

Representations of Arabic Proverbs in al-Jawahiri's Poetry -A Pragmatic Approach-

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Abstract:

The study shows that pragmatics focuses on context and elements of speech acts like speaker intention, listener traits, and communicative conditions, giving it an interdisciplinary scope involving linguistics and psychology.

It also reveals how Al-Jawahiri's poetry employs Arabic proverbs as symbolic and argumentative tools that enrich meaning evoke cultural memory, and create a persuasive poetic discourse rooted in the collective consciousness through the familiar and impactful nature of proverbs.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Proverbs; Al-Jawahiri's Poetry; Speech Acts.

1. Introduction:

Since the twentieth century, linguistic studies have witnessed a significant transformation marked by the emergence of two main approaches to the study of language: a **formal** approach concerned with structural form, and a **functional** approach that views language from the perspective of its use in communicative contexts. The latter focused on analyzing linguistic discourse in terms of its contexts and purposes, which helped explain the communicative process beyond the limits of the traditional structural model—thus opening new horizons for linguistic research. This view confirms that discourse is understood not only through its linguistic elements but also through its relationship to context and use.

Based on the **pragmatic conception** of language as a functional activity determined by context, this study seeks to address the following problem: *To what extent was Al-Jawahiri able to employ Arabic proverbs in constructing a pragmatic poetic discourse that transcends traditional rhetorical dimensions to produce effective argumentative mechanisms derived from a dynamic linguistic structure with communicative and semantic impact?*

This study proceeds from a set of hypotheses summarized as follows:

1. The Arabic proverbs in Al-Jawahiri's poetry are not merely invoked for aesthetic or ornamental purposes, but function as pragmatic tools carrying argumentative functions that contribute to meaning-making and reinforce cultural values within the poetic structure.

2. Al-Jawahiri integrates proverbs as intentional speech acts that transcend literal meaning toward deeper rhetorical and critical purposes.
3. The receiver plays a pivotal role in activating the pragmatic dimension, as their cultural background and collective memory contribute to revealing the symbolic and cognitive dimensions embedded in the poetic discourse.

The study adopts a methodological approach combining description and analysis, grounded in understanding language within its pragmatic contexts, in order to trace its rhetorical and argumentative functions within the poetic text.

2. Pragmatics: The Term and the Concept

2.1 Pragmatics in Language:

The Linguistic Dimension of Pragmatics:

The term “Pragmatics” in the Western context is derived from the word *Pragmatique*, which comes from the Latin root *Pragmaticus*, itself originating from the Greek root *pragma*, meaning “action” or “deed.”

In Arabic, the root (d-w-l) is considered the origin of the concept, as it is used to denote change and alternation in conditions or situations. In *Asas al-Balagha* by Al-Zamakhshari, this root appears in several usages such as “*dalat lahu al-dawla*” (he gained power) and “*tadawalū al-shay’a baynahum*” (they exchanged something among themselves), among other expressions that reflect the idea of movement and exchange, which indicates the dynamic and interactive nature inherent in pragmatics.

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In *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, it is stated: “*tadawalna al-amr akhadhnahu bi-l-duwal*. And they say: *dawalayka*, meaning alternation over the matter... and *dalat al-ayyam*, meaning the days turned, and Allah yudawiluha bayna al-nas. And *tadawalathu al-aydī*: this one took it once, and that one another time... and *tadawalna al-‘amal wa al-amr baynana*, meaning this one did it once and that one another time.”²

From the study of the linguistic root d-w-l, it becomes clear that its central meaning revolves around the concepts of transition and transformation. In **Maqayis al-Lugha**, this root is associated with two main meanings: the first relates to movement and the change of position, as in the expression “*indala al-qawm*” (the people moved from one place to another), and the second conveys the idea of weakness or relaxation. From the first meaning derives the verb *tadawala*, meaning the transfer of something from one hand to another.³

As for **Al-Firuzabadi**, he linked “*tadawalūhu*” to “*akhadhūhu bi-l-duwal*,” explaining it as a succession or alternation over something.⁴

Thus, all the lexicons confirm that the connotation of this root is grounded in the notions of motion, alternation, and circulation.

2.2 Terminologically:

Pragmatics focuses on the study of language in the context of its actual use. It is inseparable from the circumstances surrounding the act of communication such as the identity of the speaker and the listener, the place and time of the conversation, the presence of other participants, and the social or psychological relationship between the interlocutors, as well as their cultural background. All these elements contribute to clarifying the speaker’s intentions and the meanings intended to be conveyed. For this reason, Rudolf Carnap (R. Carnap) considered pragmatics to be the foundation upon which

linguistic studies should be built, given its ability to address linguistic problems that earlier approaches failed to solve.⁵

Pragmatics draws its foundations from multiple fields of knowledge, making it an interdisciplinary domain where several disciplines intersect. It is therefore difficult to precisely determine its sources, as each pragmatic concept often stems from a particular intellectual background. For instance, the theory of speech acts emerged within the framework of analytical philosophy, while the theory of relevance and the theory of conversation go back to the works of Paul Grice (P. Grice), originating from cognitive psychology.⁶ As a result of this overlap between philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, pragmatics has been characterized by diverse perspectives and varying definitions according to the researchers' concerns and methodologies. It thus became a meeting point for numerous cognitive and philosophical theories, leading to the multiplicity of its definitions depending on scholarly interests.

Engaging with pragmatics places the researcher before the challenge of defining concepts and delimiting terms due to the epistemological overlap it shares with other related scientific fields. Several disciplines have contributed to shaping the pragmatic perspective, borrowing and adapting its concepts and tools. Consequently, pragmatics has attracted the attention of philosophers, logicians, and semioticians, in addition to psychologists, sociologists, communication specialists, and linguists. Hence, pragmatics constitutes a fertile space where several domains of knowledge intersect, allowing linguistic, philosophical, sociological, and psychological theorization to interact a reality that demands a multidimensional vision for comprehensive understanding.

Masoud Sahraoui offered a clear definition, stating that it is "a linguistic doctrine that studies the relationship between linguistic activity and its users, the methods and ways of successfully using linguistic signs, the various contextual and situational layers within which 'discourse' is performed, and the factors that make 'discourse' a clear and successful communicative message, as well as the reasons for failure in communication through natural languages."⁷

Similarly, Djilali Delache did not diverge from these definitions when he stated: "Pragmatics is a linguistic discipline that defines its subject matter within the domain of use or performance of what we speak, studying how speakers use linguistic evidence during their dialogues, in shaping their utterances, and within their discourses. This field also concerns itself with how language users interpret those discourses and utterances, while also focusing on the speech producer, the speaker, and the context."⁸

3. The Main Pragmatic Concepts:

Pragmatic linguistics is built upon a set of key concepts that form its theoretical framework. The most prominent among them are: the Theory of Relevance, Conversational Implicature, Implicit Meaning, Argumentation, and Speech Acts.

3.1 Implicit Meaning:

Implicit meaning is one of the operational pragmatic concepts that aims to identify the hidden, unspoken dimensions within discourse. These dimensions are governed by various conditions surrounding the communicative act such as context, situation, and communicative intention. Among the most significant phenomena in this regard is presupposition, which is based on the existence of prior shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener. This shared background is essential for successful understanding and communication. Such presupposition is often implied within the linguistic structure and not explicitly stated. For example, in both "Close the window" and "Don't

close the window,” it is implicitly understood that the window is open representing the common assumption upon which the discourse is built.

- **Presupposition:**

This concept relies on the existence of prior knowledge shared by the speaker and the listener, which is necessary for the success of comprehension and communication. This type of presupposition is usually embedded within the linguistic structure and not explicitly expressed. For instance, in both sentences “Close the window” and “Don’t close the window,” it is implicitly understood that the window is open forming the shared assumption that underlies the discourse.⁹

When the speaker produces a discourse, they proceed from an implicit assumption that the listener possesses a prior cognitive background related to that discourse. This constitutes one of the foundations upon which the theory of presupposition is built. Although the concept may appear at first glance to be associated with the speaker, Perelman assigns a central role to the listener, viewing them not as a passive receiver but as an active participant in constructing and interpreting meaning. Every linguistic communication does not occur merely for the sake of utterance; rather, it pursues specific goals and is built upon a common ground of shared assumptions resembling in nature an implicit contract binding the two parties.

Thus, presupposition becomes a communicative necessity grounded in the implicit agreement between speaker and listener.

- **Implied Speech:**

Implied speech is a type of implicit meaning that is primarily tied to the context and situation of discourse, unlike presupposition, which is anchored in stable linguistic features within the utterance structure.

Implied speech refers to information that may be contained within the discourse without being explicitly stated. Its interpretation depends on the circumstances surrounding the communicative event. For example, when someone says, “It’s raining,” the listener may interpret it as an invitation to stay home, to hurry to work, or to delay going out. These interpretations vary depending on the situational context in which the discourse takes place.

The main difference between this type of implicature and presupposition is that implied speech emerges within the living communicative context, whereas presuppositions are based on a stable cognitive background shared by both parties.

3.2 Conversational Implicature:

Conversational implicature is one of the most prominent pragmatic concepts and is closely linked to discourse analysis. It contributed to shifting linguistic research from focusing on building general theories about discourse to exploring how communication is actually achieved under real conditions. This concept is based on the idea that what is understood from discourse is not limited to what is explicitly stated but also includes implicit meanings inferred from context and from the principle of cooperation between interlocutors. Thus, discourse is no longer studied as a closed system of sentences, but as a communicative process produced within a specific context and understood under real interactive conditions.

The concept of conversational implicature is closely associated with the work of philosopher **Paul Grice**, who observed that natural language expressions can be used in certain contexts to imply meanings different from those explicitly stated. This is illustrated by an imaginary dialogue between

two professors: one asks about the student “J” and whether he is qualified to continue his studies in the philosophy department. The other replies, “Student J is an excellent football player.”

This answer carries two semantic levels: one explicit, indicating that the student excels in sports, and another implicit, suggesting that the student lacks the intellectual qualifications necessary for philosophical study. Grice coined the term “**conversational implicature**” to describe this phenomenon, emphasizing that linguistic communication operates under a **cooperative principle** regulated by a set of implicit conversational maxims. These maxims enable the listener to infer unspoken meanings based on context and situational cues.

3.3 Theory of Relevance:

The Theory of Relevance is one of the cognitively oriented pragmatic theories developed by Deirdre Wilson (D. Wilson) and Dan Sperber (D. Sperber). It derives its importance from being part of cognitive sciences and is among the first theories to accurately define the place of pragmatics within linguistics, particularly in relation to syntax.

This theory is distinguished by its ability to reconcile two seemingly opposing tendencies. On one hand, it seeks to explain syntactic phenomena in utterances at various levels; on the other, it is grounded in a cognitive and perceptual perspective. This dual nature results from its reliance on two complementary theoretical frameworks: the first is psychological-cognitive, based on Jerry Fodor’s modular theory (1983); the second stems from philosophy of language, specifically from Grice’s conversational theory (1975).¹⁰

3.4 Argumentation:

Argumentation is understood as the process of presenting reasoning and evidence leading to a specific conclusion within discourse. It is constructed upon a logical sequence that helps persuade or influence the listener’s stance. At its core, argumentation organizes utterances into argumentative components that support an idea and conclusions intended to be reached or demonstrated. Thus, it is not merely the presentation of information but a linguistic practice aimed at producing a specific effect on the listener’s mind through an internally coherent inferential logic.

To speak of the argumentative function of language means that the construction of discourse does not depend solely on the factual content expressed by sentences but also on how those sentences are structured — that is, on their linguistic form and the expressive means used. The effectiveness of argumentation depends not only on content but also on linguistic tools that direct meaning, organize arguments, and achieve persuasion within the discourse.

From this perspective, argumentative discourse cannot be separated from the interactive nature of communication between speaker and listener. A discourse is truly argumentative only when it meets the conditions of interaction imposed by the pragmatic situation — addressing the other, anticipating responses or objections. Every utterance containing a claim directed toward the other and aiming to influence their stance falls within the scope of argumentation. Hence, argumentation is not an incidental feature of discourse but an essential property that shapes its structure, function, and purpose.

This realization has led the New Rhetoric to restore argumentation to its rightful place, considering it an indispensable communicative essence in discourse analysis and in understanding its persuasive mechanisms.

3.5 Speech Acts:

The Theory of Speech Acts is founded on the central idea that utterances do not merely convey information or describe reality but perform linguistic actions within specific communicative contexts. Speech, in its essence, is not merely a report of the present state of affairs but an act carried out through language. Such acts may be explicit, as in direct commands, or implicit, inferred from context and situation. The social context plays a decisive role in interpreting these acts and determining whether they express a command, prohibition, question, or other pragmatic functions whose meanings derive from the relationship between the speaker and the listener and from the circumstances surrounding the discourse.

Searle's Classification of Speech Acts:

a. Representatives:

The aim or function of the representative category is the speaker's commitment (to varying degrees) to the truth of a certain proposition to predict or assert a fact that corresponds to reality. All members of this category are thus subject to evaluation in terms of truth or falsity.¹¹

Representative acts fall within the speech acts that seek to make what is said correspond to reality their direction of fit is from language to the world. These acts reflect the speaker's mental attitude, particularly regarding belief, judgment, or reporting a given state of affairs. Belief, in this case, expresses a psychological stance that is not always precisely defined, as the degree of commitment may vary and can even approach zero.

This category includes a wide range of acts used to describe or evaluate reality, similar to Austin's classification, which grouped most assertive and descriptive acts under it.

Representative acts are distinguished by their direct verifiability in terms of truth or falsity, making them subject to truth-testing within pragmatic discourse.

b. Directives:

Directive acts are those through which the speaker seeks to influence the listener's behavior in order to prompt them to perform a specific future action. The strength of this influence can vary from mild to strong it may take the form of a suggestion or encouragement, or it may be expressed as insistence or a firm request.

This category operates in the direction from the world to words, as the speaker expresses a desire or wish that the listener carry out a particular action. A key condition for these acts is sincerity, meaning the speaker genuinely wishes for the act to be accomplished. Examples include verbs such as ask, advise, request, insist, plead, permit, encourage, and others.

It is worth noting that some acts Austin classified as behavioral, such as "object" or "speak," can be viewed as directive in light of their persuasive purpose. Likewise, some acts related to practical conduct may fall under this category since they aim to bring about a change in the listener's behavior.

c. Commissives:

Searle considered Austin's definition of commissive acts to be highly accurate in principle, though he observed even if only slightly that certain acts included in this category, such as "will" or "intend," do not truly belong to it, since they do not clearly express an actual commitment from the speaker.

Commissive acts are those by which the speaker commits to performing a future action, with varying degrees of strength for example, promising, pledging, offering, or swearing.

In this case, the speaker does not merely express an opinion but involves themselves in a behavioral or practical commitment toward the future.

d. Expressives:

Expressive acts are used to express a psychological or emotional state experienced by the speaker. They require sincerity, meaning that the speaker must genuinely feel the emotion being expressed. These acts are characterized by the absence of the “direction of fit” found in other speech act types they do not aim to make words match the world or vice versa. Rather, their truth is implicitly presupposed.

Examples include thank, apologize, congratulate, welcome, warn, etc. These acts express specific emotional or attitudinal stances toward an event or a person, without intending to change reality but rather to express a response to it.

e. Declarations:

This category of speech acts is distinguished by its ability to create a change in reality through the utterance itself, provided that it is performed under appropriate institutional conditions and by a person authorized to do so.

The success of a declarative act produces a correspondence between what is said and what becomes real. In other words, if the act is successfully performed, its content becomes a new fact. For example, when one appoints someone to a position or declares a state of emergency, the utterance itself brings the new situation into being, rather than merely describing it.

Thus, the relationship between speech and reality in declarative acts is not one of reference or representation but one of direct performance a speech act that changes the existing situation.¹²

A notable feature of declarative acts is that the surface structure of the sentence does not explicitly reveal the distinction between propositional content (the statement’s meaning) and illocutionary force (the performative function). The grammatical form may seem ordinary, yet it conceals a linguistic act that produces a real-world change. This lack of visible distinction makes it difficult to separate what is being described from what is being achieved by the utterance itself. Consequently, the interpretation of declarative acts depends heavily on the institutional context and the authority of the speaker, rather than merely on the syntactic form of the utterance.

4. The Pragmatics of Proverbs in the Diwan:

Proverbs are among the oldest forms of expression in Arabic prose, valued for their linguistic conciseness and profound cultural significance. They originated as brief sayings transmitted orally from generation to generation, eventually becoming an integral part of the collective memory.

The essence of a proverb lies in its brevity and richness of meaning it encapsulates a human experience or wisdom and is invoked in new situations that resemble those in which it was first uttered. A proverb is constructed upon an analogical relationship between the source (the original story or context in which it arose) and the application (the new situation to which it is applied). Thus, understanding a proverb depends on grasping its cultural and linguistic background and the context in which it functions.

Since the mechanism of speech acts is grounded in the fundamental premise that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a rule-governed act aimed at influencing the listener whether in perception, belief, or behavior the proverb can be seen as a linguistic form with a

powerful capacity to perform indirect speech acts. Its effect becomes clear within the context in which it is used. The selection of a proverb within discourse is never random; it reflects pragmatic competence, given the proverb's ability to condense meaning, truthfully represent social and intellectual realities, and achieve greater communicative impact than other forms of expression.

A proverb, with its symbolic charge and cultural depth, enriches poetic language both linguistically and aesthetically, granting it a pragmatic dimension that transcends time. Thus, the proverb is not merely a fleeting expression but a literary genre in its own right, combining semantic depth with apparent simplicity. This dual nature makes it close to the emotional core of human experience, ensuring its enduring presence in both poetic and prose traditions.

In Al-Jawahiri's Diwan, the presence of Arabic proverbs is particularly remarkable. He deliberately employs or alludes to them in multiple contexts, thereby endowing his poetic texts with layers of meaning and rich cultural resonance.

The inclusion of a proverb within a poem is never arbitrary; it reveals a high degree of linguistic and cultural awareness and attests to the poet's mastery of the deep structures of popular expression. Hence, Al-Jawahiri's use of proverbs is not mere linguistic ornamentation but a rhetorical strategy that enriches meaning and amplifies the text's impact on the reader, owing to the proverb's symbolic density and rootedness in collective memory.

Among the notable examples of this usage to mention only a few is Al-Jawahiri's saying:

Koni bugathan waslamī

bilnafs thumma istansiri ¹³

This verse refers to the proverb: "Inna al-bughatha biardina yastansir" (In our land, even the weak birds become eagles).

- **Explanation of the Proverb:**

Al-bughath: a small, weak bird (singular: bughathah), and yastansir means "to become an eagle," the eagle being one of the strongest birds of prey.

This proverb is used to describe a false reality in which the weak and opportunistic rise to positions of power, while true strength and merit are absent.

- **Pragmatic Analysis:**

Speaker: Al-Jawahiri

Addressee: The "puppets of politics" the political class that falsely assumes the role of heroes and powerful leaders.

In the verse "Kūnī bughathan waslamī bil-nafsi thumma istansirī" (Be a weak bird and save yourself, then pretend to be an eagle), the speech acts "kūnī" (be), "aslamī" (surrender), and "istansirī" (pretend to be an eagle) are directive acts whose surface meaning conveys advice, yet whose deeper function is mockery and irony. The true purpose is to humiliate and expose the addressee.

In this line, Al-Jawahiri implicitly evokes a traditional proverb and inverts its structure. If rephrased as a direct speech act, it would mean: "You are the most despicable of beings." Through this inversion, the poet expresses his disgust at the state of politics and his sarcasm toward politicians who compete for power and boast about it. It is as if he tells them: You do not even deserve to pretend to be strong; humiliation is your true nature.

Thus, in this political pragmatic context, the term "bughath" (a weak bird) becomes a symbol of the corrupt ruling elite, while "istansar" (to act like an eagle) denotes an impossible act, uttered

sarcastically rather than encouragingly. Through this strategy, the poet exposes hypocrisy and denounces the moral decay of leadership under the guise of poetic irony.

He lived his life hunting amid its and striking blindly in its troubles, darkness, gathering firewood. ¹⁴

To refer to the proverb: “Akhbat min hatib layl” (More reckless than one who gathers firewood at night).

- **Explanation of the Proverb:**

The woodcutter at night cannot see what he gathers; he may grab a snake or a branch.

This proverb is used to describe someone who acts recklessly and without foresight, taking action without thought or discernment.

- **Pragmatic Analysis:**

Speaker: Al-Jawahiri, the critic.

Addressee: A particular Iraqi politician.

The verbs “yaseedu” (he hunts) and “yakhbutu” (he strikes blindly) are evaluative and ironic assertive acts. Al-Jawahiri is not merely describing; he is judging the politician’s behavior and issuing a sarcastic moral verdict.

When the poetic verse is projected onto the Arabic proverb, the latter traditionally refers to someone who acts recklessly and chaotically, performing a pragmatic function of symbolic discrediting of the agent. However, in Al-Jawahiri’s poetic line “yakhbutu fī dujaha ḥaṭiban” (he strikes blindly in its darkness, gathering firewood), the meaning goes beyond mere recklessness to include opportunism and self-serving behavior the exploitation of confusion and disorder to gain personal benefit.

Thus, according to Al-Jawahiri’s satirical vision, this politician is not simply erratic or misguided but rather one who thrives amid political corruption and chaos, scavenging for advantage within the “darkness” of moral and institutional decay. Through this ironic speech act, the poet exposes both the depravity and opportunism that dominate political life, transforming the proverb’s original moral critique into a sharper tool of political denunciation.

When he is said to be from the land of Iraq, eyes turn toward him, and people gather with greetings and welcome.
In times of glory he rules, noble and famed, yet in hardship he needs a well-propped palm to lean upon. ¹⁵

This verse intertwines with the Arabic proverb: “Ana jadhiluha al-muhakk wa adhīluha al-murajjab” (I am her solid post and her well-supported palm).

- **Explanation of the Proverb:**

- “Jadhiluha al-muhakk” refers to the tree branch against which camels rub themselves to scratch their bodies; it symbolizes experience, competence, and high standing.
- “Adhīluha al-murajjab” refers to the high branch of the palm tree that people rely on for various purposes.
This proverb is said of someone who considers himself worthy of leadership and reliance in times of hardship.

- **Pragmatic Analysis:**

Speaker: Al-Jawahiri, in a critical and ironic stance.

Addressee: The public audience.

In this verse, the poet reactivates the well-known Arabic proverb “Ana jadhiluha al-muhakk wa ‘adhīquha al-murajjab” (I am her solid post and well-propped palm), but he does so in a reversed sense. Traditionally, the proverb expresses pride and self-confidence, uttered by someone asserting

their strength and reliability. However, Al-Jawahiri employs it implicitly and ironically to highlight the absence of such a strong and capable figure in positions of leadership.

Through this reversal, the poet draws on the cultural memory of his audience, projecting the symbolic framework of the proverb onto the political reality of his time. This intertextual use creates a contrast between the original meaning (self-affirmation and power) and its current implication (the lack of true leadership and integrity).

The verse therefore prompts the listener's evaluative awareness, inviting them to question whether today's leader is indeed worthy of that title. The speech act performed here is evaluative and directive, aiming to criticize social and political reality and to expose the discrepancy between appearance and essence. Through a rhetorical strategy that capitalizes on the proverb's cultural depth, Al-Jawahiri provokes reflection and re-examination of the audience's standards regarding who truly deserves authority and respect.

5. CONCLUSION:

The verses analyzed represent a distinctive example of what may be termed "pragmatic condensation" in Al-Jawahiri's poetry, where the poet succeeded in activating intertextuality with Arabic proverbs in a functional rather than ornamental way. Through this, he transformed poetic discourse into a coherent critical and argumentative structure. By invoking proverbs, the text opens up to a broader cultural and aesthetic horizon, where the poetic image becomes a tool for generating meaning and conveying implicit positions of profound intellectual and critical depth.

In this context, the proverb does not merely serve a comparative or illustrative purpose; rather, it becomes a means of revealing familiar everyday truths and reshaping them within a condensed symbolic framework, turning them into moments of reflection rich with significance.

Because the proverb encapsulates collective experience and relies on the cultural memory of the recipient, it possesses an exceptional persuasive power that grants it a distinctive place within the pragmatic field of poetic discourse, making it one of the key elements that ensure the poem's endurance and renewal within collective consciousness.

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