

# Proverbs Attributed to Humans and Nonhumans in the Beja Language (Sudan)

*Mohamed-Tahir Hamid Ahmed*  
*Llacan (UMR 8135, CNRS – INaLCO, EPHE, France)*  
*Sudan University of Sciences and Technology, Sudan*  
*mtahir6@yahoo.fr*  
*<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3194-4149>*

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to determine the social and discursive functions of Beja proverbs and the reasons why some of them are attributed to non-human enunciators. The discussion is based on oral texts of different genres (tales, poems, and proverbs) containing 214 proverbs. Animals and, more rarely, inanimate objects take part in the scenes they contain, and in 43 of them speech is attributed to non-humans. The comparison of these with texts with human enunciators points to the role played by non-human enunciators. The method followed is a descriptive and analytical one, adopting a semantic and pragmatic approach to identifying the different meanings and functions of each proverb. The study is related to the theory of proverb praxis, which focuses on the context of use and the cultural context as determining factors for the meaning of a proverb. It proposes to focus on the immediate situation of use, called the 'enunciative context', among other contextual elements. It shows that Beja proverbs have the power to express a personal point of view, although they are allusively attributed to the whole community by the Beja themselves. The analysis of the enunciative context, focused on examples of proverbial events, proves that the allusive style of Beja proverbs is determined by the essential metaphors of their contextual meaning. Moreover, non-human enunciators are introduced for specific contextual purposes: disapproval of a defect or a behaviour, ironical reactions, expressions of agreement or disagreement, and evaluations of events. None of these objectives can be achieved with human enunciators, and the use of non-human enunciators underlines the prudent attitude of the speaker, who seeks to maintain good relations with his interlocutors and preserve social harmony. The analysis of proverbial semantic structure in this article is proposed as a contribution to knowledge of the cultural anthropology of the speakers of the Beja language in Sudan.

**Keywords:** non-human enunciator; contextual meaning; allusion; unsaid; discursive restrictions

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### **About the author**

*Mohamed-Tahir Hamid Ahmed* is a Sudanese professor specialized in teaching French as a foreign language, at the College of Languages, Sudan University for Sciences and Technology. He holds a Ph.D. from Bordeaux University, France, on Beja oral poetry (2000). Beja is his mother tongue, and he has been interested in the Beja language and oral literature since over twenty years. He has co-authored many articles on Beja with Martine Vanhove, Emeritus senior researcher at the research unit Llacan (CNRS – INaLCO – EPHE). Both have just finalized a trilingual Beja-English-French dictionary with a grammatical sketch. He is currently conducting research on Beja-Arabic contact within the French research program PAUSE hosted at Llacan.

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## 1 Introduction

The first available written source on Beja proverbs is that of Mohamed Adarob Ohaj (1972). The author presents over 150 proverbs to show that they are an important form of Beja oral tradition, fulfilling both legal and pedagogical functions. Indeed, proverbs are still one of the most important tools today in conflict resolution, problem solving, and reconciliation. Used for educational purposes, they show attachment to values and distance from vices (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 55). Among the list of proverbs presented by the author, there is a minor category (10/168 proverbs) said in the name of non-human characters, animals, and inanimate entities, a category of enunciators which is also found in Beja tales. However, since those in this minor category are identified by the Beja themselves as proverbs, their function is proverbial and certainly different from that of tales.

Since proverbs generally express knowledge related to the thought and wisdom of a people (Claybrook 2023, 215–235), one wonders what the presence of an enunciator of the animal kingdom or of inanimate objects might introduce. The relationship between proverbs and tales has been pointed out in Leguy (2012, 171), who shows that, among the Bwa of Mali, some proverbial statements “repeat the moral of a well-known fable”.<sup>1</sup> She gives the example of a proverb said in the name of a hyena, which alludes to a short tale in which the hero is the hyena. Similarly, some Beja proverbs are uttered at the end of stories presented as being the origins of the proverb (as in proverb (2) below). If a non-human enunciator in a narrative production has the function of enriching its images, its presence in proverbs gives a basic contrast between proverbial functions and those of a tale. It prompts us to revisit the functions of Beja proverbs and to try to discover the particularities of the category of proverbs with non-human enunciators. Consequently, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the social and discursive functions of Beja proverbs?
2. Why do the Beja people attribute certain proverbs to non-human speakers?

Following Siran (1987) and Leguy (2005), I think that observing the enunciation situation allows us to grasp the social and discursive circumstances of Beja proverbs attributed to non-human enunciators. The theory of proverb praxis highlights three components of the context of proverb use: the social environment in which proverbs are used, the social references of the speakers and audience, and the more immediate situation (Yankah 1989, 32). The enunciation situation in this study refers to this third component: the immediate situation of use of the proverb. It provides information about the different meanings of the proverb. This is why it is considered as an event to be described in detail. Furthermore, while cognitive theories of proverb use, as presented by Honeck (1997), deal in particular with the category of metaphorical proverbs (such as proverb 1 below), which are distinguished from non-imagistic proverbs (such as proverb 2), my idea is that the metaphorical image is not located in the linguistic form of the Beja proverb, but in its actual use in a proverbial event creating a contextual meaning that represents the value of the proverb. The description of proverbial events presented in this article is based on personal witness and knowledge of the Beja Bedouin culture. The enunciation situation implies the proverbial event and therefore provides a number of answers to the questions.

The paper is structured as follows: I will first present the theoretical and methodological approach (Section 2), then a brief overview of the language and its speakers (Section 3). This is

<sup>1</sup>“(…) reprennent la morale d’une fable bien connue”.

followed by a description of the corpora used for this study, where I will show the place of oral texts with non-human enunciators in the different genres (tales, poems, proverbs) represented in the corpus. A short comparison between these occurrences will highlight the particular role played by non-human enunciators in Beja poems and proverbs (Section 4). I will then shed light on the local presentation and representation of proverbs among the Beja and see how proverbial metaphors shift from a community opinion to a personal one that gives a particular semantic value to the proverb (Section 5). The classification of Beja proverbs given by Adarob Ohaj (1972) is based on a functional approach and neglects the semantic variations resulting from the use of each proverb in multiple contexts (Section 6). We will point out literal, conventional, and contextual meanings for proverbs from Adarob Ohaj's presentation. My fieldwork and my personal knowledge confirm that the same proverbs are still being used today and have been preserved for more than 50 years. A remark concerning the presence of human enunciators in these examples (Section 7) will lead us to concentrate on the opposition between human and non-human enunciators in the corpora under study. We will see that some discursive purposes justify the utterance of proverbs with non-human enunciators (Section 8), such as indicating disapproval of a defect or a behaviour (Section 8.1), an ironical reaction (Section 8.2), agreement or disagreement with contextual elements (Section 8.3), or a specific evaluation of an event (Section 8.4). These purposes, targeted by the use of non-human enunciators, emphasize the allusive process, with a higher-level and more beautiful discourse that aims at preserving good relations and social harmony. This is also the case in Beja poems with non-human enunciators (Section 9). The conclusion (Section 10) wraps up the findings.

## 2 Theoretical framework and method

Beja proverbs are a living discourse in the daily and social life of the Beja, in particular the Bedouin Beja. This is why the analysis, which adopts a pragmatic perspective, is based on a distinction between three levels of meaning:

- a. the 'literal' meaning (i.e., compositional, of the sentences),
- b. the 'conventional' meaning (i.e., formulaic, of general law), and
- c. the 'value' (i.e., the contextual and updated meaning of the proverb each time it is uttered).

In this respect, I follow Siran (1987, 403; 1993, 225) and Leguy (2005, 99) in their analysis of these three levels of the semantic structure, in order to elucidate the metaphorical and allusive expression found in the Beja proverbs and considered in their enunciation situations. Leguy (2005) provides an ethnographic description of the enunciation situations for Bwa, a group of Gur languages spoken in Burkina Faso and Mali, considering that essential metaphors only come into being when the proverbs are uttered.

Here, I will describe real proverbial events at which I was present, as well as typical ones that can often be encountered while living among the Beja in Sudan, a community of which I am a member. This approach will therefore provide more than one contextual meaning, based on my knowledge of the use of proverbs as well as on my experience of observing proverbial events during fieldwork. In fact, both the conventional and contextual meanings of Beja proverbs are related to the specific culture of the Beja Bedouin society. The objective is to describe, for each proverb, its enunciation situation(s), as well as the discursive objective of each enunciator in each

situation. I assume that the presence of non-human enunciators in various Beja oral language practices (proverbs, poems, and tales) is related to discursive purposes targeted specifically by the speaker in the enunciation situation.

Let us take the following two examples:

- (1) A young man tells his father about his intention to sell a cow and a calf from his herd to buy a camel. The father says:

*bittabi:ri*                                 *jam*    *kag<sup>w</sup>?ata*  
 that.you.do.not.accumulate     water    you.do.not.drink

'You can't let the herd drink water that you haven't accumulated in the trough.'

- (2) He continues, after being silent for a while:

*t?abka:b*             *tikatj-i*                     *fdigti*   *ba:d?ija*             *adri:s ko:killim*  
 that.gripping     that.you.become             let.go   do.not.do             hoopoe

*idi*     *e:n*

he.said   they.said

'A hoopoe said: "Don't let go of what you grip", they said.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 60, 103).

A few observations are important to make before going further. First, the above narration is marked by a final *e:n* 'they said', which is a stylistic feature of the Beja mode of narration.<sup>2</sup> It does not indicate direct speech, but the end of a statement. Second, I call these two examples a 'proverbial event' and make them the main focus of the semantic and pragmatic analysis. A proverbial event can be extended to the story behind a proverb (see Table 1 below). Third, within the events, the specific texts of Beja proverbs are used. Fourth, all proverbial events recounted here come from my personal observations. In addition, I provide the reference to Adarob Ohaj (1972) when the same proverbs are mentioned without any description of events.

The first of the two proverbs is said in the name of the father, and the second in the name of the hoopoe. Each of the two proverbs has three levels of meaning.

- (1) 'You can't let the herd drink water that you haven't accumulated in the trough':
- a) It is impossible to let the herd drink when you don't have water (literal meaning)
  - b) You have to plan for the cost of what you are trying to get (conventional meaning, general law)
  - c) You should not buy a camel for which you have not planned the price (contextual meaning, value of the proverb).
- (2) 'Don't let go of what you grip':
- a) The order and the advice to not let go (literal meaning)
  - b) The advice not to risk a loss of property (conventional meaning, general law)
  - c) I don't agree with you selling your flock (contextual meaning, value of the proverb).

<sup>2</sup>This has to be distinguished from similar expressions after or before proverbs in Sudanese Arabic, which could be translated as 'as they say'. The Beja expression is frozen, always final, and closes a statement, playing a role in the rhythm of the oral performance of the text sequences that define the literary genre (Morin 1995, 234). Thus, the resemblance with Arabic is just a coincidence.

The proverbial event in example (2) could have included the story behind the proverb, as mentioned by Adarob Ohaj (1972, 103), provided in Table 1 in our literal and free English translations.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1:** The story behind Proverb 2 in literal and free translations

'Someone caught a hoopoe, and said to it: (people) say about you: "it is skilful and intelligent, and if you don't tell me what you know 'I will kill you", he said, they said. When he said that, when it said: "I will tell you, so let go of me", he let go of it. When he let go of it, it said: "Do not let go of what you hold", they said.'

'Someone caught a hoopoe and told it that it is believed to be skilful and intelligent. He threatened to kill it if it did not share its knowledge with him. The hoopoe accepted but asked him to release it first, which he did. When he let it go, it said: "Do not let go what you hold."

Two questions arise: (i) Why is the second proverb spoken in the name of a hoopoe, and not the first one? (ii) Does the presence of the hoopoe here contribute to the allusion?

In the above story, the father conveys his opinion in an allusive way. He is careful to convince his son without making him angry, and generally with the aim of keeping good relations with him and preserving social harmony. So, the purpose of this argumentative discursive strategy is to introduce the hoopoe as a non-human enunciator in order to emphasize the father's ironical reaction to his son's inappropriate idea of selling valued property. At the same time, it makes his reaction acceptable by his son. Based on this example, and on the ones that will follow, we assume that Beja speakers opt for non-human enunciators when social conveniency makes that their discursive purposes cannot be attained by the use of human enunciators.

### 3 The language and its speakers

The Beja language, with the autonym *biḍa:wje:t*, is the sole member of the North Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic phylum. It is spoken in the northernmost part of the Cushitic speaking area, mainly in the Red Sea and Kassala States in eastern Sudan, by approximately 2,000,000 speakers, and in north-western Eritrea by 60,000 speakers, as well as in southern Egypt by a much smaller number of speakers. In Sudan, where my data come from, the language is unwritten, but a Latin-based alphabet is used in schools in Eritrea.<sup>4</sup> Three dialectal zones are recognized by scholars: northern, central, and southern (Morin 1995; Wedekind 2012).

The Beja are all Muslims and are traditionally camel traders and pastoralists. In Sudan, they settle nowadays in villages like those in the irrigated delta areas of the Gash and Tokar, and in cities like Port Sudan and Kassala. They practise trade and small-scale agriculture as well as pastoralism. Until war broke out in April 2023, Beja people could also be found in other parts of Sudan, particularly in Khartoum (Hamid Ahmed 2005, 67).

<sup>3</sup>Stories or tales do not have the tripartite semantic structure of the proverbs. The literal translation is given here in order to reveal their generic stylistic features.

<sup>4</sup>Hence the use of the IPA transcription system.



In Sudan, bilingualism with Sudanese Arabic is widespread and expanding in urban areas, but is discredited for women, who are expected to have a conservative attitude like that of Bedouin Beja living in rural areas. Beja speakers have a linguistic conservatism that leads to a strong awareness of a hierarchy of speech related to rules of honour, politeness, and taboos (Hamid Ahmed 2005, 99–118). Their formal and literary production is characterized by a strong inclination towards allusive speech enriched by metaphors. Poetry is placed at the top of the hierarchy, followed by imagery in other literary genres, while speech in a direct manner, as in ordinary conversation, is at the very bottom.

Beja has a rich and complex morphology, mainly templatic, like Arabic; it is flexional and derivational both in the nominal and verbal domains. It has four nominal cases, two for the verb core arguments, nominative and accusative, and two for noun phrases, genitive and vocative. Pronouns have two additional cases, dative and ablative/locative. The canonical constituent order is Subject-Object-Verb, but this may vary for pragmatic reasons. With some exceptions, main clauses follow dependent clauses. Suffixes, enclitics, and postpositions are much more frequent than prefixes, proclitics, and prepositions (for details see Vanhove 2017; Vanhove and Hamid Ahmed, submitted).

#### 4 Presentation of the corpora

This research is based on four corpora. Most of the data used here comes from the first one, which consists of nearly 15 hours of recordings collected by Adarob Ohaj between 1970 and 1971. It was kept in the Sound Archive department at the Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, and partially published in 1972. It contains 170 proverbs transcribed in Latin characters, translated into Arabic, and sometimes annotated with conventional meanings, mostly compared with concepts from Arab culture. This corpus targeted history and cultural heritage through oral narratives and literature. The second corpus consists of eight hours of recordings that I collected between 1995 and 1999 with the objective of investigating Beja oral literature, mainly poetry. The third one consists of ten hours of recordings collected by Martine Vanhove between 2001 and 2011<sup>5</sup> with the scope of conducting linguistic research. The fourth one is a written list of 21 Beja proverbs published recently on a website.<sup>6</sup> I added to these data one Beja proverb published in Morin (1995). None of the three oral corpora is based on exclusive work on Beja proverbs. Adarob Ohaj (1972) provides 170 (considering them to be part of what he called the “Beja popular heritage”) out of a total of 193 proverbs studied for the purposes of this paper.

I found in these corpora 259 texts in which animals and, more rarely, inanimate entities take part in the scenes described, or perform different actions. Among them, only 43 texts (17%) contain non-human speakers, distributed across 21 tales, 10 poems and 12 proverbs. These occurrences show that the Beja do not commonly attribute the role of enunciator to non-humans. Comparing these texts with texts with human enunciators, the opposite and majority of cases, will illustrate the reasons for this situation. Although proverbs constitute only approximately 6% of all the texts, the whole corpora provide useful information on the circumstances in which speech is attributed to non-humans, namely hyenas, donkeys, dogs, cats, vixens, lions, beetles, frogs, mosquitoes, hens, eagles, vultures, crocodiles, warthogs, ticks, birds (ravens, doves, owls), snakes, cows, and goats. Inanimate entities include the tall shrub *Calotropis gigantea* (locally

<sup>5</sup> Partly available online at <https://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/corpus.php>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bejalanguage.org/en/translations> (accessed March 1, 2024).

*ushar*), the small tree *Ziziphus lotus* (locally *tundub*), the soft dates, and the summer season.

While most of the examples here refer to a scripted form of the proverbs, like Adarob (1972),<sup>7</sup> it has to be mentioned that our analysis is based on the actual use of proverbs. During my fieldwork, over 20 years after Adarob Ohaj (1995–1999), I noticed that the proverbs he published were still being used. Moreover, before the war began on 15 April 2023, I used to meet up frequently with Beja and have exchanges containing proverbs. The accounts of proverbial events are part of my personal repertoire (like proverb 13 below). This shows how these proverbs have endured since the 1970s right up to the present day. It is thus likely that the proverbs I found in the three corpora are those often cited by Beja people in their daily social life. Thus, they are enough to illustrate their particular social and discursive functions, and to discover the reasons why proverbial words are attributed to non-human speakers.

## 5 Local presentation and representation of the proverbs

During my survey of Beja literature (1995–1999), the expression *ti-bɔa:wji ti-ndi-je:b-a* [DEF.F-Beja.COL 3SG.F-say\IPFV-REL.M-COP.3PL] ‘it is what the Beja say’ was a common one and was a response often given to someone asking the meaning of a proverb. My Beja interlocutors, instead of explaining the meaning of a proverb, would only assert its attribution to the speaker community. Syntactically, the expression is a topicalization marked by the use of the relative clause, a cleft construction with the copula. The expression refers to two sociolinguistic aspects: First, a relationship between proverbs and speakers of the Bedouin Beja culture, because the term *ti-bɔa:wji* ‘the Beja’ denotes ‘authentic’ Beja, who necessarily respect the distinctive conservatism of a mostly rural lifestyle, and excludes other Beja, who may be designated in the response only by first person pronouns. Second, it refers to the position that a proverb is far from expressing the speaker’s personal opinion on a specific proverbial event. We shall see that this is a relatively misleading idea. The meaning of a proverb is not immediately explained, which indicates the intention to allusively convey the message of each proverb. If its personal character were asserted, the proverbial metaphor distinctive of the context would disappear, according to the Beja conception of what a proverb is. Here, the power of the speaker’s opinion is asserted by hiding its reality from those who do not immediately understand it, using a simple attribution to otherness that is the entire community.

There is no dedicated Beja lexeme for ‘proverb’, although proverbs are widely used. However, some Beja living in towns may use three variants of a term which refers, in their Beja variety, to both tales and proverbs, *masal*, *massal*, or *mitaal*, which is actually borrowed from Sudanese Arabic *masal* ‘proverb’ (in which *s* replaces the interdental *θ* of Classical Arabic *maθal* ‘proverb, example’). Although there are many proverbs that come at the end of tales (like proverb 2 above), the two literary genres are normally used separately in Beja, with totally different functions. I think that the polysemy of these terms also asserts an intention to completely hide the metaphor that characterizes a proverb and its direct content. In fact, the reason behind this secretive attitude can be conceived as being within the larger scope of the discourse strategy, requiring, for the sake of eloquence, the forsaking of any direct expression of the intended meaning. The apparent confusion of terms once again shows that the pragmatic aspect of proverbs is being denied, insofar as they are, in their utterance, the expression of a personal opinion addressed to a specific interlocutor. The community may concentrate on one conventional meaning of a proverb, treating it as a narrative production as in a tale. But what is essential for the existence of

<sup>7</sup>His transcription system has been adapted to IPA.



a proverb is the event that creates a contextual meaning based on the speaker's purpose in that context. This is why a proverb is a metaphor by virtue of its construction, and not by virtue of the fact that both its literal and conventional meanings may contain metaphorical images. Henri Meschonnic (1976, 427) pointed out this unique nature of the proverbial metaphor. There is no proverb if it is assimilated to a tale, because the tale lacks the contextual meaning linked to the proverbial event.

In non-allusive speech, the reported discourse is inserted between the subject and its quotative verb, as in proverb (3), where the subject is additionally qualified by a relative clause.

- (3) *tak*      *ʔáraw*      *ba:bari*      *ʔárawa:ni:*    *idi*    *e:n*  
 man      friends      who.doesn't.possess    oh.our.friends    he.said    they.said  
 'A man who has got no friends said: "Oh! our friends!" they said.'

But if the reported speech *ʔáraw-a:-ni:* 'Oh! our friends!' were placed in initial position, this would direct the attention of the interlocutor to a hidden meaning, and the whole sentence would be interpreted as a proverb (see 17 below), necessarily spoken in relation to a specific event.

Allusive speech, called *sʔá:rja*, is valued among Beja Bedouins and is considered as a trait of eloquence. Beja proverbs make use of allusion devices such as ellipsis and metaphors in order to convey contextual meanings. The Beja people consider the proverb as part of the allusive speech punctuating discourse, and as asserting the speaker's eloquence, because it builds a symbol to be decrypted, and performs important functions in daily social life.

Beja society places a special emphasis on speech. This is evidenced by the frequent use of several maxims in the context of advice or advocacy in customary courts, such as in (4–6).

- (4) *imi:da:bu:k*      *bi:li:s-ho:k*  
 your.tongue      must.not.reduce.you  
 'your personality depends on what you say',

- (5) *biqwa*    *bhali*      *hadi:da*  
 fat      speech      speak  
 'tell a great speech!'

- (6) *imi:da:bi:so:k*    *winna*  
 by.your.tongue    be.great  
 'be great because of what you say!'

The social importance of speech leads us to consider different hierarchical degrees for discourse genres, as mentioned above.

## 6 Classification of Beja proverbs

The classification given by Adarob Ohaj (1972) proposes four categories: 'legal', 'educational', 'said on behalf of animals or things', and 'miscellaneous'. The first two categories correspond to criteria of social functions or areas of proverbial use. The multiplicity of proverbial functions led Adarob Ohaj to propose the ambiguous category of 'miscellaneous proverbs', and to place

proverbs spoken in the name of animals and things in a separate category, with no indication of their function. He says nothing either about the principle of the opposition between human and non-human enunciators, or about the criteria for his classification. He does not take into account any enunciation situations, and thus neglects the proverbial value, its contextual updated meaning. His approach considers proverbs only as attributed to the Beja community, whereas contextually they have the power of personal points of view. I propose hereafter examples taken from Adarob Ohaj, with my comments focusing on the components of their specific semantic structures.

The 'legal' category (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 57–59) is a category of proverbs used during oral argumentation in Beja customary courts, called *madʒlas*. The litigant must be knowledgeable about the proverbs that must be cited in order to strengthen his arguments and convince the opposing party. Proverbs also express the rejection or acceptance of the opposing party's argument. They reinforce or invalidate other proverbs.

In (7) below, the literal meaning contains a comparison, and the conventional meaning refers to a general law: reconciliation is better and involves fewer losses than a quarrel or a war. The value of the proverb concerns the preference for a peaceful solution to the problem submitted to the court.

- (7) *o:fna:jka*                      *jha:j*                      *made:n*  
of.the.quarrel.than      the.reconciliation      they.become.easy  
'The reconciliation is easier than the quarrel.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 57)

In (8) and (9), the conventional meaning refers to the advantage of an excuse and its healing effect. The value of the proverbs here, linked to the context, depends on the actual situation in court. It implies the recognition of the origin of the blame, and the promise of an apologetic speech or action.

- (8) *ba:ka:jt*                      *ba:me:slhi:t*                      *kitha:j*  
that.does.not.exist      that.cannot.be.repaired      is.not.present  
'Any damage can be mitigated.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 57)

- (9) *o:ja:j*                      *tʔadʒar*                      *mhe:le:n*  
the.blame                      the.apology                      they.heal  
'Apology heals the blame' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 57)

The literal meaning in (10) is about the dirt on someone who gets up after having fallen. The conventional meaning is about a loss or a damage. As for the value (the contextual meaning) of the proverb, it refers to a request to accept a minimum amount of loss.

- (10) *qibtini:na*                      *ha:f*                      *anu:*                      *kajakta*  
thing.that.falls      dust      without                      does.not.rise  
'Not every being that falls rises without dust.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 57)

The proverb in (11) denotes, literally, a relationship between duration and beauty. The conventional meaning refers to the recommendation to be patient. The value refers to the request for the adjournment of the court's decision.

- (11) *tigwmadi:t*      *kafingirta*  
 that.lasts      does.not.become.ugly  
 ‘Business that lasts cannot go wrong.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 58)

According to Adarob Ohaj (1972, 59), the ‘educational’ category of proverbs contains two types. The first is made up of proverbs used to solve problems between members of the same tribe or family. In (12), the literal meaning refers to the interlocutor’s duty to protect his relatives from aggression or impoverishment. The conventional meaning is the general Bedouin law of solidarity between relatives, as part of the code of honour. But the metaphor lies in the contextual meaning, which can be an allusive comment on a particular incident. This may be a reminder or an order to the interlocutor to take responsibility for his relatives.

- (12) *wʔaja:j* *taku:k*      *bi:ja:j*      *bi:hami:r*  
 relative your.man      must.not.die      must.not.become.impoverished  
 ‘Your relative must not die or become impoverished.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 59)

The proverb in (13) literally refers to the idea of considering the members of a family as identical to a group of she-camels, but the conventional meaning is the need for solidarity between members of the same family. She-camels leave each other, scatter, and quarrel at night. Then they meet together in the morning, forgetting what happened between them the night before. This metaphor is different from the proverbial contextual meaning, which takes into account a particular family problem to be solved.

- (13) *ingalda*      *hawa:di:t*      *kamta*  
 the.one.men      of.night      are.she-camels  
 ‘Members of one family are (like) she-camels.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 59)

The second type of ‘educational’ proverb is used with a larger scope (14–16). The majority of Adarob Ohaj’s examples fall into this category. In (14), the literal meaning refers to an ethical principle in Beja Bedouin culture: an honourable man must take into account the value of good speech. The conventional meaning refers to a general law in the code of honour, while the value of the proverb lies in commenting on a specific context and producing the effect targeted by the speaker.

- (14) *inqiwʔo:r*      *ida:ji*      *mhe:n*  
 the.honourable.man      the.good.speech      they.satisfy  
 ‘The good speech satisfies the honourable man.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 59)

The literal meaning of (15) refers to the fact that if a liquid cannot become cloudy, it cannot become clear. Conversely, the possibility of becoming cloudy indicates the possibility of becoming clear. The conventional meaning metaphorically refers to the existence of unpleasant things among pleasant ones. The contextual meaning is another metaphor that defines the use of the proverb: it makes the enunciator evaluate contextual elements as pleasant or unpleasant, in order to perform the pragmatic act of reminding, advising, or comforting an interlocutor who is complaining or facing a certain problem.



- (17) *jʔarawa:ni: idi e:n wʔara:w ani*  
 oh.our.friends. he.said they.said the.friend without  
 “Oh, our friends!” the friendless said, they said.’ (personal knowledge)<sup>11</sup>

The goatherd’s interlocutor understood that the goatherd was too busy at that moment to be able to help him load the donkey. The literal meaning of the proverb concerns what is said by the friendless man. The conventional meaning is what is generally conceived about a man, who is sometimes forced to try to get an unreachable target by calling out for something that he does not have. The value (the contextual meaning) of the proverb alludes to a similarity with the initial context of the desperate call for friends by a friendless man. Here the similarity is implicit, and the value is a commentary on a contextual attitude. It can also be a humorous criticism of oneself (meaning that the interlocutor remains powerless because the speaker has committed an act against the rules of the code of honour), an implicit demand to be helped by the interlocutor, or a satirical piece of advice to warn against resembling the friendless person who desperately calls for help from others. In any case, the speaker’s aim is to evaluate an event, a task to which he chooses not to introduce a non-human enunciator. Compared to proverbs spoken in the name of non-human enunciators, ‘the friendless person’ of this proverb is the enunciator, playing the same role of completing the situation of the proverbial metaphor.

## 8 Purposes in uttering proverbs with non-human enunciators

The contextual meaning of Beja proverbs clarifies the reasons why certain proverbs are spoken in the name of non-human enunciators. However, at the level of conventional meaning, Beja proverbs, just like proverbs in other languages, are wise sayings that offer guidance and advice from generation to generation. The discursive strategies in which they are embedded are either argumentative, when targeted to influence the receiver’s opinion, expository when transmitting information, or both (see, e.g., Austin 1962; Brown and Yule 1983; Plantin 1996). We will be able to identify the reasons why Beja proverbs are uttered with non-human enunciators by considering the events and the speakers’ purposes with these two strategies, as detailed below.

### 8.1 Indicating disapproval of a defect or a behaviour

Let us consider example (18).

- (18) *u:n iragadi ba:raje:b-i id e:n igala:ba*  
 this my.leg I.do.not.like-is he.said they.said the.spotted.hyena  
 “I do not like (the state of) my leg,” said the spotted hyena, they said.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 66)

The literal meaning of (18) is the spotted hyena’s disapproval. The conventional meaning refers to undergoing a condition of which the speaker of the proverb disapproves. The value (the contextual meaning) indicates the disapproval of a defect or behaviour belonging to the speaker or one of his relatives (these being present in the same underlying way that a leg – the hyena’s leg – is an inalienable property of an individual). The spotted hyena is called *gala:ba*, literally ‘lame’, because of the shape of its legs and the way it walks, which are both indicators of this defect. In

<sup>11</sup>This proverb is not mentioned in previous accessible written sources.



the proverb, the natural state of the leg (which appears defective) is evoked as a despised entity, as if this state had happened at some point, and was not the property of the spotted hyena. Attributing this proverbial statement to the hyena makes the criticism, represented by the attitude of misappropriation, acceptable. If the proverb were about the speaker himself, it would convey a humorous self-criticism. If it were about another person, it would convey a satire under the guise of humour, in which the speaker is careful to maintain good social relations. Such contextual objectives are absent in proverbs attributed to persons, like in example (17).

## 8.2 Indicating ironical reaction

In (19), a man disagrees with a young one who wants to marry. The older man thinks that the young man should marry another girl. He therefore speaks with the elders of the young man's family to ask them to advise him to change his decision. But the older man realizes that he cannot convince them and that they have all already agreed to the marriage. He then utters the proverb in (19).

- (19) *imhaga:ji*      *ani*      *u:ma:g*      *anhadaj*      *id*      *ijanna*  
 the.summer      I      the.bad      I.am.finished.so      he.said      they.say  
 'The summer said: "I, the bad, I am finished, so ...," they say.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 67)

The proverb refers conventionally to a problem that has not been solved. The ellipsis represented by the unfinished sentence ending with "so..." implies a question: "So, what are you going to do?!", suggesting ironically: "your problems don't just persist during the summer, they continue even after it!" In its contextual meaning, the proverb indicates that the speaker withdraws after revealing his point of view (contesting the marriage because he expects his interlocutors' opposition, just as, at the end of summer, herders still expect difficulties in life, like transhumance and the need to buy fodder to support their livestock. The summer personified in the proverb has the symbolic value of a bad and troublesome person, and is mentioned to avoid mentioning the person who intends to disagree. This disguise is required in order to maintain tribal and social unity, by allusion to elements that cannot, for discursive and social reasons, be said directly on behalf of the speaker or another person.

The proverb in (20) is a second example of an ironical reaction: during the flood season, herdsmen in the flooded rural area around a village are forced to move and live temporarily in the village. They usually return home after their dwellings have dried out. One of them was asked to settle in the village. His answer was laughable.

- (20) *u:gʔo:jaj*      *ba:ski:ttinija*      *e:ne:k*      *gʔ-e:*      *i:qhan*  
 oh.the.frog      do.you.fast      when.they.say      while.drinking      who.lives  
  
*tak*      *idi*      *e:n*  
 man      he.said      they.say  
 'When they said, "Oh frog, do you fast?" it said, "(Is there a man) who can live even when he allows himself to drink?" they said.' (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 66)

The literal meaning refers to a frog who finds it difficult to live even if he abstains from fasting, by allowing himself to drink water. The conventional meaning is about a persistent difficulty,

that of living even if the speaker of the proverb abandons a task that he cannot perform. The contextual meaning of the event the herdsman endures is: “I already find it difficult to live in the village, and you ask me to make a house in it. That’s impossible.”

The allusion includes the representation of the non-human character as conceived by the Bedouin Beja society. In proverb (20), there is “a previously codified metaphor” (Leguy 2001, 159) based on the image represented by both the frog and the trait of incapacity that qualifies the person inferred in the proverb. This despised personality trait is assigned to an otherness in the animal kingdom. The social codification of the metaphor has the natural consequence of obscuring the real message of the proverb, and putting to the fore the eloquence of the speaker.

This is an eloquent reminder that incapacity or passivity<sup>12</sup> are to be denounced because they are negative traits according to the Beja’s code of honour. The proverbial language act of reminding is an intrinsic property of the proverb that can be explained in terms of the community’s code of honour. The comic effect comes from this caricature of a deviation from the values of Beja society.

### 8.3 Indicating agreement or disagreement

The speaker of the following proverb (21) is confronted with a situation in which two opposing viewpoints arise. To indicate his position, he says:

(21) *are:naje:b*      *ne:msi:w*      *birraje:b*      *ne:msi:w*      *id*  
 that.we.like      we.hear      that.we.do.not.like      we.hear      he.said

*e:n*      *ikara:j*  
 they.said      the.hyena

“We hear what we like, we hear (also) what we do not like,” the hyena said, they said.’

(Adarob 1972, 66)

The conventional and contextual meanings of this proverb concern the expression of the speaker’s opposing feelings towards two opposing points of view. The initial story behind this proverb is given as follows: There were travellers who had gotten off at a place to spend the night. They had a donkey. Some of them said “Let the donkey graze!”, others said “No, tie it up near here so the hyena doesn’t eat it!”, and each group insisted on their opinion. The hyena was listening to their discussion. It then said, “We hear what we like, we hear (also) what we don’t like.” The sentence later became proverbial.

The use of this proverb emphasizes that the speaker cannot speak directly about his or her preference. The proverb is attributed to the hyena, and allusively conveys the following idea: “I am in favour of untying the donkey so that I can devour it”. This allusion cleverly conceals the opinion of the hyena and, therefore, of the speaker. If the travellers discovered the presence of the hyena, they would hunt it down and kill it, but the hyena cannot move away because it wants to get hold of the donkey, an easy and fearful prey. Said in the name of a hyena, the proverb distances the speaker from any possible reproach or condemnation, in order to preserve social life

<sup>12</sup>The image of passivity concerning the frog is given in a humorous Beja poem (Vanhove 2005), which allows it to be considered as a stereotypical image attached to this animal among the Beja. The study of this type of metaphor provides information on a cognitive configuration, here between passivity and the frog, and is therefore part of an anthropological project (Moeschler 1996) about the Beja Bedouin culture.

(Leguy 2005). Through the two sentiments (liking, disliking) expressed, the example contains the speaker's position on Beja intra- or intercommunity otherness.

The use of the proverb reflects a respect for the code of honour (Hjort Af Ornas and Dahl 1991), and at the same time alludes to the rule of concealing any direct expression of feelings, which represents one of the rules of this code. Bedouin Beja society is characterized by a valued social conservatism that is also discursive and that gives rise to this particular oral modesty.

#### 8.4 Indicating an evaluation of an event

Evaluating an event may be the anecdotal evaluation of a behaviour. The allusive aspect of proverbs is often based on anecdotes that are pleasantly told, easily remembered, and that appeal to the sense of humour, which facilitates their oral transmission. The anecdotal allusion in (22) is discreet and punctual: a man comes late and finds his meal mates having nearly finished their food. There is nothing left for him but a little meat broth. The friends ask him to wait for a better alternative. He replies with the proverb in (22).

- (22) *o:re:w*            *rha:t*            *da:ji:ti id*            *e:n*            *ikara:j.*  
the.livestock    that.have.seen is.good he.said            they.said            the.hyena  
“(Everything) that has to do with livestock is good,” said the hyena, they said.’ (Adarob Ohaj 1972, 66)<sup>13</sup>

The literal meaning refers to the idea of extending the value of livestock to encompass “everything related to livestock”. The conventional meaning refers to the love of any object linked to pastoralism, which seems to be a perfectly natural trait in a traditional pastoral society. The value of the proverb is represented by what the friends in the event understand immediately, which is the acceptance of the situation: “I’ll settle for that. I’m not going to look for other things to eat.”

The story behind this proverb tells of a hyena who was very hungry and couldn’t find anything to eat. Eventually, it found the hair of an animal. It put it in water and started drinking, looking at the hair until its belly was filled up. Then it said “(Everything) that has to do with cattle is good.”

First, regarding the enunciator, the hyena comically gives a point of view contrary to usage (the consumption of water in which hair has been put), which symbolizes an unusual context necessary for the use of the proverb. A human speaker could not play the same role as the hyena if he wanted to avoid any misunderstanding. Then, regarding the proverbial statement, although the phrase attributed to the hyena is in itself non-allusive, with an explicit mention of cattle, the anecdote as a whole remains allusive. In its various variants, the proverb considers livestock, and everything associated with them, as a good thing, bringing good luck and good omens. The anecdote provides a comical contrast between these positive qualities and the characterization of the context in which the proverb is spoken, for example, a situation of contempt for food derived from livestock, such as dairy products or meat. The anecdotal allusion serves to conceal the inappropriateness of contempt, resulting in a reinforcement of the transmission of this idea. Thus, the function of the allusive style of Beja proverbs is to skilfully conceal the message they convey in order to make it more powerful for the receiver.

A second example in which the purpose of the speaker is the evaluation of an event is given

<sup>13</sup> In another version used in the Gash region, the proverb is slightly different: *o:-re:w rha:t fibo:t-i* ‘everything that has to do with cattle is beneficial’.

in an expository discursive strategy. The animal intervention allows the speaker to indicate a better consciousness than the scope of the interlocutor's knowledge or feeling. In (23), the proverb appears as the conclusion of a tale.

(23) *tʔa*      *ki:ki*    *isakana*      *ilaga:j*      *ʔankʷana*      *jʔi:ho:bi*      *nu:n*  
 now      is.not    the.news      of.the.calf      the.master      when.he.comes    but

*bʔafo:t*    *tidi*      *e:n*  
 vixen    said    they.say

“The consequence is not now, but when the master of the calf arrives,” said the vixen, they said.’ (Morin 1995, 260)

The story behind this proverb tells of a calf who sank into the mud on its way to drink water. Its legs came to rest in the middle of the abundant mud. A vixen who saw the scene brought along a hyena, convincing it to catch and eat the calf. The hyena, encouraged by the idea of an easy prey, got bogged down, except for its back and neck, and could not reach the calf. The vixen laughed its head off and said: “The consequence is not now, but when the master of the calf arrives.”

The conventional and contextual meanings imply the following idea: “You must not limit yourself to only what is apparent. I know that something more important than what happens during the proverb's use is about to happen.” The seriousness of the problem is still to be considered. What is experienced is lighter than what is about to happen.

The proverb here is used to express eloquently a point of view that humans avoid explicitly. The vixen says what a man should not say. In this case, it warns its interlocutor to expect the worst (here to be drowned in the mud or killed by the master), to consider a negative development of the situation. The allusive process relates both to the situation in question and to the point of view of the speaker of the proverb.

## 9 Beja poems with non-human enunciators

We saw with the preceding examples that Beja proverbs and tales can be attributed to non-humans to fulfil certain speakers' purposes with respect to social and discursive restrictions. Beja poetry is the third genre that can have non-human enunciators. The following example illustrates a poem of four segments, preceded by an explanation of the context of its utterance.

Someone said to a dog: “You know, clothes are now cheap. You cannot stay naked. Buy some clothes!” So the dog replied:

(24) *o:gma:f*              *imrhiso:*              *e:msi:w*  
 the.cloth              its.becoming.cheap    I.hear  
 ‘I hear that clothes became cheap

*girfi*              *na:wi:*              *karabo:ban*  
 of.money              by.lack.of              I.do.not.become.naked  
 It is not by lack of money that I am naked

*dʒikka:t*      *ba:fadi:g*      *andi*  
 sirwal.belt      I.would.not.untie      I.say  
 I intend not to untie a *sirwa:l*<sup>14</sup> belt

*fajag*      *ʔilte:b*      *aʃanbi:b*  
 ease      in.trotting      I.look  
 I look for trotting easily.' (BEJ\_MV\_POEM\_04\_dog\_20)<sup>15</sup>

On the surface, the dog justifies its nudity by saying that it does not want to busy itself tying and untying a *sirwa:l* belt, which would be necessary if it wore one (or clothes, in general). The dog wants the comfort of moving ('trotting') easily, without the impediment of a belt. The theme of nudity is expressed negatively twice, first with the action noun *na:w* 'missing' and the negative polarity on the verb *rabo:b* 'be, become naked', literally "I am not naked because I lack money" in the second segment. However, the related sexual act is not explicitly mentioned. It is hidden by a metaphor expressed by the act of trotting. In the last segment, which is the semantic summit, as in all Beja quatrains (Hamid Ahmed 2005, 182), the receiver of the poem will guess the unsaid type of comfort that the dog is looking for by refusing to put on clothes. Thus, the quatrain is heavy with innuendos. It makes the listener laugh because of its poetic sense of humour. Even if the theme is saucy, it takes on an acceptable character in the poem, and the literary creation here mainly seeks a comic effect: we have here a dog *throwing*<sup>16</sup> (composing) a quatrain in order to defend its point of view concerning its own nudity. The justification of nudity by the search for an easier trot sounds comical. This example, once again, shows that speech is attributed to a non-human speaker for reasons of eloquence and decency, when the speaker intends to address an area of the unsaid related to modesty.

## 10 Conclusion

Human or non-human enunciators in Beja proverbs, tales, and poems are underscored by the presence of a person or a personified element who speaks in the text, or simply by the repetition of *e:n* 'they said' at the end of the sentences, which becomes a common stylistic feature attributing the content to the whole Beja community. So, the narrative mode with reported speech is predominant in these artful literary productions, proving that they all express somehow the thought and the wisdom of the Beja. The fact that some Beja proverbs are originally based on tales indicates a limited semantic similarity between the literal and the conventional meanings of a proverb and the moral of a tale, indicating both general and ethical laws. An analysis of the semantic structure as being composed of three types of meaning, literal, conventional, and contextual, has demonstrated that proverbs are distinguished from the genres of stories and poetry by their particular contextual meaning.

Concerning the discursive strategies adopted in these genres, they are either argumentative, expository, or both, with the major objective of convincing the interlocutor of the speaker's point of view. To reinforce these strategies, the Beja introduce non-human enunciators.

Beja proverbs have pragmatic, educational, and legal functions, making them valued

<sup>14</sup> *Sirwa:l* (a loanword from Sudanese Arabic) is a large outer garment for men, covering both legs and usually extending from the waist to the ankle, that is, a kind of trousers.

<sup>15</sup> Martine Vanhove's unpublished corpus.

<sup>16</sup> In Beja the verb *gid* 'to throw' is polysemous, and also means 'to compose a poem'.



expressions of the speaker's point of view. Proverbs are used to solve problems between members of one or more families. They are also used during oral argumentation in Beja customary courts. I have shown that these functions determine how proverbs function in the context in which they are used, including in ordinary conversation.

The analysis must consider that the specific metaphors of proverbs are situated in their actual relationship with the context. They come together with the optional metaphors found in the content of the same proverbs. To use a proverb is to construct a meaning that is, by definition, a contextual one, and gives to the proverb its value, which composes an essential part of a tripartite semantic structure, together with literal and conventional meanings. This pragmatic and semantic approach focuses on the analysis of actual proverbial events, considered in their situation of enunciation, in order to understand the reasons underlying the attribution of proverbial utterances to non-human enunciators.

The contextual meaning of each Beja proverb clarifies why some of them are spoken in the name of non-human enunciators. I have shown that the speakers' purposes within this strategy can indicate the disapproval of a defect or a behaviour, an ironical reaction, an agreement or a disagreement, or the evaluation of an event. These purposes found in the corpus show up when the speaker expresses allusively his own opinion, not when he tells of a general law.

Beja society places a special emphasis on speech, and in particular on allusive speech. Proverbs maintain to the highest degree the valorization of allusive speech. They allow the speakers in the proverbial events to achieve their purposes while keeping good relations with members of their community and thus preserving social harmony. The examples show that the Beja attribute speech to an animal or an inanimate entity in their proverbs, tales, and poems in order to achieve discursive and social goals that cannot be achieved by human enunciators due to social and stylistic restrictions. My analysis has shown that the attention paid by speakers to their relationship with their interlocutors has necessitated the use of non-human enunciators, in order to ensure that texts convey their contextual meaning in an eloquent way. The corpus shows that when caution is not necessary, as in the Beja proverbs used in educational and legal contexts, the enunciators are human entities directly expressing general and ethical laws.

We have also seen that Beja proverbs are said in the name of animals, either to make them acceptable or to make people laugh through humour. They indicate, in an allusive style, a humorous treatment of questions in the domain of the unsaid, or a criticism of oneself or of the Beja Bedouin community. Allusion, a stylistic device that is frequent in any discourse valued by the Beja, seems here to define the literary character of the Beja discourse represented by proverbs, tales, and poems. Said in the name of animals or inanimate entities, these genres refer in their conventional meaning to the code of honour of the Beja Bedouins, characterized by a social and discursive conservatism.

The article is consistent with the praxis theory of proverbs, which focuses on how context helps to inform the meaning of the proverb. Furthermore, it extends the concept of the enunciation situation to present the tripartite semantic structure of proverbs. The analysis of proverbial events resembles an ethnographic description, but it is also linked to the theory of proverbs as a discursive device, since the aims of the Beja speakers and the nature of the enunciators are presented in relation to specific discursive strategies. Such a contextual, discursive, semantic and pragmatic approach would be desirable for a better understanding of proverbs in the context of other oral tradition societies as well.

## Abbreviations

COL collective; COP copula; DEF definite; F feminine; IPA International Phonetic Alphabet; IPFV Imperfective; Lit. literally; M masculine; n.ac action noun; PL plural; REL relator; SG singular.

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