

# **Caravan of Dreams: Metaphors in Intercultural Communications**

**Stephen K. Roney**  
Jubail Industrial College  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
[sronykor@gmail.com](mailto:sronykor@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

Nations and cultures are held together not by common language, history, or beliefs, but by shared metaphors. Know the metaphor, and you understand the culture at a fundamental level. Know it not, and misunderstandings and “culture shock” occur. The ruling metaphor for society, in Arab society, is the journey. This has immediate ramifications for those of us who are foreigners living in Arab countries, and practical implications for the EFL/ESL classroom.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, culture, intercultural communication, English as a Second Language (ESL), Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

## **1. Introduction**

Metaphors are the final, highest form of language. Moreover, the encounter of two or more cultures is what the TESL profession is about. It is very much in our interests as EFL instructors to understand - and teach - cultural metaphors.

Differing language is our focus, but all aspects of the cultural encounter are present: it is the main thing that happens daily in every ESL class, and it is the reason our students want to learn English in the first place - for intercultural communication. This paper examines one specific, but very important, instance of a cultural conceptual metaphor: that for the culture itself, for society.

What is a cultural metaphor? The idea of conceptual metaphor is perhaps most familiar from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book, *Metaphors We Live By*. "Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence," they write, "we found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature." And what do they mean by "metaphor"? "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4).

## **2. National and Cultural Metaphors**

The idea that cultures are held together by common metaphors is not new. Margaret Atwood writes in her 1972 book *Survival*, "Every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core ... The symbol, ... - be it word, phrase, idea, image, or all of these - functions like a system of beliefs ... which holds the country together and helps the people in it to co-operate for common ends" (Atwood, 1972).

Atwood then enumerates national symbols for three English-speaking nations. For Britain, it is "The Island." America's unifying image is "The Frontier." For Canada, Atwood says the equivalent theme is "Survival."

## **3. The Arab World**

What is the equivalent metaphor for the Arab world? I submit that it is "The Journey": the caravan in the desert, the dhow in the sea. Arab culture has always been especially concerned with transportation: cars, camels, horses, are still the most prized possessions; Arab airlines have become world-beaters. Community solidarity among national groups within the broader culture is usually formed through some shared journey: the Qawasim two centuries ago into Ras al Khaimah, the Bani Yas two centuries ago to Abu Dhabi. When Morocco sought to establish its claim to the former Spanish Sahara, they did so by lining up along the border, men, women, and children - and walking in. Muammar Ghaddafi suggested the same tactic in Libya's recent turmoil: a hike East by the population as a whole to reclaim Benghazi.

The essential Arab self-image is likewise still the bedouin, even if most Arabs now live in large cities.

#### **4. The Arab Conception of The Journey**

The motif of the voyage is familiar to Englishmen as well - a fellow trading nation. But there is a difference. An English hero braves the sea to reach his island destination. Sinbad, the Arab hero, after his first voyage, was rich enough to never need to set sail again - much less to face the terrible dangers of his journeys. Yet he returns to sea, seven times. Why?

Sinbad himself explains: "... very soon I grew tired of such an idle life ...." Later: "... as I was still in the prime of life, it pleased me better to be up and doing." Later still: "I soon wearied of pleasures, and longed for change and adventure" (Lang, 1918).

For an Englishman, the voyage is a means to an end. For an Arab, the voyage is the end.

#### **5. The Journey in Islam**

Time itself, to Arabs, is a journey. The Arab and Muslim calendar, uniquely, starts with an expedition. Years are numbered from the exodus of Muhammed and Abu Bakr from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. Islam's birth is dated to this event.

Being on a journey is moreover a moral act. "According to Islam," an article in the *Gulf Times* explains, "Hijrah is of two kinds: literal ... and metaphorical, which means the abandonment of sins" (al-Uthaimen, 2009).

Every Muslim, therefore, is obliged to take such a journey - the Hajj - as a religious duty. Nor is the Hajj just one journey to a fixed destination: it is journeys within journeys, even one in which one must literally *run* between the hills of Safa and Marwa. The apotheosis is neither Safa, nor Marwa - it is the running in between.

#### **6. The Journey in Arab Thought**

Is this idea of journeying as a moral act arbitrary? Ibn Khaldun, the great 14<sup>th</sup> century Arab social scientist, makes a compelling case that it is not. His theory of human history - the world's first, according to Arnold Toynbee (Irwin, 1997) - is as a cyclical movement, with cohesive bands from the wilderness settling, growing decadent, then being replaced by a fresh wave from desert or steppe.

Settling, therefore, is the beginning of moral decline; nomadism was and is the source of virtue and energy. "Sedentary life constitutes the last stage of civilization and the point where it begins to decay. It also constitutes the last stage of evil and of remoteness from goodness" (Ibn Khaldun, p. 94). "Superiority comes to nations through enterprise and courage. The more firmly rooted in desert habits and the wilder a group is, the closer it comes to achieving superiority over others" (ibid, p. 107).

There are traces of the moral superiority of nomadism in the Hebrew Bible - it is what distinguishes the Hebrews, Semites, from the Egyptians and Canaanites, descendants of Ham. In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain, the villain, is a settled farmer; Abel a herdsman. In the Bible, Cain becomes a wandering fugitive later. In the Hadith, his punishment is the opposite: he is prevented from moving. "His leg was joined to his thigh, and his face was turned forever towards the sun ..." (Ibn Kathir, 1999, p. 52).

## **7. What Are the Implications for the English Class?**

All of this implies that language is, for Arabs, important. For language shares many of the features of a journey. It is conceptually a journey between speaker and spoken to, understanding and intent, subject and object, beginning and end of a narrative. Like a journey, it is intensely temporal.

The Arabs, accordingly, more than most cultures, define themselves by their shared language. Every Muslim must study classical Arabic, as a religious duty. This linguistic study was once the entire object of a formal education in Arab countries. Meaningfully, the fact that the Qur'an was written in Arabic is considered part of its essence - one cannot read it in translation.

Language matters here; hence, so does English class. This very importance of language often causes intercultural misunderstanding - for language is not held in nearly as high regard in the English-speaking world.

Consider Mohamed Saeed Al-Sahaf, Iraqi Information Minister under Saddam. In the dying days of the Second Gulf War (as Americans call it), he gathered the international press on the roof of his Information Ministry to tell them that there were no American soldiers anywhere near Baghdad. They had all been barbequed in their tanks at the border. Meanwhile, massed cameras and microphones revealed the battle raging within eyesight.

Americans thought this clownish; it earned him the nickname "Comical Ali."

The Arab perspective was different. Obviously, he was not trying to lie - otherwise, why would he hold the conference on the rooftop, making the truth visible? No; it was a heroic act of defiance. Among the Arabs traditionally, "the perfect warrior was also the famous poet" (Siddiqui, 1960, p. 4). Al-Sahaf was performing the traditional role of the poet, inspiring the troops and dispiriting the enemy.

After the war, it is said, Al-Sahaf turned himself in to the American authorities, only to discover that they were not looking for him. To Arabs, his words were important weapons of war. To Americans, they were meaningless.

Our task, accordingly, as language teachers, is simple. Our students are eager to learn language. If it is not simple in practice, this may be because, missing metaphors, we end up working at cross purposes.

One hears certain common complaints, among "native speakers" teaching EFL in the Gulf. What follows is a discussion of some of these complaints in light of our metaphor.

## **8. Arab Students Will Not Read**

More generally, their reading and writing lag behind their speaking.

In Arab culture, spoken language is more valued than written. The spoken word is more temporal, more like a journey; once a passage is written, the destination is already

present. It is possible, after all, to turn the page and read ahead, or even to read it backwards.

Consider the history of the printing press. It was invented in the Far East to print the Sutras, the Buddhist canon. When Gutenberg independently invented movable type, what was the first book printed? The Bible.

Yet Arabs, and Muslims, did not embrace this new invention. Printing was forbidden in the Ottoman Empire by decree in 1485 (Lewis, 1995, p. 268). Printing in Arabic characters was finally permitted in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century - but only on non-religious subjects (Lewis, 1995, p. 269). The Qur'an was virtually the last thing printed.

Poetry, accordingly, is valued more highly in Arabia than in the West. When Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet, died, he was buried with state honours. By comparison, how many of us could name the current US or Canadian poet laureate?

Yes, Arab students are less inclined to read. But we must ask ourselves: is their need to read and write as great as we suppose it is? Or are we imposing our own values? We can convey important information orally when possible. And we are probably missing out if we are not using poetry in the classroom.

## **9. The Students Will Not Go Along with the Lesson Plan**

We are drilled to prepare a detailed plan for every lesson. Those teaching in the Middle East then often find, often in horror, that the students argue against it in class, and try to turn the lesson in some new direction. Class discipline then becomes an issue.

This is bargaining. It too can be understood from the journey motif. To preordain the class's and the semester's destination in advance is to overlook the journey. And bargaining is more interesting than the actual exchange. Bargaining together builds social cohesion. Attempt to prevent this bargaining from happening, and you are imposing social discord. No surprise if the class then becomes hard to handle.

In *al-Isra wa al-Miraj*, Mohammed travels to Heaven itself, and bargains with Allah. Now let us consider, with some humility: If bargaining is proper with God himself, surely it is also proper, and properly respectful, with us English teachers?

Why shouldn't we encourage and prolong such bargaining whenever possible as a legitimate real-world practice in English, with intrinsic motivation?

## **10. They Come to Class Late; They Do Not Bring their Books or Pens**

If, for the Arabs, it is the departure, not the arrival, that matters, tardiness will naturally seem a lesser issue than to us "native speakers." If they set out at a reasonable time with a reasonable intent, shouldn't that be enough? Hence, the "excuse," as we call it, should be decisive. How can anyone predict what will happen on a journey? How can one promise to arrive anywhere at a given time?

Remember too that, given the ethical dimension of the journey, the traveller stands automatically in a position of moral authority over we who only wait in class. Remember

the famous Arab obligation of hospitality to a traveller. The late-arriving student has a right to expect our help; all the more so if they have had a difficult journey. Should we complain about their being late, and not bringing their pen? Properly, it is our duty to supply all the traveller's wants for up to three days. Lending them a pen for an hour is a small matter.

Some argue that it is necessary to teach our students punctuality: "They will need it when they enter the workforce. You can't arrive late to an office job."

But will they be working in American offices, or Saudi offices? And how many, living in the Gulf, can truthfully claim that they always find locally-staffed offices opening promptly at the stated time?

This becomes, in other words, a case of imposing our own culture.

Why not simply leave it up to the Arab students, as responsible adults, to decide for themselves when they need to be in class? The punishment, if they choose wrongly, is intrinsic: lower marks on the test. Alternatively, we might exploit the technology we have to post all materials online, including lectures. Students could then make up lost time at leisure.

## **11. They Cheat; They Will Not Do Their Own Work**

This is another example of the Arab imperative of hospitality to the traveller. If your neighbor needs help on the path, it is immoral not to help him. All the more so if the juncture is critical, as with an exam. When we ban this, even if we must, we put our students in a moral quandary.

In ordinary classes, therefore, it seems best that we not ban it. After all, we spend half our time trying to encourage "group work." Why spend the other half trying to prevent it?

For exams, granted, this is not possible; but much can be done in designing testing situations to make the problem moot. Technology allows us, for example, with little effort, to give each student a different test, using question banks and computer randomization. Spoken tests can be taken individually.

## **12. They Will Not Sit Still**

Teachers complain that their Arab students get up, even walk around, during classes; they seem to need frequent bathroom breaks.

Those from an island culture tend to see the settled classroom as an island of order rising above the outside sea of chaos. Arabs will roughly invert those two values. A classroom's stillness is something akin to death.

Do we really need to sit still to learn? No - much research suggests exactly the opposite, that we think and learn better with our bodies engaged. We have recently rediscovered Total Physical Response - already known to the ancient Arabs, Greeks, and Hebrews.

We spend much time in our TESL training on arranging our classroom in specific ways. It might be best in the Gulf to let students fall where they may. Controlling their movements adds an unnecessary extra burden that distracts from learning.

### **13. Conclusion without Conclusion**

This essay is, necessarily, only a brief introduction to our subject. The dominion of the metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out, spans most of human thought. The implications here for our classrooms are vaster than can be covered within the present word count.

Perhaps, for the present, therefore, simply raising awareness is enough. The important thing, for this as all journeys, is not to have already reached our conclusion, but to all be on that journey together.

## References

Atwood, M. (1972). *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972. Print.

Ibn Kathir. *Stories of the Prophets*. (M. Al-Ahmad, Trans.) Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 1999. Print.

Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah*. (Franz Rosenthal, Trans.) Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. Print.

Irwin, Robert. (1997). "Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun." *Middle Eastern Studies* 33:3 (1997); pp. 461-479. Print.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.

Lang, Arthur (trans.) *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*. London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1918. Print.

Lewis, Bernard. *The Middle East*. London: Orion, 1995. Print.

Siddiqui, Mohammed. *Life of Mohammed*. Berkeley: Islamic Publications. 1960. Print.

Al-Uthaimen, Sheik. M. (2009, January 2). "The Hijrah of Allah's Messenger." *Gulf Times*, 2 January, 2009: A1. Print.

Yates, Frances. (1966). *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.