

THE NOTION *WEAPON* IN ARABIC IDIOMS CHARACTERIZATION OF PERSONS AND OBJECTS

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The present study is a sequel to an investigation published in volume 8 (2008) of this Journal that discussed a group of Arabic idioms that have as at least one of their components a word denoting a weapon and that describe situations or behavior. Here weaponry idioms denoting characteristics and features of people and objects are examined in order to understand their semantic structure and motivation. Since the majority of the idioms studied have been collected from dictionaries, an attempt is made to present an assessment of their current use in Modern Standard Arabic based on Internet sources.

Arabic phraseology constitutes a substantial area of investigation that can lead in multiple directions. Studying different types of phrasemes – or idioms in a broad sense¹ – can help see how the world of the Arabs has been and is conceptualized through the language. In this paper I take up a different group of weaponry idioms from those considered in my previous article in this Journal.² The expressions I will present still have as one of their components a word denoting a weapon, but the meaning of the whole collocation is to express characteristics, features or qualities of people or objects, as opposed to those of situations or behavior. My overall goal, again, is to look at the part played by this particular group of idioms, and by extension other idioms, in the Arabic language's ability to expand itself by expressing figuratively a wider range of meanings. Furthermore, I wish to show how the new concept created from the literal meanings of the words of an expression is accompanied by many connotations and thus becomes more vivid and expressive.

Methodologically and theoretically I apply the same principals as in my first contribution. These principals are based on recent research in the

¹ It should be understood from the outset that the collocations I am here referring to as 'idioms' fall in some cases more properly into the broader category of 'phrasemes'.

² Ludmila Torlakova, 'The Notion *Weapon* in Arabic Idioms', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 8 (2008): 125–41.

field of phraseology in different European and non-European languages. While not neglecting traditional approaches, they draw particularly on the field of cognitive linguistics. As Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij puts it:

A cognitively based theory of idiom semantics would allow us to address all kinds of knowledge evoked by the concepts which are encoded in the lexical structure of the idiom, and it would not be necessary to restrict oneself to the literal meanings of the idiom constituents as the relevant source of motivating links.³

This study will stress primarily the semantics of the weaponry idioms considered and the motivational links between their literal and actual, phraseological meanings. An attempt will be made to summarize the connotations that accompany the new meanings acquired, based either on dictionary sources or on contemporary Internet usage. For reasons of space it will not be possible to exemplify all extensions of the meaning of an idiom, and some idioms will receive only brief attention. The variety of formal structures used in weaponry idioms will also be illustrated, and within a semantic category idioms will be presented according to syntactic structure. In order to facilitate comprehension of certain sections of this article, it will be convenient to review some essential postulates of phraseological theory that I rely on.

Phrasemes are collocations of two or more words that function as units of the lexicon of a language and whose meaning cannot be readily or fully deduced from the meanings of the constituent words.⁴ Idioms are phrasemes that demonstrate these characteristics in a stronger way than other types of fixed, lexicalized collocations, which is why they are considered particularly interesting objects for research. They do not form a homogeneous and uniform category of expressions, but rather an assemblage of clusters with greater or lesser 'idiomatic' meaning.

In the idioms presented here, which have been collected from different

³ Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij, 'Cognitive and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Phraseology', in *Phraseologie: Ein internationales Handbuch der zeitgenössischen Forschung = Praseology: An International Handbook of Contemporary Research*, ed. Harald Burger, Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij, Peter Kühn and Neal R. Norrick (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 2:791a.

⁴ Cf. Harald Bürger, Annelies Buhofer and Ambros Sialm, eds., *Handbuch der Phraseologie* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 1; Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij and Elisabeth Piirainen, *Figurative Language: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 31; and Kristel Proost, 'Paradigmatic Relations of Phrasemes', in Burger et al., eds., *Phraseologie*, 1:110a.

sources⁵ and which stem from different periods, the concept of weapon is used to build another concept on a higher cognitive level. The majority of weaponry idioms investigated here are based on images that are created by the lexical structure of the expression using known and essential qualities of a given weapon – whether it is the sharpness of the blade of a sword in ‘on the edge of a sword’ or the equal and regular shape of the feathers of arrows in ‘as similar as a feather of an arrow to a feather of an arrow’. Furthermore, the image is the basis for additional development of the meaning. Thus in the case of weaponry idioms given aspects, qualities and characteristics of the weapon or a part of it, which is a constituent of the expression, acquire new, more abstract and generalized meaning by moving from one frame or script to another ‘with the help of a restricted set of conceptual operations’.⁶ The new phrase expresses a whole spectrum of connotations that the equivalent single word or literal expression does not possess.

Such classes of idioms, in conformity with Dmitrij Dobrovol’skij and Elisabeth Piirainen’s theory, and using their terminology are ‘iconically motivated’. This type of motivation, according to them, is based on ‘similarity (in a wide sense)’ between the actual phraseological meaning and the literal reading of the expression creating the idiom.⁷ Idioms whose motivation is based on image form the largest group not only of weaponry idioms, but of idioms in general. It is important to emphasize as well that the meaning of iconically motivated idioms can be explained and understood ‘only if all parts of the image structure are taken into account’.⁸ This means that the semantic analysis should include not only analysis on the level of superordinate, general cognitive models but also on the level of concrete concepts and specific characteristics for every single idiom. Utilizing such analysis requires turning to different catego-

⁵ al-Maydānī, *Majma‘ al-‘amthāl*; al-‘Askarī, *Jamharat al-‘amthāl*; Ḥamza b. al-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī, *Sawā‘ir al-‘amthāl ‘alā ‘af‘al*; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Mustaṣṣā fī ‘amthāl al-‘arab*; ‘Abu al-Maḥāsīn al-‘Abdarī al-Shaybī, *Timthāl al-‘amthāl*; ‘Aḥmad Taymūr, *Kitāb al-kināyāt al-‘āmmiyya*; *al-Munjid*; Mahmoud E. Sieny, Mokhtar A. Hussein and Sayyed A. A. Al-Doush, *A Contextual Dictionary of Idioms*; Muḥammad M. Dāwūd, *Mu‘jam al-ta‘bīr al-iṣṭilāhī fī l-‘arabiyya al-mu‘āṣira*; Arabic-Russian, Arabic-English dictionaries; V. D. Ushakov, *Frazeologija Korana* (Phraseology of the Koran; summary in English), Moscow: ‘Vostochnaia Literatura’ RAN, 1996.

⁶ Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen, *Figurative Language*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

ries of knowledge. Only then can some broader conclusions be drawn.

Besides being iconically motivated, the weaponry idioms included in this study can be motivated by the use of the word denoting a weapon in its meaning as a symbol (as in ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’⁹). The motivation can also be a combination of both – based on the image created by the literal reading of the expression and on the symbolic meaning of a word. These types of motivation of the meaning of idioms, along with other elements of the semantic and syntactic structures, will be taken into consideration here in dealing with Arabic weaponry idioms denoting characteristics of persons and objects.

The idioms in the present study are separated into two semantic fields on the basis of their general meaning: (1) idioms expressing characteristics or qualities of persons and (2) idioms expressing characteristics of objects. Within these two groups they are arranged according to their syntactic structure.

IDIOMS EXPRESSING CHARACTERISTICS OR QUALITIES OF PERSONS

1. *Idioms with Genitive Construct (ʾiḍāfa) Structure*

- (1) *ṭawīlu l-nijādi* – tall, tall of stature (lit., with a long sword belt; connotations include: strong, brave, skillful at warfare)

The pagan poetess al-Khansā⁹, who later converted to Islam and is counted among the Companions of the Prophet, used this idiom together with the rhyming expression *raftu l-ʿimādi* – having a big and high tent (lit., with a high tent pole; connotations include: a leader, a prominent and respected person)¹⁰ in an elegy in which she mourns the death of her

⁹ The ancient idea, in this particular form, was put in the mouth of Cardinal Richelieu by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy*, act 2, scene 2 [New York: Harper, 1839], 52). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_pen_is_mightier_than_the_sword (accessed March 5, 2010). Cf. the opposite notion expressed in the opening and succeeding lines of ʾAbū Tammām’s celebrated ode on the conquest of Amorium by the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim in 223/838 at a date earlier than predicted possible by the Byzantine astrologers: *al-sayfu ʾaṣḍaqu ʾanbāʾan mina l-kutubī // fī ḥaddihī l-ḥaddu bayna l-jiddi wa-l-laʿibī* (The sword brings truer news than [the astrologers’] books; // in its edge is the boundary between gravity and play). Cf., e.g., ʾAbū Tammām, *Dīwān ʾAbī Tammām bi-sharḥ al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh ʿAzzām (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964–), 1:40.

¹⁰ Al-Mubarrad, commenting on the elegy, considers both expressions to

brother Ṣakhr. Together the two expressions praise Ṣakhr as a brave and prominent tribal leader. The two idioms are still quite often cited together,¹¹ and in this particular case it is obvious how used together they are still closely related to an early literary source. Thus it is possible to discuss their ‘intertextuality’¹² and the significance of cultural knowledge for understanding them. In *ṭawīlu l-nijādi* it is possible to see a blending of metonymy and metaphor – the long sword belt in the frame of ‘physical stature’ serves to replace height. Being tall in the popular understanding of warfare is often connected with strength, ability, skill, bravery and experience as a warrior. The meaning of the idiom is thus metaphorically explained by the association of physical stature, and more precisely height, with the concept of a brave, skillful warrior.

(2) *shāḳku l-silāhi*¹³ – bristling with arms, armed to the teeth (lit., fully armed; connotations include: threatening, irritated)

This idiom has a transparent and clearly motivated meaning. The literal reading of the idiom presents the image of a person fully equipped for combat or war. Combat is the source frame for the metaphorical expression of irritation, agitation, or menace. Bearing a full array of arms constitutes a warning or a demonstration of strength, perhaps in order to obtain something by force or in order to intimidate an enemy, thus avoiding actual combat.¹⁴

mean ‘tall’. *Al-Kāmil*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo; Maṭbaʿat Nahḍat Miṣr, n.d.), 3:49–50.

¹¹ Google (December 5, 2009) found 15800 cases of the first idiom and 15200 of the second; Yahoo (December 5, 2009) found 1310 cases of the first and 1150 of the second. The examples showed that they most often still tend to be used together. The numbers should be taken only as indications of relative popularity. It must be noted that when the number of occurrences reported of an idiom is quite large, particularly when it is in the thousands, neither Google nor Yahoo actually retrieve more than a fraction of the reported number. In the case of an idiom with somewhat over 4000 reported occurrences (*ʿaʿṭi l-qawsa bāriyahā*), Yahoo retrieved 1000 (March 13, 2010). Cf. n. 41 below. Moreover numbers may vary wildly from day to day. Google reported 385000 cases of *ʿadaqqu mina l-sayfi* on October 25, 2009, but found only 34 on March 14, 2010.

¹² Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, *Figurative Language*, 230–37.

¹³ Google (October 29, 2009) found 1890 cases; Yahoo (October 29, 2009) found 216 cases.

¹⁴ Cf. Saad Abdullah Sowayan, *Nabati Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 38–39.

- (3) *ja^cbatu ʾakhbārin/l-ʾakhbāri*¹⁵ – a local gossip, full of news (lit., quiver for news; connotations include: worth watching or listening to, interesting, offering a great variety of news)

This idiom can be used for objects or things as well as persons, as numerous examples describing AlJazeera.Net show.¹⁵ It is related to the idiom (*ʾakhrāja mā fī ja^cbatihī*), which was discussed in my previous article on weaponry idioms, and which is widely used in political discourse for describing the behavior of politicians. Both idioms are well suited to perform their communicative and pragmatic functions. A quiver can be perceived as a container of many fascinating and dangerous things.

- (4) *ṣulbu/ṣalibu l-qanāti*¹⁶ – tough, with a strong will (lit., with a sturdy lance; connotations include: strength of character, determination, ability to resist, endurance)

This idiom should be seen in connection with idioms (7) and (8) below, whose literal meanings depict the opposite image and conceptualize the opposite idea – a weak, twisted lance means frailty and inability to function or resist. Conversely, the sturdy lance is metaphorically reinterpreted and a new meaning is assigned. The actual phraseological meaning of the idiom expresses positive qualities concentrated in the semantic field of the will to withstand and to fight. In order to understand these meanings, common knowledge about warfare and the characteristics and uses of weapons, along with, in particular, the positive metonymic significance of the lance, has to be activated. Idioms such as *shadīdu l-ʿaṣā* (with a harsh stick) have correspondingly negative meanings.¹⁷ The meanings of *ṣulbu/ṣalibu l-qanāti* are also connected with the concept of ‘warrior’ with all its elements or ‘slots’,¹⁸ such as mastering

¹⁵ Google (October 27, 2009) found 11900/21 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 826/11 cases. Almost all uses of the idiom come from the name of a ‘script’ that allows access to all kinds of news broadcast by AlJazeera.Net.

¹⁶ Google (October 27, 2009) found 6200 cases; Yahoo (October 29, 2009) found 913 cases.

¹⁷ Cf. Mahmoud E. Sieny, Mokhtar A. Hussein and Sayyed A. A. Al-Doush, *A Contextual Dictionary of Idioms: Arabic-Arabic* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1996), 69.

¹⁸ ‘Slot’ is an element in a frame (knowledge structure or specific cognitive structure) or a scenario component. See Anatolij Baranov and Dmitriij Dobrovol’skij, ‘Cognitive Modeling of Actual Meaning in the Field of Phraseology’, *Journal of Pragmatics* 25 (1996): 411–14.

different weapons, maintaining them in good condition and the ability and determination to use them.

2. Genitive Construct Preceded by a Preposition

- (5) *‘alā sinni l-rumḥi*¹⁹ – very famous, having a good reputation (lit., on the tip of a lance; connotations include: brave, wise, well known and exposed)

Recent Internet sources show that this idiom is quite often used to describe objects and that the expression’s literal meaning is exploited heavily, although it is used in a metaphorical context. The non-traditional meanings are more likely to include ‘to show/display’, ‘to approach/be near’, ‘to proclaim loud and clear’. Both the traditional dictionary meaning and the modern meanings seem in great part, to be related to the way objects such as prey, booty and severed heads have often been displayed on the tip of a lance. Consider some examples:

*wa-yu^clinu [ḥannā] mīna fī ‘aḥadi ḥiwārātihi ‘anā kātibun wāqi^ciyyun rūmāntikī’ qabla ‘an yuḏīfa ‘anā wāqi^ciyyun ‘alā sinni l-rumḥi wa-fī wāqi^ciyyatī tajidu l-ramza wa-l-^uuṣṭūra.*²⁰ (In one of his dialogues [Ḥannā] Mīna says: ‘I am a romantic, realistic writer,’ before adding, ‘I am realistic to the extreme/a well known realist, but in my realism you will find symbolism and myth.’)

*ḥīna ḥānati l-sā^catu kāna l-mawtu ‘alā sinni l-rumḥi wa-lam yakun hunāka khiyār.*²¹ (When the time came, death was on the tip of the lance [near/obvious] and there was no other choice.)

*‘anā wasaḥī, ‘u^clinuhā ‘alā sinni l-rumḥ, wa-lā yuḏirrunī qtirābī min 8 wa-14 ‘ādhāra li-^uannanī wasaḥī.*²² (I am in the center [politically], I proclaim it loud and clear, and my close position to [what happened on] the 8th and 14th of March does not hurt me, because I am a centrist.)

- (6) *‘alā ḥaddi l-sayfi*²³ – in a difficult and dangerous situation (lit., on the edge of a sword; connotations include: risky, perilous)

This idiom occupies a ‘middle position’ between describing figuratively

¹⁹ Google (October 18, 2009) found 8190 cases; Yahoo (October 18, 2009) found 115 cases.

²⁰ <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/85349> (accessed October 30, 2009).

²¹ <http://www.minfo.gov.ps/Docs/safir3.asp> (accessed October 30, 2009).

²² <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/135646> (accessed January 10, 2010).

²³ Google (October 28, 2009) found 65200 cases; Yahoo (October 28, 2009) found 2240 cases.

the state of a person who is in a difficult, dangerous, even potentially deadly situation, and the situation itself. Moreover, examples like *al-raḡṣu ʿalā ḥaddi l-sayfi*²⁴ (dancing on the edge of a sword) and *al-taʿāmulu maʿa ṣaddām ka-l-mashyi ʿalā ḥaddi l-sayf*²⁵ (Dealing with Ṣaddām is [dangerous], like walking on the edge of a sword) also describe behavior. The idiom is extensively used, not least in photo and caricature captions,²⁶ since it offers a wide range of possible interpretations that are interconnected and allude directly to the literal meaning of the expression and the image it presents. Different, well known features of the sword are used in the process of metaphorisation of the expression as a whole. As Veronika Teliia expresses it, the meanings of idioms are diffuse,²⁷ and different aspects are realized in different contexts. The sword is thin, fine, sharp, dangerous and deadly: thus anything related to it can be risky, perilous or harmful. The mental image produced by a literal reading of the expression shows the absurdity of the situation and the extremely hazardous exposure of one trying to stand on the edge of a sword. Thus the source scenario or frame, when it is being used to conceptualize the target frame offers several directions of activating ‘relevant conceptual material’.²⁸ This is confirmed in practice by the use of the idiom in similar but different discourses.

3. *Neither–Nor Expressions*

(7) *lā li-l-sayfi wa-lā li-l-dayfi*²⁹ – good for nothing, not suited for

²⁴ <http://www.elaph.com/AsdaElaph/2004/10/15677.htm?sectionarchive=AsdaElaph> (accessed October 13, 2009).

²⁵ <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2005/07/10/14778.html> (accessed October 13, 2009).

²⁶ <http://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=119238> (accessed October 28, 2009); <http://www.marebpress.net/gallery.php?do=pic&pid=84> (accessed October 28, 2009).

²⁷ Veronika N. Teliia, *Russkaia frazeologija: semanticheskii, pragmaticeskii i lingvokul'turologicheskii aspekty* (Moscow: Iazyki Russkoi Kul'tury, 1996), 86. This idea can be compared with the principle that A. Langlotz calls ‘literal-scene manipulation’ (see below, p. 131).

²⁸ Dobrovol'skij, ‘Cognitive and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Phraseology’, 792b.

²⁹ Google (October 18, 2009) found 568 cases; Yahoo (October 18, 2009) found 68 cases. This idiom is often used together with one or two similar expressions that intensify and stress its meaning. For example: *wa-lā li-ʿatharātin min ʿatharāti l-zamāni* (nor for any of the mistakes of life) and/or *wa-lā li-ghadarāti l-zamāni* (nor for the caprices of fate). Cf., e.g., <http://>

one's job or duties (lit., neither for the sword nor for the guest; connotations include: weak, stupid, comical, not capable of doing anything right)

I consider the motivation of this idiom to be both symbolical, based on the symbolic function of its components, and iconical, that is, based on the image it projects. The use of the sword as a symbol³⁰ is common in both European and Middle Eastern cultures. A sword in the hand of a warrior is a symbol for highly valued personal qualities – bravery and courage, fearlessness and skill in warfare. The sword, indeed, provides a diverse range of connotations in a variety of contexts. Not only did skilled warriors have a special position in medieval society, the art of making a good sword was also highly respected. The second component in (7), the guest, as a single concept and related to the more general concepts of hospitality and generosity, which are among the most highly esteemed values of Arab society from pre-Islamic times to the present,³¹ has traditionally played a significant role in the ethical system of an Arab culture that developed in the harsh environment of the desert. Thus the literal meaning of the expression ‘neither for the sword nor for the guest’ triggers a whole spectrum of related images and interpretations based on cultural knowledge, experience and conventions. When the two concepts of the *sword* and the *guest*, each loaded with its symbolic and pictorial, iconic meanings, are set over against each other in a negative expression, a wide area for interpretation, supposition and conjecture is created. Considerable room for personal evaluation and judgment remains. Taken together, these things contribute to the rich expressiveness of the idiom, as well as to its pragmatic and communicative functions in different discourses.

Idiom (7) and those following in this section belong to a group of idioms that share the syntactic structure of two or more parallel negations. This cluster constitutes a readily identifiable phraseological

alghad.com/index.php?article=8717 (accessed February 21, 2010); http://syria-court.com/newstoprint.php?sy_seq=5445 (accessed February 22, 2010).

³⁰ See http://www.templ.net/english/texts-sword_symbol_of_power.php (accessed January 10, 2010); http://www.scootermydaisyheads.com/fine_art/symbol_dictionary/sword.html#Vollman (accessed January 10, 2010).

³¹ The pre-Islamic knight Ḥātim al-Ṭāʿī, who lived in the later half of the sixth century A.D., was considered the paradigm of this virtue, a fact reflected in idioms such as *ʾajwadu min Ḥātimin* and *ʾakramu min Ḥātimin* (both meaning ‘more generous than Ḥātim’). On him see C. van Arendonk, *ET*², 3:274b–275a, s.v. ‘Ḥātim al-Ṭāʿī’.

model.³² The syntactic pattern works together in a special and complex way with the inner form of the idiom and its actual meaning. The negative particle *lā* (or the verb *laysa*) is used before a prepositional phrase or a nominal or verbal sentence. The phrases after the negation usually express opposite or mutually exclusive notions, and thus through the disparity conveyed by *neither–nor* emerges the actual meaning of the idiom. It is in most cases predictable in its general semantic frame, but the exact meaning or its function in context has to be verified through contextual examples. Dictionaries of *ʿamthāl* (‘proverbs’, including idioms) of different Arabic dialects, as well as Internet sources, show that this phraseological model with all its potential is still productive, not only in Modern Standard Arabic but also in dialects.³³ Examples from Classical Arabic persist in MSA as well:

*lā fī l-ʿīri wa-lā fī l-nafīri*³⁴ – not good at one’s profession, good for nothing, does not know what to do (lit., neither among the camels, nor among the people)

lā yusminu wa-lā yughnī min jūʿin – useless, of little value (lit., something that does not feed and does not free from hunger, or as rendered by Pickthall in his translation of the Koran, ‘Which doth not nourish nor release from hunger.’³⁵)

Regarding the use of this structure in Arabic dialects, Anis Freyha, for example, gives twelve pure examples of the structure from Lebanese.³⁶

³² Valerii M. Mokienko, *Slavianskaia frazeologija* (Moscow: Vysshiaia Shkola, 1980), 40–75. Charles Fillmore, Paul Kay and Mary O’Connor advocate the notion of ‘lexically open idioms’, which is close to the idea of phraseological model, since a given syntactic pattern accommodates particular semantic and pragmatic properties. ‘Regularity and Idiomaticity in Grammatical Constructions: The Case of *Let Alone*’, *Language* 64 (1988): 505.

³³ Anīs Furayḥa, *A Dictionary of Modern Lebanese Proverbs: Arabic-English* (Beirut: Librairie de Liban, 1995), 552–68. See also <http://www.fosta.net/amthalshabia/allam.htm> (accessed October 28, 2009).

³⁴ Google (October 20, 2009) found 806 cases; Yahoo (October 20, 2009) found 1950 cases.

³⁵ 88:7. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān*, trans. Muhammad M. Pickthall (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Masri, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, n.d.), 804. Google (October 28, 2009) found 214000 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 17600 cases.

³⁶ Furayḥa, *A Dictionary of Modern Lebanese Proverbs*, 552–55. There are

The following two examples are from Egyptian.³⁷

lā ṭabla wa-lā ṭār – neither fish nor fowl (lit., neither a drum nor a tambourine)

lā rāḥ wa-lā geh – of no significance (lit., [he] neither left nor came)

4. Idioms with Sentence Structure

(8) *lānat qanātuḥu*³⁸ – to grow weaker, to become frail, weak (lit., his lance weakened, softened; connotations include: no longer able to fight, with a broken will)

(9) *i^cwajjat qanātuḥu*³⁹ – to grow old (lit., his lance became twisted, crooked, bent)

These two idioms present almost the same image with a subtle difference in the literal meaning resulting from the use of two different verbs. It is possible to assume, however, that they remain in the same cognitive frame, though it is hard to prove this, since idiom (9) remained a dictionary item and is not used in modern discourse. Idiom (8), on the other hand, is used in MSA and allows us to define through the contexts we find it in its precise meaning and connotations. Both idioms are expressive and pictorial because their actual meanings emerge in the shift from the domain of weapons, and more specifically the *lance*, to the target domain, the evocative characterization of a person who is weak, old and unable to resist or fight any more. Consider this example:

wa-ft̄ kulli marratin yazunnūna ʾanna l-sha^cba al-filasṭīniyya lānat qanātuḥ, kāna yahubbu min jadīd. (And every time they think that the Palestinian people have become weaker, they rise again.)⁴⁰

numerous other examples of the structure used as part of a longer idiom (cf. *ibid.*, 627, no. 3514; Nizār ʾAbāza, *al-ʾAmthāl al-shāmiyya* [Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2008], 214–15).

³⁷ Mohammad El-Batal, *A Dictionary of Idioms: Egyptian Arabic–English* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban; Cairo: Egyptian International Publishing Company, Longman, 2000), 94.

³⁸ Google (October 27, 2009) found 2030 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 186 cases.

³⁹ Google (October 27, 2009) found 4 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 6 cases.

⁴⁰ <http://www.elaph.com/AsdaElaph/2004/11/21978.htm?sectionarchive=AsdaElaph> (accessed October 15, 2009).

In order to be useful and efficient as a weapon for defense and attack the lance has to be straight and sturdy. When it becomes weak or bent it is useless. Only idiom (8), referring to wear over time, is in common use. It is indeed also often used with a negative particle (e.g., *mā lānat qanātuhu*),⁴¹ thus acquiring the opposite meaning and strongly positive connotations.

(10) *ʿaʿti l-qawsa bāriyahā*⁴² – rely on those who know their profession, always ask an expert (lit., give the bow to its shaper [trimmer]; connotations include: to do the right thing, to be wise and clever, and to trust professionals)

(11) *ʿakhadha l-qawsa bārīhā*⁴³ – the right, deserving, competent person has taken charge (lit., the bow's shaper has taken it; connotations include: a good final solution has been achieved, things have settled down, the matter is in the right hands)

Idioms (10) and (11) are similar in that they both exploit the image of the bow in the hands of a skilled professional. They do not belong entirely to the semantic field of characteristics and features of persons, however, but are on the border between this and the semantic field of behavior. Both are mentioned in all major medieval collections of *ʿamthāl* and are currently used widely in a number of discourses varying from football to politics, though (11) is much less common. It is interesting that idiom (10) in particular survived and gained wide acceptance, despite the 'old' frame or setting of the literal meaning of the phrase. It can be taken as a good example of how successful the cognitive process of metaphORIZATION has been, the end result being a vivid and expressive idiom appropriate to a wide range of circumstances in modern discourse. The target domain is making sure that one entrusts important matters to someone who knows how to handle them, finding the right man. The source domain is weapons and their production or repair.

⁴¹ See, for instance, the interesting use of (8) in the official announcement of the death of the Syrian president Hafez al-Asad. <http://www.addustour.com/ViewArchiveTopic.aspx?ac=\ArabicAndInter\2000\06\arab102.html> (accessed October 28, 2009). Also in different contexts – Palestinian resistance and religious discourse: see n. 40, and <http://www.zanbaq.com/forums/index.php?topic=1090.0>.

⁴² Google (October 27, 2009) found 136000 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 3510 cases.

⁴³ Google (October 31, 2009) found 2770 cases; Yahoo (31 October 31, 2009) found 61 cases.

This process of the adaptation of an idiom to the concrete context in which it is used is quite similar to what Andreas Langlotz calls ‘literal-scene manipulation’, something he defines as an operation that ‘triggers a contextually motivated adaptation of the idiomatic meaning by adapting the literal scene for the purpose of coding the target conceptualization efficiently.’⁴⁴ Consider some examples:

*fi l-intikhābāt . . . ʾaʿti l-qawsa bāriyahā.*⁴⁵ (During the elections . . . choose the right person/s.)

yaqūlūna fi l-mathal ʾaʿti l-qawsa bāriyahā wa-ʾanā ʾaqūlu ʿindama targhabu fi l-istifādati min mawāḍiʿa qtiṣādiyya wa-maqālātin wa-buḥūthin wa-taḥālīla qtiṣādiyya, ʿalayka bi-qirāʾati l-riyādi l-iqtiṣādiyya. (They say in the proverb, ‘Give the bow to its shaper,’ and I say, ‘When you wish to benefit from economic topics and economic articles, studies and analyses, you must read *al-Riyād al-iqtiṣādiyya* [economic section of the daily newspaper *al-Riyād*].’)⁴⁶

Similar uses, mainly in titles, appear in articles on such subjects as sports, journalism, finances and health.

The following two idioms describe behavior that indicates certain characteristics and features of the subject/s.

- (12) *jaʿala l-zujja quddāma l-sināni*⁴⁷ – to do things backwards (lit., he put the [pointed iron] butt of the spear before the head; connotations include: to conduct oneself in an unintelligent way, not to be able to apprehend the real situation)
- (13) *ramaw ʿan qawsin wāḥidatin*⁴⁸ – they were united, in agreement (lit., they shot from one bow; connotations include: managing to do a difficult job together, demonstrating cooperativeness)

Neither (12) or (13) is used in Modern Standard Arabic, as Internet

⁴⁴ Andreas Langlotz, *Idiomatic Creativity: A Cognitive Linguistic Model of Idiom-Representation and Idiom-Variation in English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), 207.

⁴⁵ <http://www.14october.com/news.aspx?newsid=bc35233f-60d4-4e53-b669-48b75bea183d> (accessed October 28, 2009).

⁴⁶ <http://www.alriyadh.com/2010/01/09/article488096.html> (accessed February 2, 2010).

⁴⁷ Google (September 15, 2009) found 3 cases; Yahoo (October 15, 2009) found 2 cases.

⁴⁸ Google (October 27, 2009) found 6 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 1 case.

searches show, despite the fact that they are included in all major medieval collections of *ʿamthāl* and despite the similarity of (12), for example, to a very useful European idiom, in its English form ‘to put the cart before the horse’.

- (14) *jāʿa ka-ʿanna ʿaynayhi fī rumḥayni*⁴⁹ – very frightened or very angry (lit., he came as if his eyes were on two spears; connotations include: unpredictable, ready to fight)

This idiom is listed in al-Maydānī’s collection of proverbs, but no examples in context are to be found, so it is not easy to guess possible connotations or interpretations. Al-Maydānī explains this expression as being based on the metaphor ‘the flashing of one’s eyes, as a spearhead flashes’. The image built by the literal reading of the expression is quite vivid, and the comparative structure contributes to the transparency of the idiom’s meaning. Nevertheless it remained a dictionary item.

- (15) *ʿindahū l-sirru bi-l-miqlāʿi*⁵⁰ – who cannot keep a secret (lit., a secret with him is as if it were in a sling; connotations include: not to be confided in, unreliable, untrustworthy)

- (16) *huwa ʿawthaqu saḥmin fī kinānati*⁵¹ – he is my best helper, assistant (lit., he is the most dependable arrow in my quiver; connotations include: reliable, trustworthy, good friend)

Idioms (15) and (16) remain only dictionary items today. The images created by the literal meanings of the constituents are interesting and comprehensible. The metaphors are vivid and could offer a variety of interpretations and connotations if used in different contexts. But most likely because of the use of a rare word or an image picturing a little known situation, idioms (12) to (16), unlike many others, have not been reinvented in Modern Standard Arabic.

The next two expressions employ the comparative pattern *ʿafʿalu min*. In the first case the comparative is followed by a genitive construct and in the second by a noun + prepositional phrase. Collocations based on the *ʿafʿalu min* pattern and their semantic structure will be discussed in

⁴⁹ Google (February 22, 2010) found 6 cases; Yahoo (February 22, 2010) found 4 cases.

⁵⁰ Google (October 29, 2009) found 6 cases; Yahoo (October 29, 2009) found 1 case.

⁵¹ Google (November 1, 2009) found 6 cases; Yahoo (November 1, 2009) found 7 cases.

detail under the field of characteristics and features of objects, the subject of the following section.

(17) *ʾaṭwalu min zilli l-rumḥi*⁵² – tall and thin (lit., taller than the shadow of a lance)

(18) *ʾaḍyaʿu min ghimdin bi-ghayri naṣlin*⁵³ – wretched, miserable (lit. more wretched, more miserable than a sheath without a sword)

Both idioms, for reasons unclear, remain only dictionary items.

IDIOMS EXPRESSING CHARACTERISTICS OF OBJECTS

1. Comparative Idioms with the Pattern *ʾafʿalu min*

In this semantic field a significant number of the weaponry idioms under study exploit the comparative pattern *ʾafʿalu min*. They can be defined as fixed, conventionalized or lexicalized similes that have gradually moved into the realm of phrasemes.⁵⁴ But it should be noted that not all of them properly belong to the core category of idioms. Rather they fall into a continuum of idiomatic, less-idiomatic and almost non-idiomatic similes. Such expressions approach 1700 in number⁵⁵ in medieval collections of *ʾamthāl* that include *ʾafʿalu min* expressions. In addition, there are a number of dictionaries, meticulously put together by medieval compilers, comprising only similes of this type.⁵⁶ Among the great number of *ʾafʿalu min* similes that have as a constituent at least one word for

⁵² Google (October 27, 2009) found 10 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 22 cases.

⁵³ Google (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases.

⁵⁴ This question deserves a separate study like the ones done for French (Armand G. Nazarian, *Obraznye sravneniia frantsuzskogo iazyka: Frazzeologizmy* [Moscow: Nauka, 1965]) and Russian (Vasilii Ogorʹtsev, *Ustoichivye sravneniia v sisteme russkoi frazeologii* [Leningrad: Izd-vo LGU, 1978]).

⁵⁵ ʾAmanī Sulaymān Dāwūd, *al-ʾAmthāl al-ʿarabiyya al-qadīma: Dirāsa ʾuslūbiyya, sardiyya, ḥaḍāriyya* (Beirut: Al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2009), 179.

⁵⁶ Rudolf Sellheim, *EF*², 6:821a–24b, s.v. ‘Mathal’. Qaṭāmish, *al-ʾAmthāl al-ʿarabiyya*, 39–122. Examples are ʾAbu ʿAli al-Qālī, *ʾAfʿalu min kadhā*, ed. ʿAlī Ibrāhīm Kurdī (Damascus: Dār Saʿd al-Dīn, 2000), and Ḥamza b. al-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī, *Sawāʾir al-ʾamthāl ʿalā ʾafʿal*, ed. Fahmī Saʿd (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1988). The text of al-Iṣfahānī’s *Sawāʾir* is in fact the same as that of his *al-Dhurra al-fākhira fī l-ʾamthāl*, ed. Quṣayy al-Ḥusayn (Beirut: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 2003).

a weapon or object related to a weapon, I have found 17 that most likely characterize objects, in addition to the two mentioned above, (17) and (18), which characterize persons. Similes mentioning instruments that can be used as a weapon but are not primarily intended as such (stick, shears) have been excluded.

The weaponry vocabulary of these expressions is limited to well known medieval weapons or their parts or related objects – sword, blade, spearhead, bow and arrow. Like the other types of idioms with a constituent weaponry word, these similes exploit essential, familiar functions or characteristics of weapons – penetrating, piercing, fine, thin, sharp, sturdy, long. The meaning of the expressions is direct and tangible. In most cases it is easy to understand what kind of attribute is meant and why it can be ascribed to a potential subject (object or person) (comparandum,⁵⁷ *mushabbah*), which is not expressed when they are listed in collections.

- (1) *ʿamḍā mina l-sayfi/min sayfin*⁵⁸ – razor-sharp, keen-edged (lit., sharper than a sword)
- (2) *ʿamḍā min sinānin*⁵⁹ – sharp as a needle, sharp-pointed, piercing (lit., sharper, more rapidly piercing than a spearhead)
- (3) *ʿamḍā min naṣlin*⁶⁰ – sharp as a needle, sharp-pointed, piercing

⁵⁷ Given some variation in the use of I. A. Richards' terms for the main parts of a simile (topic, tenor, ground and vehicle), I make use of the Latin terms comparandum, comparatum, and tertium comparationis. These are unambiguous and match precisely the Arabic terms *mushabbah*, *mushabbah bihi* and *wajh al-shabah*. An overview of comparatives in general is given by Leiv Egil Breivik, 'On Comparatives in English and Other Languages', in Toril Swan, Endre Mørck and Olav Jansen Westvik, eds., *Language Change and Language Structure: Older Germanic Languages in a Comparative Perspective* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 51–73.

⁵⁸ Google (October 25, 2009) found 153000/87400 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 2390/220 cases. Of the variant without the definite article there were many repetitions and instances where *sayf* is the first member of a construct.

⁵⁹ Google (October 25, 2009) found 4310 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 169 cases. The use of this expression is very similar to the previous one.

⁶⁰ Google (October 25, 2009) found 770 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 13 cases. Many of the cases have a definite noun after *naṣl*.

(lit., sharper than the tip of a knife or sword, sharper than a sword)

- (4) *ʔamḏā mina l-sahmi/min saḥmin*⁶¹ – sharp-pointed, piercing (lit., sharper, more rapidly piercing than an arrow)
- (5) *ʔaṣradu mina l-sahmi*⁶² – sharp-pointed, piercing (lit., more deeply piercing than an arrow)
- (6) *ʔamkhaṭu min saḥmin*⁶³ – sharp-pointed, piercing (lit., more deeply piercing than an arrow)
- (7) *ʔamraqu min saḥmin*⁶⁴ – sharp-pointed, piercing (lit., more rapidly piercing than an arrow)
- (8) *ʔadaqqu min ḥaddi l-sayfi*⁶⁵ – extremely fine, finer, thin (lit., finer, sharper than the edge of a sword)
- (9) *ʔadaqqu mina l-sayfi*⁶⁶ – extremely fine, finer, thin (lit., finer, sharper than a sword)
- (10) *ʔadaqqu min ḥaddi l-shafrati*⁶⁷ – extremely fine, finer, thin (lit., finer, sharper than the edge of a blade/knife)
- (11) *ʔaqaddu mina l-shafrati/min shafratin*⁶⁸ – extremely sharp (lit., more cutting than a blade/knife)
- (12) *ʔaraqqu min ḥaddi l-sayfi*⁶⁹ – exceptionally fine, thin (lit., thin-

⁶¹ Google (October 25, 2009) found 3740/1050 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 39/6 cases.

⁶² Google (October 25, 2009) found 92 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 13 cases.

⁶³ Google (October 25, 2009) found 3 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 6 cases.

⁶⁴ Google (October 25, 2009) found 7 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 10 cases.

⁶⁵ Google (October 25, 2009) found 563 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 52 cases.

⁶⁶ Google (October 25, 2009) found 385000 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 249 cases.

⁶⁷ Google (October 25, 2009) found 7 cases; Yahoo (October 25, 2009) found 4 cases.

⁶⁸ Google (March 13, 2010) found 0/3 cases, all links to the same dictionary; Yahoo (March 13, 2010) found 0/3 cases, all dictionary items, including 2 links to the same source.

⁶⁹ Google (October 31, 2009) found 9 cases; Yahoo (October 31, 2009)

ner, finer than the edge of a sword)

- (13) *ʿasraʿu mina l-sahmi/min saħmin*⁷⁰ – faster than an arrow/a bullet, (lit., faster than an arrow)
- (14) *ʿadyaqu min zujġin*⁷¹ – very narrow/slim (lit., slimmer than an arrowhead/spearhead)
- (15) *ʿadyaqu min ẓilli l-rumħi*⁷² – very narrow/slim (lit., slimmer than the shadow of a lance)
- (16) *ʿakħaffu mina l-jummāħi*⁷³ – exceptionally light (lit., lighter than an arrow without a head [used by boys to play or to train])
- (17) *ʿashaddu quwaysin saħman*⁷⁴ – the best choice (lit., the best bow [for shooting] arrows)

Here, despite the limited number of weaponry similes, it is possible to notice an interesting characteristic of these expressions. They are predominantly grouped in clusters⁷⁵ of variants or elaborations on one and the same concept, which is communicated by the meaning of the adjective in the comparative form. In the case of the similes in such clusters the comparative adjectives are essentially synonymous and the words denoting weapons are few, representing the ones most used. Most likely this grouping in clusters results from the fact that the medieval compilers were gathering all established similes in circulation, whether in spoken usage, oral poetry or written texts. Their purpose was to preserve the treasure of curious, witty and eloquent expressions that re-

found 14 cases.

⁷⁰ Google (October 31, 2009) found 7210/5490 cases; Yahoo (October 31, 2009) found 238/193 cases.

⁷¹ Google (October 27, 2009) found 10 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 11 cases.

⁷² Google (October 27, 2009) found 8 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 15 cases.

⁷³ Google (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases.

⁷⁴ Google (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases; Yahoo (October 27, 2009) found 0 cases.

⁷⁵ ʿAmānī Dawūd (*ʿAmthāl*, 189) gives a count of the largest clusters, for example, similes with *ʿasraʿu min* (faster than) come to 47 items, those with *ʿaħmaqu min* (stupider than) come to 44 items and those with *ʿaħwanu min* (more insignificant than) come to 31. My personal counts are very similar.

flected directly and truthfully long experience with harsh desert life and tribal wars.

For some similes is difficult to know how and in what context they have been used. The dictionaries do not always give examples of usage, and sometimes only a piece of poetry is cited to exemplify their figurative use. But the very fact that these similes are included in almost all medieval *ʿamthāl* dictionaries suggests that many have obviously been employed in different types of discourse. An impressive number are used today, as Internet searches demonstrate, for a wide variety of pragmatic purposes. Some examples are:

al-sayfu ʿamḍā? ʿami l-sukhriyya? (Which is sharper, the sword or ridicule?) – title of an article that begins thus: *yadūru l-qawlu ʿahyānan ʿinna l-kalimata ʿamḍā mina l-sayf* (It is sometimes said that the word is sharper than a sword), and concludes thus: *ʿanna l-sukhriyya, fī l-qawli ʿawi l-kitābati, hiya fiʿlan il-ʿashaddu dhakāʿan wa-l-ʿamḍā mina l-sayf*⁷⁶ (Ridicule in oral communication or in writing is in fact wittier and sharper than a sword).

*wāqifun ʿalā širāṭin ʿadaqqa mina l-sayf*⁷⁷ (standing on a path finer than [the blade of] a sword)

*fa-kam min jurḥin wa-ʿalamin wa-kalimatin yakūnu waqʿuhā ʿashadda min waqʿi l-sayfi wa-khtirāquhā li-l-qalbi ʿasraʿa mina l-sahm*⁷⁸ (How many wounds, pains, and words strike harder than a sword and penetrate the heart faster than an arrow).

Some expressions in use on the pattern *ʿafʿalu min* have been ‘rediscovered’, while others are recent coinages. New cases appear in modern collections of colloquial *ʿamthāl*. Many also emerge in lists of *ʿamthāl* and sayings that appear on the Internet, and numerous examples in the present study come from such lists. They gain wide popularity through various Internet channels, for example, chatting rooms (*muntadayāt*).⁷⁹ A number of the above seventeen similes are popular

⁷⁶ <http://www.jamaliya.com/new/show.php?sub=4114> (accessed October 31, 2009).

⁷⁷ <http://www.fiqhforum.com/articles.aspx?cid=2&acid=338&aid=5442> (accessed October 31, 2009).

⁷⁸ <http://www.umluj.com/vb/showthread.php?t=12470> (accessed November 1, 2009).

⁷⁹ For example, several sites and chatting rooms used as a greeting for the beginning of Ramadan 1430 A.H. a ‘poem’ in which several ‘old’ and ‘new’ similes are put together. Cf. <http://alnumair.net/vb/showthread.php?t=111>; <http://www.3kalam.com/vb/members/11661-3.html>; <http://www.hdrmut.net/vb/>

and often used, most likely because of their easily recognized form and their expressiveness. The images, moreover, are easy to understand and easily applicable to different target domains.

The noun or the phrase which (in transcription) is on the right side, that is, the comparatum, is considered by the language community as the exemplification of or standard for certain features, qualities or characteristics. But in these similes the tertium comparationis is almost consistently an adjective in the comparative form, as in, ‘sharper than a razor’ rather than ‘(as) sharp as a razor’, and the standard is in fact surpassed, which lends great vividness to the idiom and generates a significant emotional effect.⁸⁰ The intention is not only to make a comparison or give an evaluation, but also to intensify or exaggerate the feature ascribed to the comparandum.⁸¹ Moreover, the weapon component adds strength and intensity, because words like *sword* and *arrow* have strong symbolic meaning attached to them.

Authors of collections of *ʿamthāl* were aware of the particular characteristics of these similes and grouped them in separate lists and occa-

t277914.html (all accessed October 31, 2009; only the first and last still available May 1, 2010). The poem, which occurs in a number of versions, reads on these two sites as follows:

تهنئه أزكى من العود الكمبودي (Greetings more fragrant than Cambodian oud)
 وأحر من شطة قودي (Hotter than Goody chili sauce)
 أدق من السيف (Finer than [the edge of] a sword)
 وأحلى من الكيف (Sweeter than being high/in high spirits)
 وأمتع من المطر (More delightful than rain)
 وأسمن من أمير قطر (Fatter than the Emir of Qatar)
 تهنئه أنعم من الحرير (Greetings softer than silk)
 وأوسع من مكتبة جرير (More spacious than Jarir Bookstore)

(‘Cambodian oud’ – agarwood, source of an expensive scent; ‘Goody’ – brand name of sauces and other food products; ‘Jarir Bookstore’ – large chain of superstores operating in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.)

⁸⁰ Cf. Anna Wierzbicka’s arguments concerning the extreme intensity of lexicalized similes that express the tertium comparationis with an adjective, and particularly those containing an adjective in the comparative form (‘Srvanenie – gradastia – metafora’, in Nina D. Arutiunova, ed., *Teoriia metafory* [Moscow: ‘Progress’, 1990], 139).

⁸¹ *ʿAmānī Dāwūd* expresses this particular effect of *ʿafʿalu min* similes, remarking that ‘they are made not only to compare, but to shock the receiver, to surprise him in order to awake in his soul contemplation, admiration and amazement’ (*ʿAmthāl*, 183).

sionally devoted separate works to them.⁸² For example, the author of one of the largest and best known collections of *ʿamthāl*, ʿAbū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī, calls them *ʿamthāl maḍrūba fī l-tanāhī wa-l-mubālagha* (proverbs/similes coined to attain an extreme degree of exaggeration), and it is with this heading that he introduces his lists of *ʿafʿalu min* expressions for each letter. This intensification or exaggeration, it should be noted, is inherent in such Arabic similes, since they cannot be re-expressed idiomatically on the lower level of intensity ‘(as) sharp as a razor’.

2. Idioms with Adjectival Phrase Structure

- (1) *silāḥun ʿabyaḍu*⁸³/*ʿasliḥatun bayḍāʿu*⁸⁴ – cold weapon/s, cold steel (lit., white weapon/s)

This is a common expression that should not be considered a true idiom anymore, since it is the established term for weapons that do not ‘involve fire or explosions’.⁸⁵ It may be assumed that the adjective ‘white’ is used to suggest not the color but the shiny, well polished metal surface of the weapons.⁸⁶

- (2) *sihāmun ṭāʿishatun*⁸⁷ – false claims, lies, falsities, slander (lit., stray arrows; connotations include: bad intentions, irritating and false assertions, ungrounded accusations)

This idiom is connected with an idiom in the semantic field of behavior discussed in my previous article, *ṭāsha sahmuhu*⁸⁸ – to be on the wrong track, bark up the wrong tree, be unsuccessful, fail (lit., his arrow missed the mark). The active participle of the verb *ṭāsha* (to miss the mark, to stray) is used as an attribute of *sihām* to express metaphorically false, ungrounded claims meant to hurt or damage. The image created by the

⁸² See n. 56 above.

⁸³ Google (October 30, 2009) found 59800 cases; Yahoo (October 30, 2009) found 14000 cases.

⁸⁴ Google (October 30, 2009) found 43000 cases; Yahoo (October 30, 2009) found 11700 cases.

⁸⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_weapon (accessed February 20, 2010).

⁸⁶ Cf. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrossowitz, 1979), s.v. ‘ʿabyaḍ’.

⁸⁷ Google (October 30, 2009) found 3040 cases; Yahoo (October 30, 2009) found 681 cases.

⁸⁸ ‘The Notion *Weapon* in Arabic Idioms’, 135, 137. Google (December 18, 2008) found 303 cases of *ṭāsha sahmuhu* and 164 of the variant *ṭāshat sihāmuḥu*.

literal meanings of the words, arrows being meant to disable or kill, is quite graphic.

- (3) *silāḥun dhū ḥaddayni*⁸⁹ – a two-edged sword (lit., a weapon with two edges; connotations include: the necessity of bearing in mind both the positive and negative sides of means or measures, the dangers of a specific means)

Idiom (3) appears only in modern collections,⁹⁰ not in the old ones. It is widely used because its actual meaning conceptualizes, not only the risky nature of a weapon with two sharp edges, but also the hazardous aspect of many means and measures that can easily prove more harmful than useful. This makes the idiom with its connotations or extensions useful in numerous different discourses. The idiom seems most likely to be of biblical origin, although the primary biblical meaning does not appear to be that of a weapon that might turn back against its wielder.⁹¹ While the concept of a two-edged weapon, of a treacherous issue, must have existed in Arabic, I suspect this idiom is a translation from English or French (both languages have versions in which the biblical ‘sword’ is replaced by ‘weapon’: ‘a two edged weapon’, ‘une arme à deux tranchants’). However it may not be possible totally to exclude an Arabic biblical origin.

- (4) *ḥadhwa l-qudhhati bi-l-qudhhati*⁹² – identical, deceptively alike (lit., as similar as a feather of an arrow to a feather of an arrow; connotations include: difficult to tell apart, undistinguishable, following/imitating someone)

In order to understand the meaning of idiom (4), background knowledge about arrows needs to be activated, namely, that for arrows to be effec-

⁸⁹ Google (October 31, 2009) found 260000 cases; Yahoo (October 31, 2009) found 114000 cases.

⁹⁰ Cf., e.g., Muḥammad Dāwūd, *Muʿjam al-taʿbīr al-iṣṭilāḥī* (al-Qāhira: Dār Gharīb li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2003), 310; Sieny et. al., *A Contextual Dictionary of Idioms*, 66.

⁹¹ See ‘A Two-Edged Sword’, http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/brush_excerpts/brush_20050913.shtml (accessed February 13.02.2010), where ‘really, really sharp’ is cited as the original biblical meaning of, e.g., the Hebrew (Proverbs 5:4) and Greek (Hebrews 4:12) for ‘two-edged’. Cf. a number of other biblical passages.

⁹² Google (October 31, 2009) found 1550000 cases; Yahoo (October 31, 2009) found 16400 cases.

tive weapons they have to be made with extreme care and skill, which includes the precision with which the feathers are cut and placed to improve stability, accuracy and trajectory. This old idiom, which pictures something that for most people at present means little, is extremely popular today. Among the explanations is the popularity of a slightly misquoted *ḥadīth* of the Prophet about the Jews and Christians in which the idiom, apparently erroneously, occurs, as well as the various uses the *ḥadīth* is put to and the many Internet discussions surrounding it.⁹³ An example in which the idiom is not used in a religious context is: *lā yazālu l-sūqu yasīru ʿalā nasqi l-taḥlīli l-fannī ḥadhwa l-qudhhati bi-l-quhdha* (The market continues to move *precisely* as the technical analysis predicts).⁹⁴

ONLINE CONCLUSION

Having presented weaponry idioms belonging to the semantic fields of characteristics, features and qualities of persons and objects, and having discussed their motivation, it is important to summarize some of the aspects shared with the weaponry idioms considered in the previous article and to point out some specific traits of the present group.

The constituent words denote familiar medieval weapons or their parts. In this group of idioms, again, basic, well known qualities and

⁹³ The *ḥadīth*, as cited by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), followed by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792) and subsequently popular in Salafī circles, has the following text: *la-tatbaʿunna sanana man kāna qablakum ḥadhwa l-qudhhati bi-l-quhdha, ḥattā law dakhalū juḥra ḍabbin la-dakhaltumūh. qālū: yā rasūla llāh, al-yahūdu wa-l-naṣārā? qāl: fa-man?* (‘Indeed you follow the custom of those who went before you as the feather of an arrow resembles the feather of an arrow, so that if they had gone into the hole of a lizard, you would go into it too.’ They [the Prophet’s Companions] said: ‘O Messenger of God, the Jews and the Christians?’ He said: ‘Who else?’) See Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Ṣawmaʿī al-Bayḍānī, ‘Irshād al-muʿlim ʿilā ʿanna lafzat “ḥadhwa l-quhdha bi-l-quhdha” laysat fī l-Būkhārī wa-Muslim’, <http://www.sahab.net/forums/showthread.php?p=726474> (accessed February 13, 2010). ʿAbū Hājar Muḥammad al-Saʿīd b. Basyūnī Zaghlūl, who had an enormous collection of *ḥadīth* works at his disposition, lists no example of a *ḥadīth* beginning with *la-tatbaʿunna* containing the idiom *ḥadhwa l-qudhhati bi-l-qudhhati* (*Mawsūʿat ʿaṭrāf al-ḥadīth al-nabawī al-sharīf*, 1st ed., 11 vols. [Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Turāth, 1419/1989], 6:568b–69a). I have not consulted the 4-volume *Supplement (al-Dhayl)* to this work (Medina: Maktabat al-Ghurabāʾ al-ʿAthariyya, 1994).

⁹⁴ <http://9i2.net/vb/showthread.php?t=15032> (accessed November 6, 2009).

applications of weapons are used to express figuratively new, more intricate and abstract concepts. This is how weaponry idioms contribute to the means that Arabic, like other languages, can use to expand itself and to express subtler meanings and connotations. On the one hand, the actual phraseological meaning of the idioms studied is based on the metaphoric or metonymic reinterpretation of the literal reading of the source collocation, or on a blending of the two. On the other hand, many of the idioms utilize the symbolic meaning of the medieval weapons, which is still clearly recognizable. It should be repeated that, in my opinion, the idioms studied here are to some extent more vivid and expressive than other idioms that do not have as a constituent a word denoting a weapon. Weaponry idioms exploit the inherent fear of and respect for weapons. Particularly interesting are the idioms/similes on the *ʿafʿalu min* pattern based on exceeding a certain standard, and thus exaggerating some given quality. They are generally elaborations on qualities of the sword, spearhead and arrow, such as sharp-pointed, piercing, cutting, razor-sharp, extremely fine and rapid.

Most of the idioms containing a word denoting a weapon have a transparent, readily recognizable meaning, though idioms with rare, archaic words are often exceptions. Still, in order to grasp the actual meaning of an idiom denoting particular features or characteristics of people and objects, one or more levels of knowledge have to be activated. The weaponry idioms addressed here, by and large, do not seem to be ‘culturally bound’ or ‘culturally specific’. Both the weapons and their qualities are well known across many different cultures and thus do not pose any difficulty for non-Arabic speakers. However, information about other constituents of certain idioms may occasionally need culture-specific amplification.⁹⁵

Idioms expressing characteristics or qualities of persons, including weaponry idioms, can be categorized from a semantic point of view into two groups, those with positive meaning and those with negative meaning. Some weaponry idioms (not so many) have positive meaning, denoting metaphorically positive features such as strength of character, persistence, physical strength, professional ability and cooperation.

ṣulbu/ṣalibu l-qanāti – tough, with a strong will (lit., with a sturdy lance)

tawīlu l-nijādi – tall, tall of stature (lit., with a long sword belt)

⁹⁵ See my remarks above (p. 127) on the concept of *guest* in the idiom *lā li-l-sayfi wa-lā li-l-dayfi*.

ʔakhadha l-qawsa bārīhā – the right, deserving, competent person has taken charge (lit., the bow's shaper has taken it)

ramaw ʿan qawsin wāhidatin – they were united, in agreement (lit., they shot from one bow)

Other idioms collected here have negative meaning or can be used in negative contexts expressing negative qualities and characteristics of human beings (normal for the system of idioms in every language). But by condemning unacceptable or repulsive features of character, they advocate those that are good and praiseworthy according to the standards of Arab society. Here are some examples:

jaʿala l-zujja quddāma l-sināni – to do things backwards (lit., he put the [pointed iron] butt of the spear before the head)

ʿindahū l-sirru bi-l-miqlāʿi – who cannot keep a secret (lit., a secret with him is as if it were in a sling)

lānat qanātuhu – to grow weaker, to become frail, weak (lit., his lance weakened, softened)

ʔadyaʿu min ghimdīm bi-ghayri naṣlin – wretched, miserable (lit. more wretched, more miserable than a sheath without a sword)

lā li-l-sayfi wa-lā li-l-dayfi – good for nothing, not suited for one's job or duties (lit., neither for the sword, nor for the guest)

Regarding idioms referring primarily to characteristics or qualities of objects, it is seldom possible to detect any similar division into positive and negative traits. Examples of exceptions, the first generally positive and the second negative, are:

ʔasraʿu mina l-sahmi/min sahmin – faster than an arrow/a bullet, (lit., faster than an arrow)

silāḥun dhū ḥaddayni – a two-edged sword (lit., a weapon with two edges)

Weaponry idioms denoting characteristics and features of persons and objects are used in a wide range of discourses no longer connected with the situation that produced the idiom. However, the context often exploits the literal meaning of the source expression, since such idioms are generally transparent and clearly motivated. As with the weaponry idioms studied in my earlier article, it has to be remarked that most of the

idioms investigated here can be interpreted iconically and symbolically. The iconic motivation is based on ‘the relation between the literal and figurative readings (both of the whole word string and of the single constituents or parts of the constituents)’.⁹⁶ The symbolic motivation is based on the same semantic features, but it is related to ‘only one single constituent (or more precisely, the concept standing behind it)’.⁹⁷ For example:

ʿaʿfi l-qawsa bāriyahā – rely on those who know their profession, always ask an expert (lit., give the bow to its shaper)

ʿalā ḥaddi l-sayfi – in a difficult and dangerous situation (lit., on the edge of a sword)

ḥadhwa l-qudhhati bi-l-qudhhati – identical, deceptively alike (lit., as similar as a feather of an arrow to a feather of an arrow)

Symbolic motivation is particularly evident in idioms such as the following:

sihāmun ṭāʾishatun – false claims, lies, falsities, slander (lit., stray arrows)

ʿamḍā mina l-sayfi/min sayfin – razor-sharp, keen-edged (lit., sharper than a sword)

lā li-l-sayfi wa-lā li-l-ḍayfi – good for nothing, not suited for one’s job or duties (lit., neither for the sword, nor for the guest)

It is standard, as with other languages, to approach Arabic idioms primarily as examples of figurative expressions and to investigate the metaphors (or metonymies) that lie behind them. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical and ‘we typically conceptualize the nonphysical in terms of the physical.’⁹⁸ Employing this thesis, it is possible to recognize that in many weaponry idioms the notion of weapon or knowledge of physical experience with weapons stands behind the nonphysical, less clearly delineated image expressed (e.g., *ʿadaqqu min ḥaddi l-sayfi* – lit., finer than the edge of a sword). On the other hand, some idioms in this group and their meanings suggest that they derive from a concep-

⁹⁶ Dobrovolskij and Piirainen, *Figurative Language*, 90.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3, 59.

tual construction rather than a concept based on actual experience (e.g., *‘alā ḥaddi l-sayfi* – lit., on the edge of a sword).⁹⁹ Clearly the first type is predominant with weaponry idioms describing persons and objects, as opposed to those describing situations and behavior, which were the subject of the previous article.

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⁹⁹ Cf. Dobrovol’skij, ‘Cognitive and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Phraseology’, 792b.