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A Comparative Cognitive Analysis of Repartee in Persian, Arabic, and English

Zeinab Akbari *
Assistant Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran
zakbari@alzahra.ac.ir

Abstract
This study presents a comparative cognitive analysis of repartee—a strategic, adversarial form of verbal interaction characterized by rapid response, subversion, and parallelism—across Persian, Arabic, and English. Repartee is conceptualized as a linguistic duel wherein the responder (H) reconfigures the initiator's (S) utterance through deliberate mirroring, thereby inverting its intended meaning. This research addresses a notable gap in the literature, as most prior studies have focused primarily on European languages, leaving the cognitive and structural underpinnings in non-European traditions underexplored. Focusing on two core mechanisms, the study examines Structural Parallelism—defined as the replication of the syntactic or logical framework of the initiating utterance to produce a counter-response with an inverted evaluative focus—and Polysemous Parallelism, which exploits inherent lexical ambiguity to reassign meaning and subvert the original communicative intent. Employing Langacker's (2001) Current Discourse Space (CDS) model, the analysis demonstrates how hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal operate within the CDS to reconfigure shared conceptual structures. Qualitative analysis of 150 repartee instances (50 per language) reveals universal cognitive strategies: (1) responders detect and subvert implicit assumptions via syntactic/lexical mirroring, and (2) reorient evaluative hierarchies by shifting the figure (salient focus) and ground (contextual assumptions) within the CDS.
Keywords: Repartee, Cognitive Linguistics, Structural Parallelism, Polysemous Parallelism, Current Discourse Space.

1. Introduction

Repartee is a dynamic and strategically adversarial form of verbal interaction, defined as a linguistic duel in which the responder skillfully turns the initiator's utterance against itself to secure a rhetorical victory. At its core, repartee is characterized by three principal features: rapidity, subversion, and parallelism. Rapidity refers to the instantaneous formulation of responses under conversational pressure, while subversion involves the reinterpretation or reframing of the original utterance to undermine its intended effect. Parallelism, meanwhile, denotes the maintenance of linguistic or conceptual alignment between the initial statement (U) and the counter-utterance (U′); it is through this mirroring—whether in syntactic structure or lexical ambiguity—that the responder effectively neutralizes the adversary's message. This combative essence is inherent in repartee, as the initial statement often places the responder in a "one-down" position, from which a swift and cleverly constructed reply can reverse the power dynamic and achieve both rhetorical and social dominance.

Despite its rich historical presence and extensive documentation in literary and political discourses, most research on repartee has been confined primarily to European languages. The majority of studies have examined repartee within a single cultural context, often neglecting cross-cultural comparisons, particularly between non-European and European linguistic traditions. As a result, the cognitive mechanisms and structural strategies that underpin repartee in languages such as Persian and Arabic remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by adopting a comparative approach that focuses on the adversarial and subversive nature of repartee across Persian, Arabic, and English. By concentrating on these diverse linguistic landscapes, we aim to reveal universal cognitive strategies as well as language-specific variations in the deployment of repartee.

The primary objective of this study is to compare the cognitive mechanisms underlying repartee in Persian, Arabic, and English. In doing so, we focus specifically on two principal modes of linguistic parallelism: Structural Parallelism, wherein the responder

*Corresponding author
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mirrors the syntactic or logical structure of the initiating utterance to produce a counter-response with an inverted meaning; and Polysemous Parallelism, which exploits the multiple meanings of a lexical item to subvert the intended message. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. What universal cognitive strategies are employed in adversarial repartee across these three languages?
2. How do Structural and Polysemous Parallelism function as core mechanisms in the subversion of the initiating utterance?

This study is innovative in its cross-cultural examination of repartee by integrating Persian, Arabic, and English—a comparison seldom undertaken in previous research. By narrowing the focus to Structural and Polysemous Parallelism, the study provides a parsimonious yet robust framework for analyzing adversarial humor. The theoretical implications extend to reinforcing and refining cognitive models of humor, particularly by highlighting mechanisms such as hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal in real-time discourse. Practically, the findings promise to enhance our understanding of intercultural communication and the universality of linguistic ingenuity, thereby offering valuable insights for both cognitive linguistic theory and applied communication studies.

The paper is organized as follows: The Literature Review synthesizes prior studies on repartee and highlights the research gap. The Theoretical Framework elaborates on Langacker's Current Discourse Space and the cognitive mechanisms underpinning repartee. The Analysis section presents a comparative examination of selected examples, followed by a Discussion of theoretical and practical implications, and concludes with suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Research on repartee—a strategic form of adversarial verbal interaction— has evolved along two primary trajectories (Sherrin, 1996): the rhetorical–literary tradition and the linguistic–pragmatic, cognitive-linguistic approach. The former is deeply rooted in classical Arabic and Persian traditions, whereas the latter predominates in Western scholarship on conversational humor and cognitive linguistics. This section synthesizes these streams, identifies critical gaps, and positions the current study's contribution.

Rhetorical–Literary Approaches in Arabic Scholarship: The Arabic literary tradition has long recognized repartee—termed *al-ajwiba al-muskitah* ("silencing repartees")—as a distinct rhetorical and literary genre, particularly within the context of debate and intellectual contestation. By the third century AH (9th–10th CE), it had been codified as a refined verbal art, with early scholars systematically documenting its structure and function. Ibn Abi ʿAwn's *al-Ajwiba al-Muskitah* represents one of the earliest treatises to classify repartee as a rhetorical duel (Ibn Abi 'Awn, 1996, p. 45). Likewise, Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih in *al-ʿIqd al-Farid* likens repartee to a verbal battle in which conciseness, rapidity, and intellectual subversion serve as the principal weapons (Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, 1983, p. 4/53). The Abbasid era, which fostered intense literary and ideological exchanges, witnessed the consolidation of repartee in courtly, scholarly, and theological discourse, as reflected in *Rabiʿ al-Abrar* (Al-Zamakhshari, 1992) and *Akhbar al-Adhkiyaʾ* (Ibn al-Jawzi, 2003, 2008). The role of *al-ajwiba al-muskitah* in contesting power, refuting adversaries, and securing rhetorical dominance is further highlighted in Ibn Qutaybah's *ʿUyūn al-Akhbar* (Ibn Qutaybah, 1996) and in al-Thaʿalibi's *Thimar al-Qulūb* (Al-Tha'alibi, 2003). Classical literary anthologies meticulously preserved these witty exchanges, often contextualizing them within broader socio-political and religious discourses (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1982; Ibn 'Asim al-Gharnati, 2009).

While early Arabic studies primarily focused on cataloging repartee as an aesthetic and rhetorical phenomenon, modern scholarship has sought to contextualize it within cognitive and pragmatic frameworks. Contemporary analyses, such as those by Qadduri (2018) and Fa'ur (2014), examine the stylistic devices underlying repartee, including *Jinas* (paronomasia), *tawriyyah* (double entendre), and *Qalb* (chiasmus). Fa'ur's (2014) study explores the argumentative potency of repartee in classical Arabic texts, while Qasim (2017) situates *al-ajwiba al-muskitah* within the broader tradition of Arabic verbal dueling. Despite these contributions, repartee remains largely unexamined within cognitive linguistics, particularly regarding mechanisms such as figure-ground reversal and hyper-understanding.

Persian Scholarship: Unlike Arabic literary tradition, Persian rhetoric has not formally categorized repartee (*ḥaẓirjawabi*) as an independent literary genre. However, instances of repartee are widespread across various textual traditions. One of the most prominent contexts is found in classical Persian debates and dialogues, including heroic boasting (*rajaz*), panegyric disputes, and rhetorical exchanges in romantic epics, as exemplified in Neẓami's *Khusraw va Shirin*, where the king acknowledges his verbal defeat to Farhad, remarking: "به یاران گفت کز خاکی و آبی/ ندیدم کس بدین حاضر جوابی " (Nizami Ganjavi, 2013, p. 235). Mystical discourse and Sufi biographies also serve as significant repositories of repartee, where wit and brevity are employed as tools of spiritual instruction and rhetorical prowess (Muhammad ibn Munawwar, 2002; Aflaqi, 2007). Collections such as *Laṭaʾif al-Ṭawaʾif* by Fakhr al-Din ʿAli Ṣafi (Safi, 1957) and *Jawamiʿ al-Ḥikayat* by ʿAwfi (Awfi, 1973) document repartee under labels such as *laṭaʾif*, *ẓaraʾif*, and *nawadir*, demonstrating its social and rhetorical importance across different strata of Persian society, from jesters and beggars to scholars and court officials. Repartee appears extensively in satirical literature and humorous prose, where it functions as a linguistic device for wit and critique, often employed by both the elite and marginalized groups (Ja'farian, 2019; Shamisa, 2010, Ravanbakhsh & Mehravaran, 2022). This tradition extends to instructional texts, where repartee is used pedagogically, particularly in manuals promoting the rhetorical use of Qurʾanic expressions, as seen in *Qurrat al-ʿAyn* by Qaḍi Awsh (12th century CE), which emphasizes quick-witted responses in religious and social discourse (Qazi Awsh, 2018).

Despite its pervasive presence, repartee has rarely been the subject of systematic theoretical study in Persian rhetorical manuals. However, rhetorical devices such as *suʾal wa jawab* (question-answer) and *uslūb ḥakim* (wise redirection) have been implicitly linked to repartee (Raduyani, 2001; Rashid Vatvat, 1983). Kazazi (2019, p. 155) notes that the aesthetic value of *suʾal wa jawab* lies not merely in the question-answer structure but in the unexpected and intellectually subversive nature of the response. Similarly, *uslūb ḥakim*—a rhetorical strategy where the responder deliberately shifts the meaning of an utterance—parallels the figure-ground reversal observed in repartee (Mazandarani, 1997, p. 350; Vaḥidian Kamyar, 2004, p. 156). Classical Persian scholars frequently employed these techniques to redefine power relations in discourse, often subverting authoritative inquiries with spiritual or philosophical retorts (Aflaqi, 2007, p. 1/356; Saʿdi, 1997, p. 62). Shamisa (2010, p. 173) emphasizes that repartee is often structured to defeat the interlocutor

logically, using strategies such as rhetorical inversion, irony, and parody. However, contemporary Persian scholarship remains largely anthological, with collections emphasizing historical documentation rather than cognitive or pragmatic analysis (Shamisa, 2023; Vaḥidian Kamyar, 2004).

Linguistic–Pragmatic and Cognitive Approaches in Western Scholarship: In the English-language tradition, the repartee is frequently subsumed under the broader category of conversational humor (Norrick, 1984, 2003). Early descriptive works—such as Grote's *Viva la Repartee* (2005)—have compiled extensive Repartee collections without systematically interrogating their cognitive architecture. More recently, advances in cognitive linguistics have furnished new tools for examining adversarial humor (Dynel, 2009). Veale et al. (2006) theory of "trumping" reconceptualizes repartee as a multi-agent language game that leverages mechanisms such as hyper-understanding and parallelism. Within this framework, parallelism—whether structural or polysemous—enables the responder to reappropriate the initiator's utterance by preserving its formal features while inverting its meaning. This process is further anchored in Langacker's (2001) concept of the Current Discourse Space (CDS), which offers a dynamic representation of shared conceptual structures. Additionally, Dynel (2009) provides a comprehensive account of conversational humor, positioning repartee as a critical subcategory employed in a wide array of social interactions, from hostile exchanges to playful banter.

Despite these advances, several critical gaps remain. First, cognitive models of repartee have predominantly focused on European languages, leaving the mechanisms in Persian and Arabic largely unexamined. Second, while Arabic scholarship emphasizes rhetorical aesthetics and Western studies concentrate on pragmatic and cognitive aspects, there is a dearth of comparative analyses that bridge these approaches. Third, no systematic tripartite comparison of repartee mechanisms across typologically diverse languages has been undertaken. This study addresses these gaps by extending the "trumping" framework to encompass Persian and Arabic repartee. By concentrating on two primary modes of parallelism—Structural Parallelism and Polysemous Parallelism—we provide the first systematic cross-linguistic analysis of repartee, revealing universal cognitive strategies that underlie cultural and linguistic variation.

3. Theoretical Framework

To understand the semantic processes underpinning adversarial repartee, it is essential to examine the multiple ways in which interlocutors negotiate and reconfigure the meaning of their utterances. Cognitive linguistics offers a dynamic framework for this analysis by conceptualizing meaning as an emergent property of discourse, where both the objective content of an utterance and the interactive circumstances of communication are integrated into a cohesive whole.

A central concept in this regard is Langacker's notion of the **Current Discourse Space (CDS)**, as developed in his discourse-level extensions to Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2001). The CDS is defined as "the mental space comprising those elements and relations construed as being shared by the speaker and hearer as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse" (Langacker, 2001, p. 144). This construct provides a schematic representation of how both the speaker's utterance (S) and the hearer's counter-utterance (U′) are integrated into a unified discourse representation. In successful communicative exchanges, both parties are drawn into a coordinated focus on a particular conceptual entity—the linguistic profile—while the remainder of the conceptual base, comprising relevant but background information, is evoked as necessary.

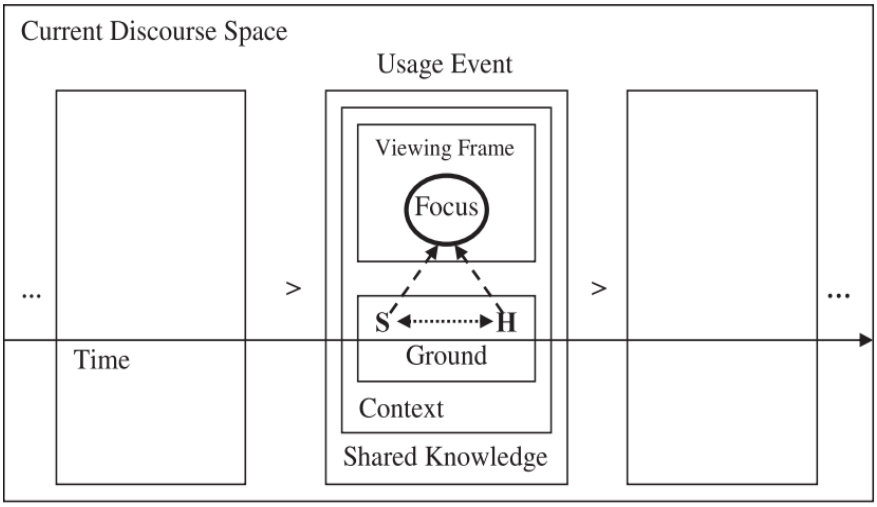

Figure 1. A schematic View of a Current Discourse Space of CDS (Langacker 2001, p. 145)

Within the CDS framework, the "viewing frame" delimits those conceptual entities that are most immediately salient during the unfolding discourse. For instance, when the term *knee* is employed, only those body parts (e.g., leg, muscles, bones) that are critical to characterizing the concept are activated within this frame. Moreover, the CDS encompasses a vast repository of commonly accessible knowledge—spanning bodily, mental, social, and cultural dimensions—that undergirds the interactive process. The "ground" of the discourse, in turn, is constituted by the entire speech event, the interaction between speaker and hearer (often symbolized by a bidirectional arrow), and the specific situational context (time, place) in which the exchange occurs.

The multifaceted nature of the CDS thereby provides the operational playground for the cognitive mechanisms of meaning construal. It is within this space that interlocutors continually rearrange the internal structure of their shared discourse, enabling them to represent experiences in diverse and flexible ways. As Casad (1995, p. 23) posits, "The speaker's ability to conceptualize situations

in a variety of ways is, in fact, the foundation of cognitive semantics". Similarly, Croft and Cruse (2004, p. 40–73) underscore the importance of analyzing how fundamental conceptualization processes—commonly termed construal operations—are manifested in language use.

Repartee's effectiveness, particularly in adversarial humor, lies in its capacity to manipulate this shared discourse space. Two critical cognitive demands emerge in the context of repartee:

1. **Hyper-Understanding:** This refers to the hearer's ability to demonstrate a nuanced and comprehensive grasp of the lexico-conceptual subtleties embedded in the speaker's initial utterance—subtleties that may escape the speaker's own awareness. It is precisely this understanding gap that creates the conceptual latitude for the hearer to outmaneuver the speaker, repurposing the original words and ideas to serve an opposing communicative goal.
2. **Figure–Ground Reversal:** In this mechanism, the hearer effectively redirects the focus of the discourse. Rather than accepting the speaker's intended meaning (the figure), the hearer reassigns prominence to an alternative, often ironic or unintended, interpretation (the new figure) while relegating the original meaning to the background (the ground). This reversal not only destabilizes the speaker's proposition but also reconfigures the shared discourse space in favor of the hearer's counter-narrative.

In summary, by leveraging both hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal within the framework of the CDS, interlocutors engaged in repartee are able to subvert the communicative intent of the initial utterance. This dual mechanism underpins the adversarial humor observed across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, providing a robust cognitive account for the transformative power of repartee.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Repartee occurs when an initial utterance (U) by an agent S (the instigating speaker) elicits a counter-utterance (U′) from a second agent H (the responding hearer) that not only contradicts or rejects U but actively subverts it by revealing that U is fundamentally unsuited to achieving S's communicative goal. In adversarial humor, this mechanism is not merely about negation; rather, it is the strategic appropriation of the speaker's own linguistic resources. Such subversion is achieved via parallelism—a framing device that aligns key aspects of U and U′ to produce a reversal of meaning. For the purposes of this study, we reduce the typology of repartee to two main forms of parallelism that capture the majority of cases encountered in Persian, Arabic, and English interactions:

1. **Structural Parallelism:** Structural parallelism is defined as the deliberate imitation of the syntactic or logical structure of the initiating utterance. In this mode, H constructs U′ by mirroring the formal configuration of U while introducing content that is antithetical or counteractive to S's original intent. This technique ensures that the reply remains contextually coherent yet semantically inverted, effectively "turning the tables" on S. For example, if S employs a conditional construction to articulate an insulting or self-aggrandizing remark, H may replicate that construction but substitute its components with a counterargument that negates S's claim. This type of parallelism is particularly effective under time pressure, where the rapid deployment of a structurally similar response accentuates the cognitive agility of the hearer.
2. **Polysemous Parallelism:** Polysemous parallelism exploits the multiple meanings (polysemy) inherent in a single lexical item to generate an effect of subversion. Here, the hearer's response capitalizes on a word or phrase used by S in an extended or figurative sense and reinterprets it in its literal, less salient meaning (or vice versa). By doing so, H creates an ironic or humorous inversion that exposes the inadequacy of S's original communicative intent. This type of parallelism provides a powerful lexico-conceptual bridge between U and U′ and is especially potent in contexts where punning and wordplay are central to the exchange. The strategic reallocation of meaning through polysemy not only demonstrates hyper-understanding but also leverages cultural and contextual associations to reinforce the Repartee's impact.

In both forms, parallelism serves not as a mere repetition of words but as a sophisticated cognitive strategy. Structural parallelism enables the hearer to replicate and then invert the formal characteristics of S's utterance, thereby maintaining a tight interactional bond while subverting its intended message. In contrast, polysemous parallelism operates on the lexical-conceptual level, where the reanalysis of a word's multiple senses creates a subtle yet decisive shift in meaning. Together, these two strategies allow for a focused yet comprehensive analysis of repartee, as they account for a significant portion of the adversarial humor observed in cross-cultural settings.

The present study adopts these two dimensions as its analytical lens. Preliminary examinations of repartee examples in Persian, Arabic, and English have revealed that most instances can be classified either as structural parallelism—where the responder's reply mirrors and inverts the syntactic framework of the original utterance—or as polysemous parallelism—where a word's inherent multiple meanings are reappropriated to achieve subversive humor. This binary categorization is not only theoretically sound but also pragmatically sufficient given the empirical data, as it provides a clear, replicable basis for comparative analysis across languages.

By employing these two forms of parallelism as the core of our analysis, we aim to demonstrate that despite cultural and linguistic differences, repartee in all three languages shares common cognitive mechanisms. The strategic use of structural replication and lexical reanalysis underscores a universal propensity for linguistic ingenuity in adversarial exchanges—a finding that has significant implications for our understanding of humor as a cognitive phenomenon. In our analysis, 150 instances of repartee (50 from each of Persian, Arabic, and English) were qualitatively examined. Preliminary examinations reveal that the majority of these examples can be robustly categorized into either Structural Parallelism or Polysemous Parallelism. By employing these two dimensions as the core analytical lens, the present study seeks to demonstrate that, despite cultural and linguistic differences, repartee in all three languages shares universal cognitive mechanisms. In doing so, we aim to highlight how the strategic use of structural replication and lexical reanalysis underscores a universal propensity for linguistic ingenuity in adversarial exchanges—a finding that bears significant implications for our understanding of humor as a cognitive phenomenon (Langacker, 1991, 1993; Dynel , 2009). Subsequent subsections will provide in-depth qualitative analyses of selected examples from each language, detailing how each instance exemplifies one of these two forms of parallelism and discussing the broader cognitive and cultural implications of these repartee strategies.

4-1. Structural Parallelism

Structural parallelism in repartee is characterized by the deliberate replication of the syntactic or logical structure of the initiating utterance (U) by the responder (H). While maintaining formal alignment, H inverts the semantic content of U, thereby subverting its communicative intent. This process is particularly effective in adversarial humor, where rhetorical mirroring enhances the cognitive impact of the Repartee. Within Langacker's (2001) **Current Discourse Space (CDS)** framework, structural parallelism achieves its effect by shifting the **profile** (the salient focus of the discourse) while redefining the **base** (the background assumptions that support the meaning of U). Below, we analyze representative examples from Persian, Arabic, and English, illustrating how adversarial wit operates through syntactic mirroring and semantic inversion.

Example 1: Persian Repartee from *Tazkereh-ol-Awliya* (Attar, 2019, p. 676)
Original Text (Persian):

نقل است که روزی [شبلی] کنیزکی صاحب جمال را دید. با خداوندش گفت که:

"این کنیزک را به دو درم میفروشی؟"

گفت" :ای ابله! در دنیا کنیزکی به دو درم که فروشد؟"

شبلی گفت" :ابله تویی، که در بهشت حوری به دو خرما میفروشند."

It is said that one day, Shibli saw a beautiful maidservant and asked her owner,
"Would you sell this maid for two dirhams?"
The owner responded,
"You fool! In this world, would anyone sell a maid for two dirhams?"
Shibli then countered,
"You are the fool, for in paradise, houris are sold for two dates!"

Representation (CDS Framework):

- **Before the Repartee (U):**
  - **Figure:** The evaluative focus in the initial exchange is on the economic valuation of the maidservant, where the monetary amount (two dirhams) symbolizes the mundane, transactional value of a human commodity.
  - **Ground:** The underlying assumption is that worldly commerce (and by extension, material value) governs social interactions; this is embedded in the cultural context where monetary exchange determines worth.
- **After the Repartee (U′):**
  - **New Figure:** Shibli's Repartee shifts the evaluative focus to a religious–idealized domain by invoking the imagery of paradise, where houris (celestial maidens) and dates represent a higher, transcendent form of value.
  - **New Ground:** The background assumptions are reconfigured: rather than being governed solely by material exchange, the discourse now implies that spiritual or divine valuation overrides mundane economic transactions.

Analytical Discussion: This Persian example demonstrates structural parallelism through the replication of a conditional question-answer format, in which the same syntactic structure ("Would you sell… for…?") is maintained. The responder (Shibli) mirrors the original conditional frame but inverts the evaluative domain. Aristippus' (the initiator) assertion situates the discourse within a worldly, economic context (the sale of a maidservant), wherein the figure is the monetary value, and the ground is the prevailing economic norm. Shibli's response subverts this structure by transferring the evaluative focus to the celestial realm (paradise) where the exchange involves houris and dates. This figure-ground reversal—shifting the emphasis from a materialistic valuation to a transcendent, ideological one—exemplifies hyper-understanding: Shibli discerns the implicit cultural assumption regarding economic worth and strategically reassigns semantic weight to contest it. The CDS is reconfigured such that the new figure (the divine or ideal value) now dominates the discourse, effectively undermining the initial claim and demonstrating the cognitive ingenuity inherent in repartee.

Example 2: Arabic Repartee (Chiastic Structure)

أنشد رجل رجلا شعرا، فقال له:

"لو ذهبت بهذا إلى البقال أعطاک علیه باقة بصل."

فقال له:

"فلو ذهبت بلحیتک إلى البقال لما أعطاک علیها زبیل سماه."

A man recited a poem to another, saying,
"If you take this to the grocer, he'll give you a bunch of onions".
The other replied,
"If you take your beard to the grocer, he wouldn't even give you a sack of straw".

- **Before the Repartee (U):**
  - **Figure:** In the initiating utterance, the figure is the poem, presented as an object with trivial economic value—symbolized by the "bunch of onions".
  - **Ground:** The ground comprises the underlying assumption that literary or artistic worth can be equated to a material exchange in the marketplace (the grocer's valuation).
- **After the Repartee (U′):**
  - **New Figure:** The responder shifts the evaluative focus to the initiator's own personal attribute (his beard), which is

reinterpreted as even less valuable.

- **New Ground:** The background assumption is reoriented so that the grocer's role in assigning low economic value remains constant; however, the target of the evaluation changes, thereby subverting the original metaphor and challenging the initiator's position.

Analytical Discussion: This Arabic example showcases structural parallelism through the preservation of the conditional structure ("لو ذهبت…") across both utterances. The initiator employs a metaphor that equates the poem with an object of low value (onions), thereby establishing a discourse where literary worth is trivialized. The responder mirrors this structure perfectly, yet substitutes the object with the initiator's beard, thereby effecting a semantic inversion. This substitution performs a figure-ground reversal: whereas the initial figure focuses on the triviality of the poem, the new figure shifts to the personal domain (the beard) to expose the initiator's own lack of worth or self-respect. The hyper-understanding mechanism is evident as the responder identifies the implicit equivalence between literary expression and material valuation and then repurposes it to undermine the initiator's argument. The reconfigured CDS thus reveals that the initiator's own self-presentation is subject to the same devaluation he initially imposed on the poem, thereby achieving a decisive rhetorical subversion.

Example 3: English Repartee – Diogenes vs. Aristippus

Aristippus: *"If you would only learn to flatter the king, you wouldn't have to live on lentils".*

Diogenes: *"If you would only learn to live on lentils, you wouldn't have to flatter the king".*

Analysis: The exchange between Aristippus and Diogenes is first represented schematically within the CDS framework. In this model, the initiating utterance (U) and the subsequent response (U′) are analyzed in terms of their constituent discourse elements:

- **Before the Repartee (U):**
  - **Figure:** The core evaluative element is the necessity of royal favor as a means of survival; Aristippus asserts that flattering the king is indispensable.
  - **Ground:** The background assumption is that economic well-being is inherently linked to social standing and the acquisition of favor, symbolized by the need to avoid living on lentils.
- **After the Repartee (U′):**
  - **New Figure:** Diogenes' reply shifts the focus to self-sufficiency as a liberating principle, thereby reassigning value from external validation to internal resourcefulness.
  - **New Ground:** The original background assumption is reconfigured; instead of dependency on flattery being necessary, it is recast as a consequence of excessive material desire. This new configuration underscores that economic simplicity (living on lentils) is not a state of deprivation but a marker of true freedom.

This representation captures the essence of structural parallelism, where the responder mirrors the syntactic and logical structure of the initiator's conditional construction while purposefully inverting its evaluative content. The exchange exemplifies a chiastic structure (AB → BA) in which the conditional syntax is preserved while the semantic content is inverted. In Aristippus' utterance, the causal relationship posited is that the act of flattering the king prevents impoverishment (living on lentils). Here, the CDS is configured with the figure as the necessity for royal favor and the ground as the assumption that material security is predicated on social subservience.

Diogenes' response retains the same conditional structure, thereby ensuring structural symmetry; however, it enacts a decisive figure-ground reversal. In his comeback, the new figure becomes the virtue of self-sufficiency, embodied by the modest sustenance of lentils, while the new ground is redefined to imply that dependency on flattering the king is an outcome of excessive material desire rather than an intrinsic requirement for survival. This inversion not only undermines Aristippus' claim but also forces a re-evaluation of the underlying assumptions that govern the discourse.

The mechanism of hyper-understanding is central in this analysis: Diogenes demonstrates an acute awareness of the implicit assumption that wealth and social status necessitate subservience. By strategically reversing the evaluative components—asserting that economic simplicity confers genuine freedom—he disrupts the original logical flow. The cognitive impact is twofold: the audience is compelled to reassess the conventional linkage between material prosperity and social deference, and the responder's ingenuity is underscored by his ability to manipulate the shared discourse space. Diogenes' inversion effectively redefines the communicative landscape, exemplifying how structural parallelism in repartee not only preserves formal coherence but also subverts the intended meaning through deliberate reallocation of semantic weight.

Together, these examples illustrate that structural parallelism in repartee operates by replicating the conditional or chiastic framework of the initiating utterance and then inverting its evaluative content through hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal. The CDS model elucidates how the shared discourse space is reconfigured in each case—whether shifting from worldly economic assumptions to transcendent values in Persian, or from literary worth to personal derision in Arabic. These integrated analyses provide a robust, replicable framework for understanding the cognitive mechanisms that underpin adversarial repartee across languages, thereby reinforcing the universal yet culturally adaptable nature of this linguistic phenomenon (Langacker, 1993; Veale et al., 2006).

4-2. Polysemous Parallelism

Polysemous parallelism exploits the inherent lexical ambiguity within a single term or expression, enabling the responder (H) to reassign meaning from its extended or figurative sense to its literal or less salient interpretation (or vice versa). This strategic reallocation of meaning disrupts the initiator's (S) communicative intent by producing an ironic inversion, thereby reconfiguring the shared Current Discourse Space (CDS) through a figure-ground reversal (Ritchie, 2004).

Example 1: English – Sir Francis Bacon's Repartee (Grothe, 2005, p.36)

Sir Francis Bacon, renowned as a great philosopher, statesman, and writer—and formerly Lord Chancellor of England (1618–1621)—

was celebrated for his wit. During a court session, Bacon observed the defendant Hogg, charged with murder, who attempted humor in his defense by proclaiming:

"Your honor should let me go. We're kin. My name is Hogg, and Hogg is kin to Bacon".

Bacon's concise reply was:

"Not until it's hung".

- **Before the Repartee (U):**
  - **Figure:** The central evaluative element in Hogg's utterance is the assertion of kinship, implied by the shared surname "Hogg" as a marker of familial solidarity and, by extension, leniency.
  - **Ground:** The background assumption is that such a familial connection confers moral or judicial protection, thus mitigating the severity of the charge.
- **After the Repartee (U′):**
  - **New Figure:** Bacon's reply shifts the evaluative focus from kinship to a punitive outcome through the term "hung". Here, "hung" is polysemous: one meaning refers to the literal act of execution by hanging, while another plays on the culinary process of curing bacon.
  - **New Ground:** The original assumption of familial protection is effectively negated. The reconfigured discourse posits that instead of leniency, the respondent's fate is sealed—either by the certainty of execution or by the inevitability of transformation (as in the curing of meat). This figure-ground reversal underscores the disruption of Hogg's initial appeal.

Analytical Discussion: This exchange exemplifies polysemous parallelism through the exploitation of lexical ambiguity. In Hogg's original statement, the term "kin" functions to evoke a shared familial bond, suggesting that the defendant's relationship with Bacon might soften judicial consequences. The CDS in this case is configured with the figure as the claim to kinship and the ground as the underlying expectation of protection derived from that bond. Bacon's Repartee, "Not until it's hung," maintains the conditional format while inverting the evaluative components. Here, the term "hung" is deliberately polysemous. On one level, it refers to execution by hanging—a stark, literal punitive measure. On another level, it puns on Bacon's own surname, evoking the culinary process of curing (or "hanging") bacon. This dual interpretation forces a cognitive reallocation within the CDS. The new figure becomes the inevitable punishment (or transformation) that awaits the defendant, while the new ground dismisses the previously assumed protection of kinship.

The cognitive mechanism of hyper-understanding is at play as Bacon demonstrates an acute awareness of the lexical ambiguity underlying Hogg's claim. By reassigning the semantic weight of "hung," Bacon not only undermines the assumption that kinship ensures leniency but also redefines the discourse space to highlight a more severe, immutable outcome. The process of figure-ground reversal is thus evident: the evaluative focus shifts from the benign notion of familial solidarity to the harsh reality of punishment or transformation. This inversion forces both the interlocutors and the audience to reassess the underlying value system of the interaction.

Example 2: Arabic – Quba'thari's Repartee with Hajjaj (Faʿūr, 2014, p. 120)

حجاج" :لأحملنک علی الأدهم"

قبعثری" :مثل الأمیر یحمل علی الأدهم والأشهب"

حجاج" :أردت الحدید"

قبعثری" :لأن یکون حدیدا، خیرٌ من أن یکون بلیدا."

- **Before the Repartee (U):** In Hajjaj's initial utterance, the term *"الأدهم"* (adhem) is deployed as a polysemous element intended to function as an insult. Within the CDS, the **figure** here is the evaluative notion that Quba'thari is destined to be physically restrained—bound by "adhem," which Hajjaj implies represents a harsh punitive measure (i.e., chaining with an iron-like substance). The **ground** is the implicit assumption that such a threat conveys both physical subjugation and a degradation of personal autonomy.
- **After the Repartee**: **(U′):** Quba'thari reconfigures the CDS through a two-stage polysemous reinterpretation. In his first response, he mirrors the conditional threat by invoking a simile: "مثل الأمیر یحمل علی الأدهم والأشهب". Here, Quba'thari treats *"الأدهم"* not as a material (iron) used for punishment but as a lexical item that can be reinterpreted to denote a fine, noble horse (with *"الأشهب"* referring to a counterpart, typically indicating a light-colored or complementary horse). This new figure shifts the evaluative focus from physical restraint to an aristocratic image of command and mobility. Consequently, the **new ground** becomes the assumption that true strength and superiority are measured by one's ability to command excellence (embodied by high-quality steeds), rather than by physical punishment.

In the subsequent exchange, when Hajjaj clarifies by stating "أردت الحدید" (I meant "hadid," i.e., iron), Quba'thari further exploits polysemy. He responds, "لأن یکون حدیدا، خیرٌ من أن یکون بلیدا،" wherein the term *"حدید"* (hadid) is now reinterpreted: rather than simply denoting the material iron, it is understood figuratively as connoting sharpness, quickness, or strength—qualities that contrast with *"بلید"* (balid), meaning dull or sluggish. Thus, the new evaluative figure emphasizes that a "sharp" (i.e., swift and astute) entity is superior to one that is "dull" (i.e., slow or inept). This reallocation of semantic weight effectively nullifies the original threat by subverting its intended meaning.

Analytical Discussion: This Arabic exchange exemplifies polysemous parallelism by leveraging the multiple meanings embedded in key lexical items. Hajjaj's initial threat employs *"الأدهم"* ambiguously to imply that Quba'thari will be bound with a punitive chain—suggesting a state of subjugation. Within the CDS, this establishes a figure characterized by the necessity of submission (as inferred

from the threat) and a ground that presumes weakness or vulnerability. Quba‘thari, demonstrating hyper-understanding, detects the latent ambiguity in "الأدهم" and strategically reassigns its meaning. His first response reinterprets "الأدهم" as a reference to noble horses (الأدهم والأشهب), thereby transforming the evaluative focus: the new figure is one of aristocratic command, and the new ground posits that commanding excellence (riding fine horses) is a marker of superiority rather than a sign of weakness.

When Hajjaj attempts to clarify by asserting that he meant "حديد" (iron), Quba‘thari again exploits the polysemous nature of the term. Here, "حديد" is reanalyzed to imply qualities of sharpness and agility, as opposed to the blunt, punitive connotation originally intended. By contrasting "حديد" (sharp, quick) with "بليد" (dull, slow), Quba‘thari enacts a decisive figure-ground reversal. The evaluative focus shifts from the threat of physical restraint to an implicit critique of ineptitude; in his reconfiguration, Quba‘thari asserts that possessing the qualities of “hadid” (i.e., being quick and astute) is inherently superior to being “balid” (i.e., slow and ineffectual). Through this dual-stage reinterpretation, Quba‘thari not only neutralizes Hajjaj’s threat but also redefines the shared discourse space. The process embodies the cognitive mechanism of hyper-understanding, wherein the responder discerns and capitalizes on the lexical ambiguity to invert the intended evaluative hierarchy. Furthermore, the figure-ground reversal within the CDS underscores how the strategic reallocation of meaning can subvert the interlocutor’s communicative intent, a phenomenon that is central to adversarial repartee across cultures (Langacker, 2001; Veale et al., 2006).

In summary, this analysis of Quba‘thari’s repartee illustrates that polysemous parallelism operates by reassigning semantic weight through lexical ambiguity, thereby affecting a cognitive reconfiguration of the discourse space. This integrated approach demonstrates the universality of the underlying mechanisms of adversarial humor, while also highlighting the linguistic and cultural specificity inherent in Arabic repartee.

Example 3: Persian – Repartee from a Desert Encounter Narrative (Attar, 2005, p. 230)

«بس سبک مردی گرانجان می‌دوید / در بیابانی به درویشی رسید

گفت: «چون داری تو ای درویش کار؟» / گفت: «آخر می‌بپرسی شرم دار

مانده‌ام در تنگنای این جهان / تنگ تنگ است این جهانم در زمان» .

مرد گفتش: «اینچه گفتی نیست راست / در بیابان فراخت تنگناست؟«گفت: «اگر اینجا نبودی تنگنا / تو کجا افتادی هرگز به ما؟»

Analytical Representation:

1.**Before the Repartee (U):**

- **Figure:** The dervish’s initial utterance employs the term تنگنا in its figurative sense—signifying hardship and the inescapable adversity of worldly existence. This figurative usage establishes the evaluative element, whereby the dervish laments his entrapment in a life of suffering.
- **Ground:** The implicit assumption underlying this claim is that the world is inherently oppressive and that personal affliction (suffering due to worldly hardship) is an unavoidable condition. The discourse thus rests on a moral–existential critique that equates personal misfortune with the inescapable nature of worldly difficulty.

2. **After the Repartee (U′):**

- **New Figure:** The man from Granjan reinterprets تنگنا by invoking its literal sense—the physical notion of narrowness. His retort shifts the evaluative focus away from the dervish’s abstract, metaphorical suffering to the concrete spatial condition of the desert, which, by its expansive nature, contradicts the claim of confinement.
- **New Ground:** The background assumption is reconfigured: instead of accepting that personal hardship is a natural state, the man implies that if the environment were not truly constricted (i.e. if there were no literal narrowness), then the dervish’s lament of suffering would be unfounded. In effect, the true “narrowness” is located not in the internal state of the dervish but in the external conditions that force an encounter with a disagreeable company. This figure-ground reversal destabilizes the original evaluative hierarchy.

Analytical Discussion: This Persian repartee exemplifies polysemous parallelism by capitalizing on the dual semantic potential of the word تنگنا (Ojaghi et al., 2017). Initially, the dervish utilizes تنگنا figuratively to describe an inescapable, oppressive state of worldly hardship—a claim that configures the CDS with a figure representing existential suffering and a ground built on the assumption of an inherently oppressive world. The man from Granjan, however, exploits the polysemy inherent in تنگنا, reassigning its meaning to the literal sense of physical narrowness. By doing so, he establishes a sharp contrast: while the dervish’s figure is one of abstract confinement and moral lamentation, his own new figure emphasizes the spaciousness of the desert, implying that the true hardship is the external condition, not the dervish’s internal lament.

This process is underpinned by **hyper-understanding**, as the man perceives the implicit ambiguity in the term and strategically reinterprets it to undermine the dervish’s claim. His response enacts a decisive **figure-ground reversal**: the evaluative focus is transferred from the subjective experience of suffering (the dervish’s internal state) to an objective critique of the external environment, which he deems the real source of hardship. Consequently, the shared discourse space (CDS) is reconfigured; the previously assumed protective or inevitable nature of worldly hardship is negated, and the interlocutors, along with the audience, are compelled to reassess the underlying evaluative assumptions.

Synthesis: These examples illustrate that polysemous parallelism in repartee is a powerful cognitive mechanism that enables the responder to exploit lexical ambiguity for strategic subversion. In the English example, Bacon’s Repartee transforms a kinship claim into a pun on execution and meat curing; in the Arabic exchange, Quba‘thari reinterprets a culturally loaded term to undermine an

insult; and in the Persian narrative, the redefinition of "narrowness" shifts the evaluative focus from individual shame to environmental inevitability. Each instance demonstrates how hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal within Langacker's CDS facilitate the reconfiguration of the shared discourse space, thereby revealing the universal yet culturally nuanced nature of adversarial repartee.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive comparative cognitive analysis of repartee in Persian, Arabic, and English, demonstrating that despite surface-level cultural and linguistic differences, adversarial humor is underpinned by universal cognitive strategies. By concentrating on two principal modes of parallelism—Structural Parallelism and Polysemous Parallelism—we have shown that repartee functions as a dynamic linguistic duel in which the responder reconfigures the shared discourse space to subvert the initiator's communicative intent. Grounded in Langacker's Current Discourse Space (CDS) model (Langacker, 2001), our analysis reveals that repartee is not merely an exercise in wit but a strategic cognitive operation employing hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal to challenge conventional social and evaluative hierarchies.

Our findings indicate that in all three languages, the effectiveness of repartee hinges on two interrelated cognitive mechanisms. First, hyper-understanding enables the responder to detect and exploit implicit assumptions embedded in the initiator's utterance. For example, in the classic English exchange between Aristippus and Diogenes, the initiator posits that flattering the king is essential to avoid impoverishment—thereby establishing a CDS where the figure is the necessity of royal favor and the ground is the presumed link between social subservience and economic survival. Diogenes' retort, which mirrors the conditional structure in a chiastic (AB → BA) fashion, not only reverses the evaluative focus—shifting the new figure to self-sufficiency—but also reassigns the ground to suggest that dependency is the consequence of excessive material desire. This inversion forces both interlocutors and the audience to reassess the implicit linkage between wealth and subservience.

Similarly, our analysis of the Persian repartee, as exemplified in the *Tazkereh-ol-Awliya* narrative, demonstrates that structural parallelism is employed to juxtapose distinct evaluative domains. In this instance, the initiator's conditional query about the monetary value of a maidservant sets up a CDS in which worldly commerce is foregrounded. The responder inverts this by shifting the figure to a transcendent domain—the religious promise of paradise—thereby challenging the assumption that material valuation defines worth. This figure-ground reversal, achieved through syntactic mirroring, underscores the cognitive potency of hyper-understanding in identifying and subverting cultural presuppositions.

In the Arabic context, our analysis further illustrates that the language's rich morphological and rhetorical resources facilitate rapid structural replication. In the analyzed Arabic example, the responder mirrors the conditional "if…then" structure and substitutes key lexical items to invert the evaluative scale—shifting focus from a trivial commodity to a marker of personal identity or moral worth. This strategic reallocation of meaning via structural parallelism exemplifies how the Arabic repartee exploits its inherent linguistic features to reconfigure the CDS, highlighting the interplay between explicit syntactic forms and implicit evaluative assumptions.

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, our findings validate and extend cognitive linguistic models of humor by demonstrating that repartee operates through the interplay of hyper-understanding and figure-ground reversal. These mechanisms not only facilitate the mirroring of syntactic structures (Structural Parallelism) but also enable the exploitation of lexical ambiguity (Polysemous Parallelism) to produce ironic inversions. Second, by providing a systematic cross-linguistic analysis that bridges Persian, Arabic, and English, this research challenges the longstanding Eurocentrism in repartee studies and offers an integrative framework that accounts for both universal and language-specific cognitive strategies.

In sum, our study underscores that repartee, as a cognitive-linguistic phenomenon, transcends cultural boundaries while remaining intricately linked to local expressive traditions. The strategic interplay of structural and polysemous parallelism reveals a universal cognitive ingenuity that reconfigures shared discourse spaces to undermine adversarial claims. Future research should expand the corpus to include spoken and digital interactions, explore prosodic features, and examine repartee in additional linguistic contexts to further refine these theoretical models.

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