

# **On The Contextual Semantic Drift of Metonymy in Translation**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper attempts to prove that metonymic expressions might bring about certain drift exclusively in the semantic meaning of the message delivered, rather than its pragmatic meaning, a fact that should be taken into account in the process of translation. Context (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) has the effect of having the meaning of the metonymy to be pushed down into a subordinate position and innovating another figurative meaning linked in one way or another to the source sense to replace. In other words, the context of the expression relates two pre-existing signs or concepts by means of the reific contiguity conjure up additions sense for rhetoric and semantic reasons. This means that a sign or concept (senses) present in the syntagmatic chain serves to invoke another image for the object which is absent from and in contiguity with it. This new sense represents the new semantic meaning of the target metonymy. In addition, this pushing down of the present image (representing the semantic meaning) and inferring a suitable tenor (representing the metonymic sense) as a substitution relies also on other factors such as world knowledge, reality conditions and ontology (Leech 1985:216-217).

Meaning in language is not a single relation or a single sort of relations, but involves a set of multiple and various relations holding between the utterance and its parts (Robins 1964:27).

Psychologically, it has been shown that the meanings of words or phrases are always related in one of two possible ways. The first one in which similarity plays an important role. The two referents (words) actually and physically resemble one another in some way (iconicity): “face and hands of a clock, chip (of wood vs. potato chip). The second type of meaning relation holds between polysemous words by means of contiguity.(1) Here, the two words are not similar to each other; rather they occur in the real world in some spatial proximity to one another-metonymy (either as parts of a whole or as one item located next to another). For instance, “London issued a statement” (London here means the people governing England. Also, “The white house said, meaning The President said.

The paper explores certain examples of the semantic drift caused by metonymy and its effects on the translating process. Routes assigned for drifting are mapped with reference to certain Qur’anic ayat. The treatment is wholly allotted to English expressions to avoid expected pitfalls. Metonymy, like certain other tropes, is not just a figure of speech. It reflects an important part of the way people conceptualize images of objects depending on points of tenor created by signs or inspiration. A detour in the semantic meaning not in the pragmatic invisible message is inflected on the communicated message. The reader, in particular, infers the overlapped meaning through the analysis of the signs provided by the context, linguistic and nonlinguistic.

Furthermore, this paper, to echo some classical and modern Arab and English linguists, claims that semantic transfer of the meaning is often designated metonymy. Semantic transfer, as stated in Leech (1985:216-217), brings about a drift in the semantic specification of meaning (from old specification to new specification) of the metonymic words. Metonymic

words in the selected Holy ayat are semantically modified to mean or refer to the new specification (sense of the object) other than the old specification (image). The semantic meaning of metonymies in any one of the cited verses “ayat” is disambiguated or restated by the context of those ayat. Still, no change in the pragmatic meaning can be cited. In English, however, three main types of semantic drifting might be classified. The role of context in determining the real intended meaning and the semantic change involved are highly recognized.

One of the main features of the ‘ayat’ cited is that they tend to metonymies that are repeated so often in the Holy Qur'an, e.g.

(1)

قال تعالى (وَاسْأَلِ الْقَرْيَةَ الَّتِي كُنَّا فِيهَا وَالْعَيْرَ الَّتِي أَقْبَلْنَا فِيهَا...)

(يوسف: من الآية ٨٢)

where the word “town” (القرية) means the people living in that place. The context in which a word is used has an effect on the meaning that is usually taken for granted. The meaning of any simple word becomes intelligible only when placed in its context of situation.(2)

## 2. Metonymy

Metonymy is a trope (applying to words, or single signs, rather than to sentences, or sign complexes) and a substitution (involving the exchange of one element for another rather than the suppression or addition of an element or the permutation of the order of several elements). What differentiates metonymy from metaphor and synecdoche is the nature of the relationship between the two elements involved in the substitutions. In metaphor, the two elements (tenor and its vehicle) are joined by similarity relation; whereas in metonymy, the two elements are connected by means of contiguity. They are related as part to whole in synecdoche (Sonesson, 1989:2).

Yule (1996: 122) argues that relations such as a container-contents relation (bottle-coke; can-juice), a whole-part relation (car-wheels; house-roof) or a representative-symbol relation (king-crown) are examples of metonymy.

Sometimes, it has been difficult to separate the semantic signification of metonymy and synecdoche. For example, the crown will be considered a metonymy for the king, if the latter is considered to be a physical person with whom the crown is in spatial contiguity or proximity, but a synecdoche for the king if royalty is seen to be primarily an office of which the crown may be considered a significant part. It seems that the functions in the two cases are distinct; it is the object, which is ambiguously defined (Sonesson 1989: 2).

Whether the metonymy is a personification or reific, mental or physical, they reinforce the emotive effect and cause a semantic drift in the semantic meaning of the expression which might be inferred by the analysis of the context in terms of implicature, presupposition and speech acts.

To classify the semantic drift caused by the metonymic expressions, one may deduce the following relations:

1. Causation.
2. The whole to part lexical relation.
3. The part to whole lexical relation.
4. Obligation.
5. Hyponymy.
6. Instrumental.
7. Iconic.

The components, the parameters, of a metonymic expression might be mapped as follows:

1. The image- the (SL) item conjured up to by sign, symbol, or inspiration.
2. The object- the item described or qualified (in the real world).



### 3. Analysis of Semantic Drift Caused by Metonymy in Arabic.

3.1. From the verses “ayat” already cited as a corpus of analysis, metonymies in the Holy Qur’an are so repeated. These metonymies may outline precise semantic features and / or relations. Metonymies involved may feature the followings, among others no doubt:

3.1.1. **Intentionality of Metonymy**-metonymy is a word used intentionally to mean something other than the literal meaning or something existing in the physical proximity of the real world, e.g.

قوله تعالى (فَمَنْ شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ) (البقرة: من (6)  
الآية ١٨٥)

((And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month))  
Al-Baqarah, 185.

As indicated, the metonym (month) is intentionally used to mean crescent, the object <sup>(5)</sup>. It is impossible for any one to see the month. Thus, the word (month) is semantically modified to invoke another image existing in the world representing the real sense of the metonymy.

3.1.2. **Dependability of Context**-metonymy is semantically dependant on the context. The context (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) has the effect of having readers infer the metonymic meaning, e.g.

قوله تعالى: (يَجْعَلُونَ أَصَابِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ) (البقرة: من الآية ١٩) (7)  
((They thrust their Fingers in their ears))  
Al-Baqarah, 19.

The metonym (fingers) is used to refer to the tips of fingers (the object). The non-linguistic context plays a role in invoking the

image (tip and fingers) which is physically contiguous (in sense) to the target metonym (fingers). Thus, the context of situation relates two pre-existing images or signs, one is figured in the syntagmatic chain and the other is periphrastic in the spatial proximity in the world.

3.2. The following relations can be foreseen in mapping the semantic relatedness between the context (linguistic or non-linguistic) and the metonymic words in question.

3.2.1 **Causation**-this type of semantic lexical relation involves two sub relations.

3.2.1.1 To benefit from the cause which is the present concept in the syntagmatic chain to mean or refer to the absent connotative meaning of the metonymic word (in question) which is also present in the syntagmatic chain, e.g.

(8)

قوله تعالى: (وَجَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا) (الشورى: من الآية ٤٠)

((The guerdon of an ill deed is an ill like thereof))

Ash-shura, 40.

In this ayah, the metonym (ill deed) is used to mean (justice) for the (ill deed) is the cause for the existence of (justice) <sup>(6)</sup>. Accordingly, both the images (ill) as a sin and the word (ill) as its punishment are common in sense but different in shaping the essence.

3.2.1.2. Using the effect as the present concept in the syntagmatic chain to mean or refer to the cause as the absent concept, e.g.

(9)

قوله تعالى: (هُوَ الَّذِي يُرِيكُمُ آيَاتِهِ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُم مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ رِزْقًا)

(غافر: من الآية ١٣)

((He it is who showeth you His portents and sendeth down for you provision from the sky))  
Ghafir,13.

The above ayah indicates the syntagmatic dependency between the metonym (provision) present in the syntagmatic chain and the absent object (rain) which has been fulfilled by means of the co-text image preceding the metonymic word. The metonym (provision) is used intentionally instead of the object (rain) for the rain is the tenor of the provision to be available.<sup>(7)</sup> The co-text of the ayah in general and of the metonym (provision) in particular are inspired by the word (sendeth down).

3.2.2. **The whole to part lexical relation-** it is compatibility between a lexical unit or concept representing a whole and a lexical unit representing its corresponding parts e.g.  
(10)

قوله تعالى: (وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا) (المائدة: من الآية ٣٨)

((As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hands))  
Al-Ma'idah, 38.

The sense of the metonym (hands) is semantically drifted to mean the palm (the object) of the hand till the elbow<sup>(8)</sup>. The sense of the sign (hands) invokes a new image (palm of the hand) which is in contiguity with it.

3.2.3. **The part to whole lexical relation-** using a part to describe the whole, e.g.  
(11.)

قوله تعالى: (وَمَنْ قَتَلَ مُؤْمِنًا خَطَأً فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ مُؤْمِنَةٍ) (النساء: من الآية ٩٢)

((He who hath killed a believer by mistake must set free a believing slave))  
Al-Nisa,92.



As indicated, the semantic specification of the metonym (رقبة) in the syntgmatic chain is semantically disambiguated or restated by substitution. The preceded linguistic co-text of the ayah which is represented by the image (تحرير / set free) stimulates a sense to substitute the (رقبة / neck) with the image (slave). The context of situation also claims that it is the believing slave that is rescued, not his neck.

**3.2.4. The relation of (pre) condition or obligation-** The existence of one thing obliges the existence of another thing, e.g.

(12.)

قوله تعالى: (أَمْ أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانًا فَهُوَ يَتَكَلَّمُ بِمَا كَانُوا بِهِ يُشْرِكُونَ)

(الروم: ٣٥)

((Or have we revealed unto them any warrant which speaketh of that which they associate with Him?))

Ar-rum, 35.

In this ayah, the image, which is semantically related to the metonym (سلطان), is disambiguated when the sense (سلطان) is used to inspire (Holy Book) that guides people to the correct way.(9) The co-text (revealed) that precedes the target word (سلطان) with the support of world knowledge, presupposition, and ontology, has readers deduce that Allah doesn't send (سلطان) by the literal meaning of the word, but He sends or reveals a Holy Book for each nation to present an evidence or warrant to them as it is assigned in the word (speak).<sup>(10)</sup>

**3.2.5. Hyponymy Relation-** This type of lexical relation involves two subtypes.

**3.2.5.1. General to specific lexical relation:** The meaning of the general term (superordinate) describes the meaning of the specific term (subordinate), e.g.

(13.)

قوله تعالى: (أَمْ يَحْسُدُونَ النَّاسَ) (النساء: من الآية ٥٤)

((Or are they jealous of mankind))

An-Nisa, 54.

The metonym (mankind) is mentioned here to mean one specific person (Mohammed, the messenger of Allah)<sup>(11)</sup>. The word (mankind) is a general image and it is ambiguous. The non-linguistic context or real world context has the effect of creating a new image by specifying the general term.

3.2.5.2. Specific to general lexical relation- The meaning of one form (specific) is included in the meaning of another, e.g.

(14.)

قوله تعالى: (وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ تُعْجِبُكَ أَجْسَامُهُمْ ... هُمُ الْعَدُوُّ فَاحْذَرُهُمْ)

(المنافقون: من الآية ٤)

((And when thou seeth them their figures please thee ... They are the enemy, so beware of them))

Al-Munafiqun, 4.

Unlike the previous ayah, the meaning of the metonym (enemy) is included in sense of the new semantic substitution (enemies' image) which leads the new real meaning of the metonymic word in question.

3.2.6. **The relation of Instrument**-using the name of a certain instrument or tool to mean or refer to its resulting effect, e.g.

(15.)

قوله تعالى: (وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ)

(إبراهيم: من الآية ٤)

((And we never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk ...))

Ibrahim, 4.

In this ayah, the metonym (بلسان) refers to (the language of his group). Here, the metonymy connects two pre-existing signs. One is (لسان - representing the literal meaning) which is used intentionally to invoke the sense and the object (language - representing the figurative meaning). The image of the linguistic context (His folk) that follows the metonymic word in question has the effect to have the reader chooses the drifted meaning to disambiguate. The sense of the tongue shapes the instrument by which language is brought into being.(12)

**3.2.7.Container to contents lexical relation-** using a word which is the place of a human being or thing to mean or refer to the human being himself or the thing itself,e.g.,  
(16.)

قوله تعالى: (فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ) (العلق:١٧)

((Then let him call upon his henchmen))

Al-‘Alaq,17.

In this ayah, the metonymic word (ناديه) stimulates the image pushed down by means of the sense forged by the context The metonym (ناديه) is semantically changed to mean people living there (club)<sup>(13)</sup>. Thus, the non-linguistic context of the ayah, formulates the image of the semantic drift and in clearing up the sense of the expression.

#### **4. Analysis of Semantic Drift Caused by Metonymy in English**

Drifting in meaning in English may have the following main routes:

1. Metonyms are structured by substituting the image of the expression which is predictable by the analysis of the selectional

relations of the constituents of the expressions by another meaningful image which is unpredictable(14). In the following (17 ) The Green Crescent surfed the courtyard.

The relation between surf and courtyard is a complete deviant. Literally,

a team can surf the sea wave not the court but the predictable relation idiomatically altered or substituted by an unpredictable relation which can be paraphrased into:

( 18 ) The team has done gorgeously in the game.

Although the example has two meanings, it is unambiguous since its literal meaning is ruled out and it can be interpreted only figuratively by referring to the image and the sense.

2. The metonymic expression might have a literal meaning and a figurative meaning but the latter is not mapped by altering the relations existed between the items in the expressions. The ultimate meaning is ambiguous in the sense that both the literal meaning and the figurative meaning are plausible. In the sentence,

(19 ) He has other fish to fry.

We have two meanings, the literal which satisfies the truth conditions of the sentence and the figurative which indicates" a lot of problems etc."

3. The third type of metonymic expressions might inspire a complete unpredictable sense relation. The literal meaning is nonsensical in that it does not satisfy the truth conditions of the expression and the realities of the world. For instance,

(20 ) It rained cats and dogs.

which does not reflect any relation- the transitive verb rain is not in harmony with the patient cats and dogs. The subject it commonly refers to the sky (heaven). The figurative meaning is to be ruled out for no tenor is to be depicted. Thus, the image(s), the object, the sense and the metonyms are in punk relations.

## **5. Translation of Metonymy**

1. A corollary to the different situations, a metonym is to reproduce the same image in the RL especially where there is cultural overlap.

(21 ) He who becomes a ewe would be eaten by a wolf —  
من صار نعجة أكله الذئب

2. A metonym is to replace the SL image with another image in the RL or sense.

(22 ) the scum of earth—

حنثالة على/في الأرض حنثالة الأرض/ القوم

3. A metonym is to paraphrase in the RL sacrificing the pragmatic meaning for the semantic meaning.

(23 ) It rained cats and dogs = (it rained heavily)

أمطرت قططا وكلابا ؟\*

أمطرت السماء بكثافة ؟

أغدقت السماء

In Arabic, “heavy rain” is called الغدق. The it refers literally to the cloud (rainfall= الحولاء الخ) but stylistically, the word it is a referent to the sky which corresponds to السماء.

(24 ) He made a wry face—

صعر وجهه اشمئزا

(25 ) He has other fish to fry—

عنده من الهموم ما تكفي

( 26 ) He smelt a rat—

توجس أمرا

4. When unparaphrasable, the metonym is to convert to simile plus sense.

(27 ) heart of oak—(15)

قلب صلب(صلد) كخشب السنديان

To recapitulate, a metonym is to be paraphrased intralinguistically to decide any loss of meaning. The loss in pragmatic meaning, psychological and /or structural is obvious. A metonymy is unparaphrasable since it constitutes a sense. It

is not the product of the same sense but of the components of that sense. It interacts with and helps to form up a deviant image. Paraphrasing metonymy simply will impair the image and the pragmatic meaning and may incur certain structural problem. For instance,

(28 ) a. He is a candle in a sunny day—(paraphrased intralinguistically)

b. He is lost—

c. He is as loss as a candle in a sunny day—  
(paraphrased into a simile)

Two problems are entailed, likening it to something which does not exist in the real world, i.e. the simile is redundant, and the expression itself incorporates a simile and a metonym

(29)

أضيق من سراج في يوم مشمس

Metonymic expressions might be by themselves ambiguous, they have more than one figurative meaning besides the literal meaning.

( 30 ) She set a good table = (people seated at the table)  
= (Feasting)  
= (Food served)  
= (List of details)

Depending on the context and the implications of set and good one might suggest the following translation:

(31)

أعدت طعاما جيدا

## 6. Context vs. Co-text and Disambiguation of Metonymy

Yule (1996:129) and Crystal (1991:78-79) assume that the context encompasses the total linguistic and non-linguistic background to a text. The linguistic aspect or context is widely known; it includes the specific parts of a text-neighboring unit (e.g., a word) which is the focus of attention. It is also known as the co-text. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used

in the same phrase or sentence.(16) This surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word means. The non-linguistic aspect or context (situational context to call it after Crystal: 1991) includes the immediate situation, in which the unit is employed, and the awareness by the author or reader of what has been said earlier plus the pertinent belief system (i.e., those beliefs and presuppositions germane to the text at hand).

Leech (1985:79) writes that we are able to play down ambiguities of words and phrases if we could supply a more detailed specification of the context. He also adds, “meaning-in-context should be regarded as a narrowing down, or probabilistic weighting, of the list of potential meanings available to the user of the language.

## **7. Some Linguistic and Extra linguistic Problems Involved in Rendering Metonyms Cross linguistically**

The main problems faced in rendering metonyms from English into Arabic can be classified into three categories:

### **1. Lexical Problems**

This category implies the difficulty in finding the appropriate equivalent for the SL metonyms in the RL lexicon. When no clear-cut equivalent can be demanded, one usually has to make use of the context then the extralinguistic context of situation to select the suitable one. Otherwise, futile abortive attempts may lead to haphazard choice and definition. A good example is the varieties of terms used to refer to the rain and the clouds in Arabic<sup>(16)</sup>.

(30)

لا يجلب النشء (١) وابل (٢)  
ولا السحاب (٣) غيثا (٤)

Where the word subscribed with (1) means the first formation of clouds, (2) the first rainfall, (3) a moving cloud, while (4) rainfall after drought.

The same can be said about the following:

(31) He builds castles in the air.(= daydreams, no action)

which has its equivalent in Arabic as

(32)

إنما هو كبرق خلب

## 2. Structural Problems

Structural problem usually stems from the tendency for economy in expressions. The "groupment of the constituents within the syntagm...." (Ilyas, 1989:120). Ambiguity of syntactic nature should be interpreted intralinguistically by referring to the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts. Then, the metonym is to be transferred into the RL and the image to be reconstructed. The following might be analyzed into two basic structures:

(33) They are flying planes

إنهم يخلقون بالطائرات	→	N <sub>1</sub>	V <sub>trans</sub>	N <sub>2</sub>
→إنها طائرات محلقة		N <sub>1</sub>	be	N <sub>1</sub>

## 3.Cultural Problems

Cultural ambiguity might be the outcome of an influx of interests, ideas, customs etc. of a society into the language. The lexicon of any language reflects a corollary of cultural aspects. Catford ( 1965 ) believes that "cultural untranslatability takes place when a situational feature is functionally relevant to the SL text but absent from the RL text. To resort to non-corresponding RL equivalent for the SL item which may have an equivalent function in the RL is viable for avoiding such pitfall. The following indicates some cultural differences which are problematic in translation.

(34) He became green with fear→

اخضر خوفا\*؟

اصفر(وجهة) خوفا



(35) to eat no fish →

لا آكل السمك\*؟

لست عدوا

For only the Roman Catholics, the enemy of the crown eats fish during Shakespeare's time.<sup>(17)</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Metonymy is a rhetorical style or device used to have the door open in front of the readers to choose among several alternatives or possibilities of meaning. It is semantically related to the linguistic and non-linguistic context. The specification of the context has great effect in the semantic change of metonymies: metonymies are semantically transferred to mean something different but related to the semantic meaning of the metonymy. In other words, several new meanings of metonymies are included in the meaning of the target metonymic word present in the syntagmatic chain.

To recapitulate one may infer the following:

1. Metonyms are intended to be interpreted as literally false.
2. Metonymy depends on contiguity and reanalysis.
3. Meaning drifts arising out of contiguity in linguistic and pragmatic contexts are associative and conceptual.
4. Metonymy as syntagmatic leads to juxtaposition and potential incoherence. It permutes to another element, within the context, that is adjacent to it.
5. Metonymy as a process of semantic drifting through contiguity is indexical- it works through morph- syntactic domains.
6. From the corpus cited, one may suggest that metonymy is a response to a problem. In other words, it is a solution to a perceived problem. It is correlated with shifts to meaning situated in subjective belief or attitude toward a linguistic situation.

7. Metonymy usually specifies one meaning in terms of others present, though covertly, in the context.
8. Rendering metonymy into Arabic may involve one or more T-Rules of substitution (optional or obligatory), addition, or deletion to cope with the lexical, structural and cultural problems faced in handling metonymy.
9. Metonymy is to reproduce the same image in the RL; or to replace the SL image with another in the RL; or paraphrase the image in the RL; or to convert to simile and sense.
10. Paraphrasing metonymy leads to the loss in pragmatic meaning, thus it deems unparaphrasable.
11. Semantic drifting in Arabic and English by metonyms can be outlined into categories which lead to assure the semantic modification involved.
12. Alternatives are semantically related to the linguistic and nonlinguistic context.
13. The extralinguistic factors involved which might be the replica of cultural element, knowledge and social contrasts, and contexts alongwith linguistic factors and other pragmatic factors, e.g. implicature, presupposition and entailment are utilized to grasp the intended meaning.
14. Semantic meaning has to do with truth conditions whether the word is false or true, with validity and consequences, whereas pragmatic meaning is concerned with the intentions and aims of the utterance. Thus, the former is subject to semantic drifting and conspicuous modification while the latter is not.

## Notes

- 1.Yule,George 1996:121-122.
- 2.Halliday &Husan 1976:21; Brook 1979:81.
- 3.Adaptation of Newmark Approach,1988a:88.
- 4.The analysis depends mainly on Al-Najjar treatment, 1985.

(٥) تفسير الجلالين: ١٨٥/٢

(٦) تفسير الجلالين: ٤٠/٢٦

(٧) ابن كثير: ٥٤/٣

(٨) صفوة التفاسير: ١٣/ ٤٠

(٩) ابن كثير: ٣٨/٥

(١٠) تفسير الجلالين: ٣٥/ ٣٠

(١١) صفوة التفاسير: ٥٤/ ٤

(١٢) صفوة التفاسير: ١٧/ ٩٦

(١٣) تفسير الجلالين: ١٧/٣٦

- (14) Al-Najjar, 1985.
- (15) Newmark,1986b , Al-Najjar :1985 and others.
- (16)S.Muhammad,1981.
- (17) Ilyas,S. 1989:125.
- (18)Version 3.0/ The Noble Qur'an (2000-2001) Islamsoft Solutions.

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