

The Mother of All Morphemes Augmentatives and diminutives in areal and universal perspective

James A. Matisoff
University of California at Berkeley

dào kě dào fēi cháng dào
míng kě míng fēi cháng míng
wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ
yǒu míng **wàn wù zhī mǔ**¹
Dao De Jing

I. Introduction: Mothermorphs in Arabic and English²

The Gulf War is already fast receding into memory, but not without having left a modest mark on our language, as the following aggrieved letter to the New York Times (Feb. 25, 1991) attests:

To the Editor:

Iraqi statements on the Persian Gulf war, as reported in the press, have been filled with references to "the mother of battles." You quote the commander of the Iraqi Republican Guard saying that his troops "will repel the heathen alliance led by America in the mother of battles."

The translation is based on a misunderstanding of the use of the Arabic word **umm** 'mother'. Besides its literal meaning, **umm** -- when followed by another noun -- is often equivalent to English words like *chief*, *main*, or *principal* (as in *mother lode*) and is used in quite prosaic contexts where a literal translation would be absurd.

Thus, **umm al-waṭan** ("mother of the homeland") means 'metropolis'; **ummahāt al-hawadith** ("mothers of events") means 'major

events'; **ummahāt as-suhuf** ("mothers of newspapers") means 'leading newspapers.' The Arabic phrase literally meaning "mother of battles" (**ummu al-maʿārik**) can best be translated 'the great battle; the mighty battle; the decisive battle'.

This does not of course invalidate William Safire's statement (Feb. 24) that the phrase was originally associated with the great Arab victory at Qadisiya in the year 636.

Louis Jay Herman (retired UN translator)

There was something immediately appealing about this calqued construction to English speakers both in Britain and the U.S., and for a while it spread like wildfire, spawning (to change the metaphor) what *Newsweek* called "a virtual ocean of bad puns and dopey wordplay":

In the Gaza Strip, Khalid al-Kidra, a prominent lawyer, said, "Iraq's withdrawal will have impact in the Arab world, and I expect this will bring international attention to a peaceful solution for the Palestinian question, which after all is *the mother of instability* in the Middle East." [*New York Times*, March 1991]

...Mike Royko, on media coverage of the war: "This will be *the mother of all journalistic changes*." The Toronto Star, on the war: "...*the mother of all retreats*." The Boston Globe, on TV coverage: "Images are *the mother of all words*." White House spokesman Roman Popadiuk, on James Baker: "[He will take] *the mother of all trips*." London's Sunday Times, on the war: "*the mother of all routs*." And Newsweek's own Conventional Wisdom Watch, on Saddam's predicament: "...*the mother of all corners*." This is truly the *mother of all clichés*. [*Newsweek*, March 1991]

The instant success³ of this construction in English seems to stem from its piquant combination of strangeness and familiarity. While it is pleasingly exotic, it is also immediately understandable, readily lending itself to an indefinite number of new contexts. Not only does it fit right in with our

preexisting construction *the granddaddy of all N's* (as in *This morning I woke up with the granddaddy of all hangovers*), but it also gibes very well with metaphorical ramifications of the word *mother* itself throughout the documented history of English.

All this got me thinking about metaphorical extensions and grammaticalizations of "mothermorphs" in general, both in English and in the languages of East and Southeast Asia. What similarities and differences are there? What aspects of matrisemantics are universal, and what are area-specific or idiosyncratic? This investigation necessarily involves the consideration of *child* and *father* as well as *mother* -- since these are often metaphorically opposed as *diminutive* vs. *augmentative*, or *masculine* vs. *feminine*.

1.1 Arabic collocations

Arabic dictionaries⁴ give many examples of metaphorical mother-collocations beginning with the "construct state" (genitive/attributive form) of 'mother': *umm(u)* 'the mother of' [sg.] / *ummahāt* 'the mothers of' [pl]:

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|---------------------------|---|
| <i>umm-al-kitāb</i> | 'the original (of a book or scripture)' |
| <i>umm-al-khabā'ith</i> | 'wine' (lit. "mother of bad qualities") |
| <i>umm-al-nujūm</i> | 'the Milky Way' ("mother of stars") |
| <i>umm-al-qurā</i> | 'Mecca; metropolis' ("mother of cities") |
| <i>umm-al-ṭarīq</i> | 'main road' ("mother of roads") |
| <i>ummahāt-al-faḍā'il</i> | 'cardinal virtues' ("mothers of virtue") |

A subset of these expressions are fauna names, where the head noun indicates the most salient characteristic of the beast:

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|--------------------|--|
| <i>umm uwaīq</i> | 'screech owl' ("mother of bad luck") ⁵ |
| <i>umm al-ḥibr</i> | 'cuttlefish' |

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| | ("mother of ink") |
| umm arba' wa-arba'in | 'centipede' |
| | ("mother of 44 [legs]") |
| umm qarn | 'rhinoceros' |
| | ("mother of horn") ⁶ |

Particularly interesting are the medical names for the *meninges*, the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord, which Medieval Latin calqued from Arabic (perhaps via the intermediary of Jewish doctors):

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|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| umm al-dimāgh | 'meninx; meninges' |
| | ("mother of the head") |
| al-umm al-jāfiyah | 'dura mater' |
| | (Lat. "hard/coarse mother") |
| al-umm al-raqlqah | 'pia mater' |
| | (Lat. "tender/soft mother") |
| al-umm al-hanūn | 'pia mater' |
| | (Lat. "gentle mother") |

A broad, composite definition of this Arabic morpheme would then be something like: *'mother; source, origin; basis, foundation; original, original version; the gist, the essence; (as attribute) original, primary, basic, parent; main or chief part of a thing, or that which is a compriser or comprehender of things'*

1.2 Mother in English

As always, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a fount of wisdom (indeed a veritable mother of knowledge) when it comes to tracing the semantic history of *mother*.⁷ The OED summarizes the range of literal and metaphorical senses of the word roughly as follows:

1. *a female parent; a woman who has given birth to a child*
2. *applied to things more or less personified, with reference either to a metaphorical giving birth, to the protecting care exercised by a mother, or to the affectionate reverence due a mother*
3. *said of a quality, condition, event, etc., that gives rise to some other*
4. *said of the earth; said of the church; said of a country, city, etc. in relation to its natives; said of one's university*