same proverb. The English semantic equivalent could be “no gain without pain” but I think the Dutch proverb *de gebraden duiven vliegen niemand in de mond* ‘the roasted pigeons don’t fly into one’s mouth’ is a better equivalent contentwise. This implies that things don’t happen by themselves but you need to act in order to achieve something, which corresponds to the meaning of the Darfurian versions. The Dutch proverb has very similar figurative equivalents in French and German, but I could not find any in English.

(9) جردي في سروال ولا بعضي إلا قعادو ولا حلو.

jarad-a:j fi sirwa:l wala bi-.ad:-i il:a gu.a:d=u
 grasshopper-SG in pants.SG NEG 3IPFV-bite-TR but being=3SG
wala halw.
 NEG nice
 ‘A grasshopper in one’s pants does not bite but its presence is not nice.’
 “His bark is worse than his bite.”

(10)⁷ أب جنقور في فاشر ولا عندو رأي.

ab jangu:r fi Fa:fir wala and=u raj.
 ab⁸ rag.SG in Al-Fashir⁹ NEG with=3SG opinion.SG
 ‘A man in rags in Al-Fashir does not have an opinion.’
 “Like a fish out of water.”

⁷ This proverb is also mentioned in Ishaq (2002: 322-323).

⁸ *ab* or *abu* ‘father’ is a frequently used prefix in order to stress a certain peculiarity of a noun or adjective in Darfur and Chad Arabic.

⁹ Al-Fashir was the flourishing and rich capital of Darfur when it was a powerful and independent sultanate in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

6 Conclusion

Although the selection of the Darfurian proverbs in this paper is partly subjective, they contain universal human insights, as shown by their equivalents in English. Living conditions in Darfur may be different from those in Europe, and so are the metaphors. But in the end we are all birds of a feather.

References

- Geest, Sjaak van der. 1996. The elder and his elbow: Twelve interpretations of an Akan proverb. *Research in African Literatures* 27(3): 110–118.
- Ishaq [Iṣḥa:q], Ibrahim Adam. 2002. *Alʔusu:l alʔarabi:ja li-lahdʒat Da:rfu:r alʔa:m:ij:a (alqarawij:a)*. [The Arabic roots of the (rural) Darfur colloquial]. kul:ij:a al:uʔa alʔarabij:a, qism al:isa:nij:a:t, dʒa:miʕat ʔum: durma:n alʔisla:mij:a. إبراهيم آدم إسحاق. 2002. الأصول العربية للهجة دارفور العامية (القروية). كلية اللغة العربية، قسم اللسانيات، جامعة أم درمان الإسلامية.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. 2012. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Taylor, Archer. 1962. *The Proverb and an Index to 'The proverb'*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.