

## Linguistic Substitution as Verbal Dynamism

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### Abstract

Linguistic substitution is one of the most prolific and widespread processes in language use. All dialects resort to it for various purposes. An Arabic cross-dialectal investigation of this phenomenon shows the versatility of the processes reflected in substitution, and brings out all the robustness of dialectal verbal dynamism. Most of the processes involved in substitution are generally a result of applications in linguistic economy.

*Keywords:* : linguistic substitution; Arabic dialects; metonymy; lexical creation; antiphrasis.

## 1. Introduction

Linguistic substitution comes in many forms and uses a variety of processes. The processes mentioned in this paper are by no means exhaustive, and most have been the subject of numerous studies dating back to the antiquity. Most these studies, whether rhetoric treatises or general descriptions of figures of speech, belong now to classical knowledge and are classified under particular traditions. In *The Poetics of Aristotle* (2000: ch. 21), Aristotle classifies many figures of speech but does not give the names that we now know. For example, he does not specifically use the term ‘*metonymy*’ but he certainly makes a reference to it (under ‘*metaphor*’) when he stipulates that “*Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy*”. In fact, for ancient works, it was the metaphor that symbolized and characterized all the complexities of rhetorical analysis and activity. This situation prompted Groupe mu (1970 : 117) to observe that “*La rhétorique ancienne a été incapable de formuler une définition satisfaisante de la métonymie* ». Furthermore, and in the French tradition, these processes are studied both in the classical Fontanier (in a contemporary edition, 1968), in a more modern compilation by Group Mu (1970), and in the works of Ricoeur (1975) and Bonhomme (1998). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it is not necessary to go back to the symbolic rhetoric of the Exeter Book of riddles and vernacular riddling to situate the beginnings of at least some aspects of linguistic substitution. Even then, those riddles were, in the words of Charles Kennedy (1943: 134) ‘*a mosaic of the actualities of daily experience*’ and thus contributed a certain verbal dynamism to linguistic interaction in England even before the Norman Conquest. More recent works, such as those of Bolinger (1980), Hughes (1988) and a host of others have defined, analyzed and exemplified so many of the processes that enter in the various uses of language. According to Abu Libdeh (2011), the Arabic tradition in the study of figures of speech goes back even before their famous categorizations in *Asrar al-Balagha* by Abdul Qahir AL-Jurjani in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but has made little progress since then. One of the shortcomings that he attributes to the old studies is their failure to recognize the social function of figures of speech and to the new studies their failure to deal with new and modern day linguistic data. Before and after Al-Jurjani, however, there were good treatises and studies on grammar, *ilm al balagha* (rhetoric and eloquence) and *ilm al bayan* , and some of these are found under Arabic rhetoric in Sloane (2001). Another accessible chronological historical account of Arabic rhetorical disciplines and speech acts is found in Hussein (2006). In fact, Hussein [2006: 25] translates *ilm al bayan* as *figures of speech* to which he devotes the whole of chapter 5 [pp.196-238] of his book. It should be noted that more modern studies of linguistic substitution and figures of speech in Arabic dialects do include good presentations such as those of Farghal (1995) who analyzes Arabic euphemism along Gricean lines. It is not possible in this short presentation to include all the buoyant contributions in this lively domain.

While most of the above mentioned studies generally deal with linguistic substitution and its processes in written language, the present study will take its examples mostly from everyday speech and from diverse sources of dialect speakers across the Arabic spectrum. This by no way means that I am avoiding the written language, to which I shall have to resort when necessary; nor does it mean that I fanatically heed Orwell’s (1946/1970) first rule of writing in his ‘Politics and the English Language’: “*Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print*”.

## 2. Linguistic Substitution

Substitution is a process whereby a contextualized element or expression is replaced or substituted. This substitution is often resorted to for terms or expressions whose usage is considered taboo or simply unknown or ignored by the speaker. It is often chosen as a process whereby the speaker intends to replace or 'hide' a word or expression from the auditor. The purpose of this disguise is to keep the surrounding audience in total ignorance of the reality of the situation.

As with many other linguistic processes, substitution is created and perpetuated through the creative experiences of a few individuals or social groups. It somehow reflects creativity in linguistic intercourse that moulds and renews traditional linguistic corpus. In this respect, substitution pertains to the domains of general linguistics and stylistics.

## 3. Linguistic Substitution and Euphemism/metonymy

All languages need and use euphemism. Euphemism's cultural, social and diplomatic function is to cloak and camouflage the dirty bits of straight and plain language, and to dilute and cool the heat of fiery language in international relations. It is, according to Rawson (1981: 1), 'society's basic *lingua non franca*'. Metonymy, on the other hand, remains a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it bears a close association or for another of which it is an attribute. For Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 39) "metonymic concepts allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else". Gibbs (1999:61) goes even further when he states that "*metonymy shapes the way we think and speak of ordinary events and is the basis for many symbolic comparisons in art and literature*". In dialectal daily linguistic intercourse and in most of the occurrences involving this kind of use, we notice that substitution is purely lexical. For Hughes (1988:14-15), whose work on the interaction between words and social change is a valuable reference, euphemism is "*a linguistic indicator of a variety of taboos ... more revealing of certain cultural and psychological determinants than other trends*", and can be included in this category all words whose use is perceived as taboo or taboo-like, such as those for genital and sexual parts, but also those referring to social and familial organization. For example, the dialectal Arabic expressions [*al-dār*], [*al-bayt*] (metonymy of the container for the contained) and [*al-'yāl*], [*umm al-'yāl*], [*al-ħorma*] are used by male speakers as substitution metonymic expressions for 'woman' and 'wife'. To refer to their husbands, female speakers generally resort to the expressions [*mūl al-dār*], [*mūl al-ši*], [*mūl al-'yāl*] rather than the more straightforwardly classical [*rāġel*], or [*rāġl-i*] or [*zūġ-i*]. Female speakers in most North African Arabic dialect areas use the expression [*ħāša al-laħya*] (literally: 'Far be it from the beard', meaning 'far be it from you (the) man'). This locution is used by women when they address men on a topic that commands respect. It is well-known that in Maghribin dialects, the expression [*bu – šlāġam*] is closely related to Egyptian [*abu – šānəb*] (literally 'that with a mustache', and meaning a man). What is less known is the Egyptian plural [*šānabāt*] which is used for 'a group of men'. In this case, the terms [*laħya*] 'beard' and [*šānəb*] 'mustache' are metonymies of the object for the person. Here, we can see that the designation of metonymic relation is fairly clear, which is not always the case in everyday speech where, as Le Guern (1973:77) remarks, "most metonymies go unnoticed in normal conditions of communication" ('*La plupart des métonymies passent inaperçues dans les conditions normales de communication*'). [My translation]

In another context, euphemism is used as an 'oblique' technique for description and reference, whose main function is to 'obscure' the negative traits of the referent by substituting

more ‘positive’ ones for them to be socially acceptable. All Arabic dialects offer a feast of these oblique cases of which the most expressive ones are the Tunisian [*b šā ḥ tu*] (‘he is healthy’, literally ‘he has health’) as a euphemism for ‘obese’ and the Egyptian/Sudanese [*Karīm ‘ayn*] (‘generous or precious eye’) as a euphemism for the term [*a ‘war*] ‘one-eyed man’ (see Guella, 2010), and the highly expressive Egyptian [*bi- ‘āfyā šwīya*] (lit. ‘with little health’) as a euphemism for ‘poor health’ or ‘poorly’.

**[*bīlya*] and [*šāḡta*] (Egypt)**

Another interesting illustration of linguistic substitution involves both a double case of metonymy and euphemism. In Egypt, a young trainee in mechanics is referred to as [*bīlya*]. This term is a French borrowed word (‘*bille*’) perfectly integrated in Egyptian Arabic; this ‘*bille*’ is encrusted in a [*rūlma*], also derived from French ‘*roulement*’. In English terminology, the [*bīlya*] is in fact ‘*a bearing*’, a ‘*roller bearing*’, one of the smallest part in a car. The analysis of the expression requires two steps. First, [*bīlya*] may be said to be a part-whole metonymic expression for ‘car’. Second, our young trainee-mechanic is only a [*bīlya*], a euphemism for a simple unskilled trainee and not a professional mechanic yet. The same analysis applies to the expression [*šāḡta*] used for ‘a trainee-butcher’. [*šāḡta*], which is the ‘*white skin covering part of the meat in a mutton*’, is a part-whole metonymic expression for ‘meat’ (and other products sold at the butcher’s), and then it is used as a euphemism for our young trainee-butcher.

**[*ali bāba*] (Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf States)**

This expression is a ‘pidginized’ locution which means ‘thief’. It is mainly used within the expatriate Asian community in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, but also by some nationals and other Arab expatriates when addressing the non-Arabic speaking expatriates to refer to ‘thief’ or ‘thieves’. [*ali bāba*] is an invariable form which applies to the singular or plural (with both masculine and feminine). It constitutes a direct reference to the mythological character of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* story. The Arabic [*al ḥarāmi*] (and its plural [*al ḥarāmiya*]) or [*al xāyən*] or [*al- sārəq*] are simply not used by non-Arab expatriates. Here again, [*ali bāba*] is used as a part-whole metonymic expression and at the same time as a euphemism for ‘thief’. Another interesting feature is that the expression [*ali bāba*] is also used as an adjective: an Egyptian taxi-driver was explaining to a Bangladeshi interested in the trade that she should beware taxi firms who impose too many drastic conditions to taxi drivers recruits, warning that there are [*katīr ali bāba šarika*] ‘(there are) many firms thieves’.

**[*al hāla*] (Some parts of Algeria)**

The expression [*al hāla*], which the author has frequently heard in the western region of Algeria, more specifically in the city of Nédroma and Tlemcen, is derived from Arabic [*al- āla*] (= *the instrument*) which refers to ‘*musical instrument*’. [*al hāla*], however, is a specific expression used for the ‘*orchestra*’ invited to sing in ceremonies, such as marriage ceremonies. [*al hāla*], in this case, is not only a part-whole metonymic expression for ‘*group of musical instruments*’, but also as a euphemism for ‘*orchestra, group of musicians*’.

**[*al-xasla*] or [*al- ḡasla*] (Algeria)**

Dialectal Arabic has a rich vocabulary for menstruation. In North African Arabic dialects, the French expression ‘*les règles*’ is frequently used among female speakers to refer to menstruation, in addition to a big number of other words and expressions. The expression [*al-xasla*] or [*al- ḡasla*], however, seems to be used only in the western parts of Algeria and in Morocco. It is attested by Marçais (1955: 357) in Rabat in expressions like [*ma- zālet ma ḡáslet*]

(‘she has not reached her puberty yet’) and by Marçais & Guîga (1958-61: 2820) in the word [ġasla] (phonetic symbols as in original sources). This expression is then an old locution used by women and adolescent girls as a euphemism for menstrual discharge or cycle. [*al-xasla*] or [*al-ġasla*] in Arabic may mean something like a ‘wash’ or a ‘cleaning’. In this sense, menstrual discharge is seen by women as a purification of their bodies of ‘bad’ blood. The idea of ‘uncleanliness’ associated with menstruation is reinforced by the euphemism [*l-wsax*] ‘dirt’ used to refer to it by Morocco women (cf. Fatima Sadiqi, 2003:82).

**[baladiya ] (Saudi Arabia)**

- (a) [*baladiya*] means ‘town hall’ and is normally a replacement form for [*šū’ūn al baladiya*] (‘communal affairs and services’) that it provides, such as trash collection, water distribution, etc.
- (b) The expression [*baladiya*] has in this case undergone a restriction in meaning and refers to ‘trash’ or useless things that should be thrown away (or in fact that should be collected by the [*baladiya*] services).
- (c) Although the term [*baladiya*] is used as a euphemism for trash or something that should be thrown away, we can also say that it functions as metonymy of the part for the whole, in the sense that the actual services provided by the town hall come in the form of a big number of services of which trash collection is only one aspect.

**[māḥbas], plural [maḥābes] (Syria and elsewhere)**

- (a) The term [*māḥbas*] means ‘wedding ring’ in Syrian Arabic. In some Maghribin dialects, however, the term [*māḥbas*] means the ‘jar’ or the ‘stool’ on which small children sit to evacuate their bowels before they reach the age when they are able to use the normal bathroom toilets. Other terms used for this kind of stool are, beside the Syrian [*nūnīya*], the expressive word [*gallās*] (<Arabic جلس ‘to sit’), frequently heard in the north-western part of Algeria and north-eastern areas of Morocco. The Berber term [*ašquf*] is also used throughout the Berber-speaking areas in the Maghreb in addition to some Arabic-speaking pockets. In other Arab countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, the most frequent term used is [*qasrīya*] or [*qusrīya*]. All these terms for ‘stool’ carry a connotation of ‘compulsory’ or ‘constraining’ that is conveyed by the classical Arabic adjective [*qasriy*].
- (b) Both [*māḥbas*] (=ring) and [*māḥbas*] (=stool) share the notion of being engaged, constrained or trapped in a situation. The idea of prison is reinforced by the fact when babies are done evacuating their bowels they generally shout or cry and ask for help to be relieved from the ‘stool-prison’. Likewise, wearing the [*māḥbas*] for a man or woman in Syria means that they now live in what Arabs call the ‘golden cage’ (القفس الذهبي) which is a prison albeit a golden one. To flee from this cage may turn out to be a dramatic experience.
- (c) In this sense, I think it is perfectly reasonable to consider the Syrian [*māḥbas*] as a metonymy of the part for the whole because the ‘wedding ring’ is only one element of matrimonial union that leads to the ‘golden cage’. By contrast, the ‘stool’ [*māḥbas*] is a euphemism for an almost taboo-object used for an almost-taboo activity. The use of the term may be viewed as a justification of the ‘punishment’ of the culprit-user of the object, even if he/she is an irresponsible infant.

#### 4. Linguistic substitution and antiphrasis

In the case of antiphrasis, the process of linguistic substitution consists in the expression of a sense opposite to the intended or projected sense, or even the literal one. In other words, the lexical items used in antiphrasis undergo a semantic inversion and are made to project a meaning contrary to the original or traditionally normal sense. In general, this transformation also produces an ironic or humorous effect. However, some researchers, such as Morier (1989), consider antiphrasis as synonymous of irony. The author of this paper does not entirely subscribe to this extreme view, even though it is acceptable to say that antiphrasis is one of the salient and classical processes of irony and sarcasm. Consequently, the examples illustrating this phenomenon in this paper do not exclusively reflect the dimension of irony in antiphrasis, and this is probably due to the social and cultural nature of the data (see below).

Antiphrasis has always been considered a special rhetorical trait of an ingenious or inventive group of people. I shall not be so cynical as to say that is the reason why antiphrasis occurrences are much rarer than those of, say, euphemism and metonymy. Sherin Rizk (2007:297) cites an example of ‘*intonational*’ antiphrasis used by Cairene University students that has a parallel in other Arabic dialects. The example, [kul sāna w-enta ṭayeb] as a response to a question about the fate of the respondent’s salary occurs with the meaning of ‘*it’s gone, it’s finished*’. So, instead of the traditional meaning of a ‘*happy new year*’ projected in the ‘*future*’ as marked by the adjective ‘*new*’, the expression is used ironically to express a ‘*past*’ happening. In some Algerian dialects, the expression [sabāḥ al-xayr] is used with a special intonation to express the idea that what the listener is saying is ‘*old*’ and commonly known, and not ‘*new*’ like a ‘*new*’ morning. Also, the antiphrasis [bedri] ‘*early*’ (with a rising-falling intonation) is frequently used among Saudi and other Gulf youth to express the thought that their visitors are in fact ‘*late*’.

Guella (2010: 480-481) mentions some interesting examples of cross-dialectal antiphrasis. In eastern Algeria and western Tunisia, the word [bṣīr] ‘*having vision*’ is extensively used as an antiphrasis for ‘*blind*’ with no connotation of irony or sarcasm. Similarly, the expression [ṣ āḥi k- al na’sān ] (lit. ‘*awake like someone asleep*’) is used in Egypt and Sudan and should rather be considered as an oxymora because the speaker’s intention is to state only the reality of the situation, with no attempt to hide. If there is any irony, it should be produced by the ‘*alliance of contradictory signifiers*’.

#### 5. Linguistic Substitution and Borrowing

This section will consider some terms or expressions which should be considered as actual borrowings. Unlike code switching instances where the lexical items and expressions retain their structure in the language of origin, lexical borrowings are completely integrated in the dialect in which they are used (Poplack, 1980; Poplack & Meechan, 1998).

- **Fort [fōr ](Algeria)**

- (a) The French adjective ‘*fort*’ (which means ‘*strong*’) is singular masculine. Its feminine counterpart is ‘*forte*’, while the plural forms are ‘*forts*’ and ‘*fortes*’ (masculine and feminine respectively). In Algerian Arabic, however, there is only one neutralized form [fort] which takes up not only all the French adjectival declensions but also its adverbial manifestation.
- (b) Thus, in Algerian Arabic, the meaning of [fort] covers not only the idea of ‘*strong*’, ‘*excellent*’, ‘*beautiful*’, etc., but also the adverbial ‘*strongly*’, etc. [matš

*fōr*] is a ‘good and thrilling [football]match’, whereas [*yel'eb fōr*] means ‘he plays very well’. [*gāto fōr*] is a ‘delicious cake’ (with the idea of ‘strongly good’=‘very good), [*film fōr*] is a ‘good film’, and [*šōrba fōr*] means a ‘well-cooked’=‘delicious’ soup’, and also in sentences like [*al 'ūrs fāt fōr*] ‘the marriage ceremony went very well’.

- (c) The conditions and variations of use of the term [*fōr*] are close to those of the expression [*normal*], as reported in Guella (2010), and it should be noted that this kind of occurrence and its uses seem to set a pattern in the speech of many dialects speakers in the area.

- **[*farāmāl*] (Much of the Arab world and Gulf dialects)**

This lexical borrowing is an interesting one in many ways.

- (a) First, it is so perfectly adapted to the dialects of much of the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries in general that no other term or expression seems to compete with it, except the English borrowed word ‘brake’, pronounced [*brīk*]. Furthermore, its origin is a surprising one for this part of the world to integrate it. In fact the term [*farāmāl*] is derived from French ‘*frein à main*’, meaning ‘handbrake’. It has been introduced by people with some contact to French, most probably Syrian and Egyptian expatriate mechanics in the Gulf area.
- (b) What is interesting is that the expression [*farāmāl*] has undergone a semantic expansion as it applies to both ‘handbrake’ and ‘footbrake’ and also to the ‘break-shoes’: that is the reason it is used in the plural, the singular form [*farmāl*] being sometimes used to refer to one ‘brake-shoe’ but never to the whole breaking process.
- (c) The term [*farāmāl*] is not known and used in the North African old French colonial areas where the French terms ‘*frein à pied*’ (footbrake) and ‘*frein à main*’ (handbrake) and the expression ‘*plaquettes de frein*’ (brake-shoes) are normally used as borrowed items.

## 6. Linguistic Substitution and Lexical Creation

In this section, the first three lexical items [*hitist*], [*hūgra*] and [*harrāga*] are somehow linked in chronological order: the [*hitist*] of the 1970’s defeated and stigmatized by unemployment and intimidated by the [*hūgra*] of the 1980’s were pushed in their search for a decent way out to become desperate [*harrāga*] in the 1990’s and later. Obviously, we are talking of a progressive social phenomenon, which means that the [*hitist*] of the 1970’s are not necessarily the same people that became the [*harrāga*] of the 1990’s.

### [*hitist*] (Algeria)

[*hitist*] is a fairly old expression –it goes back to the 1980’s - used in Algeria to refer to those individuals, mostly unemployed, who spend their time standing outside of their homes, with their backs to the walls of buildings. The word [*hitist*] has its origin in the Algerian Arabic word for ‘wall’ [*hit*]. In fact, it was those [*hitist*] who, fed up with [*hūgra*] and [*haggāra*] and in search of a decent way out of their miserable condition and frustrating unemployment, later came to constitute the bulk of the [*harrāga*].

### [*hūgra*] and [*haggāra*] (Algeria)

[ḥaggāra] is the plural form of [ḥaggār]. The [ḥaggāra] practice the [ḥūgra], which is a degrading, insulting and intimidating attitude towards the common people who have no social and administrative connections to solve their daily problems. The [ḥaggāra] are generally members of the pervasive and corrupt administrative apparatus and the police and those civil servants supposedly at the service of the public.

**[ḥarrāga] (Algeria)**

[ḥarrāga] (plural of [ḥarrāg]) is the expression used of those individuals who try to cross illegally the borders to other countries, especially from North African countries to European borders. Originally, and literally, the word [ḥrāg] is derived from the expression [[ḥrāg al fi – rūž] (=passing or running a red light) which is a *calque* – in fact a phono-semantic matching with borrowing - from French ‘*brûler un feu rouge*’- where the [ḥrāg] part is borrowed. In the 1970’s, I used to hear this expression from students who avoided paying their bus fare and later took some pride in their act by saying: ‘[ḥrāgna]!’ (‘We took a free bus ride!’)

**[beggār] (Algeria)**

The expression [beggār] (plural [beggāra]) contains the Arabic root for ‘cow’, [bagra]. Originally, the [beggār] is a trader in horses or cows, what the French call a ‘*maquignon*’, a term which carries a connotation of cheating and unscrupulousness. The term has acquired a semantic extension in Algeria and applies nowadays to those people who became rich and wealthy through illegal means, but who have nevertheless remained conservatively unrefined in their social manners and linguistic intercourse. The [beggār] is a lexical creation. It is the Algerian equivalent of the ‘*nouveau riche*’ who shows off his newly acquired fortune but without any taste and without modesty.

## 7. Conclusion

The main purpose of this brief paper is to show that linguistic substitution in its various forms and applications contributes a great deal to verbal and lexical creation in dialects. This verbal dynamism should in fact be viewed from the perspective of an interactive and forceful projection of the surrounding social and cultural field.

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