

ANGELS CAN CROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES¹

by
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how ordinary Native English speakers and Muslim Arabs view, respectively, English *angel* and its Arabic equivalent *malāk*. These two terms are examined and analyzed based on linguistic data that show how people from each group understand and use one of these terms in their native language. The results demonstrate that there are similarities and differences between the two concepts. The similarities include, among other things, (1) the categorization of angels and 'malā'ika' (pl. of *malāk*), (2) their habitat, (3) their good nature, and (4) their relation with people. The differences are manifested mainly in the conceptualization of these creatures' (visual) appearances. Being similar to each other, these two concepts may prove to be helpful in promoting cross-cultural communication between ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs. Additionally, the analysis of the two terms can provide cultural outsiders with access to the insider perspective of each term.

Keywords: Angels, 'malā'ika', cross-cultural communication, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, English, Arabic

1. Introduction

M.J. Akbar, an Indian Muslim writer, could not go wrong when he predicted that the West's "next confrontation" would come from the Muslim world (Huntington 1993: 32). His prediction seems to have come true in several instances, the most formidable of which are probably the September 11 attacks. Swidler (2002) remarks that such outbreaks of violence are but visible signs that denote the

existence of profound problems arising from ethical, religious, and cultural differences.

Swidler (2002) also remarks that these differences are not new, but that they have become more and more prominent owing to globalization. Once, people could live in isolation and avoid, deliberately or inadvertently, communicating with people who had different worldviews. However, with advances in transportation and communication, coming into contact with the 'other' has become unavoidable.

Needless to say, different cultures have different norms, assumptions, and beliefs. Differences can create barriers which lead people who see themselves as coming from the same background to avoid communication with people who are different from them. Worse than that would be when these people form their own assumptions about who the 'others' are, what their beliefs are, and so forth. To overcome such an obstacle, people from different cultures should be encouraged to communicate with, and know about, each other. To avoid failures in communication that may arise due to differences in people's worldviews, people should endeavor to discuss shared elements and beliefs. Doing this can promote understanding between people as they discover that certain beliefs that they have are not that different from others'.

When talking about the Anglo and Arab worlds, one such shared belief between people coming from these two cultures is the belief in angels. English *angels* and its corresponding Arabic word *malā'ika* are two terms that seem to be relevant to many people from each group. A 2009 Nielsen poll for *The Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that 51% of Australians believe in angels (Maley 2009). Additionally, findings from a Gallup poll published in *Time* magazine in 1993 indicated that 69% of Americans believed in angels (in Kennard 1998). This percentage did not seem to decline with years; a 2005 Harris poll produced similar results, as it showed that 7 in 10 Americans still believed in these supernatural beings (Henig 2007). The

concept of *malāk* is no less relevant to Muslim Arabs than *angel* is to native English speakers. In fact, the Prophet stated that believing in 'malā'ika'¹ is one of the six articles of faith in Islam (*Translation of Sahih Bukhari* 2009: Vol. 6, Book 60, No. 300), which means that for a person to be a Muslim, s/he has to believe in 'malā'ika', among other things.

Examining and analyzing these two important terms will be the focus of this paper. The two terms will be investigated, based on how ordinary native English speakers and ordinary Muslim Arabs view them, since research has shown that there can be differences between folk and theological knowledge. It has been demonstrated that people may claim a theologically correct understanding of a certain religious concept, but when they are given a certain task in which they need to use this concept to process information, the concept might appear to be different from the one they have acknowledged to possess (Barrett and Keil 1996; Pyysiäinen 2004; Barrett 2000, 2007).

A comment is in order as to why I am investigating how Muslim Arabs, rather than native Arabic speakers, view the Arabic-language concept examined in this article. Unlike the Anglo society, the Arab world appears to be much more religious, and religion seems to play a much stronger role in the life of Arabs, in general, than in the lives of native English speakers, the majority of whom are secular (Gellner 1992; Haynes 1998; Esposito 2000; Li 2002; Taylor 2007). The social anthropologist Ernest Gellner (1992: 22) observes that:

In the West, we have become habituated to a certain picture, according to which puritan zeal had accompanied the early stages of the emergence of a modern economy, but in which its culmination was eventually marked by a very widespread religious lukewarmness and secularization...In the world of Islam, we encounter quite a different situation. Though long endowed with a commercial bourgeoisie and significant ur-

banization, this civilization failed to engender industrialism; but once industrialism and its various accompaniments had seen thrust upon it...it turned, not at all to secularization, but rather to a vehement affirmation of the puritan version of its own tradition.

In a similar vein, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2007: 1) writes:

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular world? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do: I mean the "we" who live in the West, or perhaps the Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world – although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways, beyond this world. And the judgment of secularity seems hard to resist when we compare these societies with anything else in human history: that is, with almost all other contemporary societies (e.g., Islamic countries, India, Africa), on one hand; and with the rest of human history, Atlantic or otherwise, on the other.

Since religion plays such a significant role in the lives of Arabs, there is reason to believe that Arabs who belong to different religions may have different conceptualizations of the same religious term. Some people may claim that the same can be argued regarding native English speakers who have different religious affiliations. I would argue, however, that, because of secularism in the Western world, the impact of religious affiliation on the conceptualization of a certain religious term may be minimal. While I do not have scientific evidence to support this argument, I do have some anecdotal observations. From talking with native English speakers, whether at my university or in the NSM workshops at the Australian National University, I have come to learn that native

English speakers appear to have almost the same conceptualization of religious terms, irrespective of their religious affiliation. They all seem to draw on the Christian background that they or their societies have, whether they are Christian or not and whether they are believers or not. In the case of Arabs, on the other hand, the native Arabic speaker would rely heavily on his/her religious background and knowledge when describing the target concept. Because the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslims, my analysis of the Arabic-language religious term will be based on how Muslim Arabs perceive these concepts.

To uncover what ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs think about the terms English *angels* and Arabic *malā'ika*, respectively, I will base my analysis on linguistic data. Obviously, native English speakers and Muslim Arabs deploy the terms *angels* and *malā'ika*, in their respective mother tongues. I would argue, therefore, that examining how these two groups of people use these terms in their native languages can give the researcher access to how the two groups conceptualize these two terms.

To examine the two groups' use of the two terms in everyday language, I will rely on corpus analysis. A corpus is a huge set of texts, taken from a variety of sources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers. Using the corpus helps the researcher find out how people use a certain term in various contexts, and this in turn provides him/her with information about what people know about the term labeled by that word (cf. Wierzbicka 1996). In this study, I will make use of two corpora: (1) The Corpus of Contemporary American English (over 410 million words; henceforth COCA) and (2) the ArabiCorpus (over 68 million words).

Describing the results of the analysis requires a method that enables the researcher to escape ambiguity and ethnocentricity. Otherwise, the description and explication of the target terms can be unclear and/or biased. To ward off these two problems, the explications of

the terms in question should rely on simple, universal concepts. The simplicity of the concepts will ensure that the explications are unambiguous, and their universality will guarantee that the explications are not ethnocentric.

But what concepts are simple and universal? Evidence from cross-linguistic research on typologically and genetically different languages has demonstrated that there are 63 concepts that enjoy these two characteristics (Wierzbicka 1972; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Peeters 2006; Goddard 2008). These concepts are realized in the English language by the following words:

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY, KIND, PART, THIS, THE SAME, OTHER, ONE, TWO, MUCH, SOME, ALL, GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL, THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR, SAY, WORDS, TRUE, BE, THERE IS, HAVE, LIVE, DIE, WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT, WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, and LIKE.

These 63 concepts are called 'semantic primes' in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory developed by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard, and colleagues (Wierzbicka 1972, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Peeters 2006; Goddard 2008). When explicating the terms of English *angels* and Arabic *malā'ika*, I will use these 63 semantic primes. However, using only semantic primes to explicate certain complex terms can result in very long explications. To avoid that, I will use, besides the semantic primes, some concepts which are complex. These concepts are called 'semantic molecules', and, when they appear in any explication, they are followed by an 'm' in square brackets. The use of semantic molecules does not affect the simplicity and universality of the explications because the semantic molecules are decomposable into semantic primes (Goddard 2007, 2010).

2. *English angels and Arabic malā'ika*

In this section, I will examine and analyze the terms English *angels* and Arabic *malā'ika* as understood by ordinary Native English speakers and Muslim Arabs, respectively. I will also construct an explication for each term using semantic primes and molecules.

2.1. English *angels*

Linguistic evidence suggests that angels are usually depicted as rational beings, who are capable of thinking and speaking. Here are two examples from COCA:

- (1) I understood that I could want – so badly – something the angel thought I shouldn't.
- (2) You can imagine how surprised the ladies were when the angel spoke to them.

Thus there is good reason to believe that native English speakers would think of an angel as 'someone' rather than 'something.' However, the word *someone* does not have a plural form, and consequently, cannot be used to refer to the plural form *angels*. To overcome this problem, I will use the word *being*, which can be regarded in NSM theory as an allolex² of *someone* in the context *someone of one kind* (Habib in preparation). This brings us to the first component of the explication of *angels*:

- (1a) beings of one kind

The number of angels appears to be large. As evidence, consider *guardian angel*, which is a common concept in the English language. This concept is found in 258 contexts in COCA. In 67 out of these

258 contexts, the expression is used in possessive constructions, such as *my/his/her guardian angel*, which implies that every person has a guardian angel. Because there are many people in our world, it follows that there are many angels. Hence:

(1b) there are many beings of this kind

As COCA data show, angels are perceived to be in heaven. The word *heaven* occurs 53 times with the word *angel*, with the meaning that angels are in heaven. Heaven appears to be understood as the 'place' to which good people, so to speak, go after they depart this life (Habib 2010, in preparation). Thus one more component can be added to the explication, and it is:

(1c) beings of this kind are in the place where good people live after these people die

Native English speakers seem to view angels as good beings. This is evident from expressions like *a real angel* and *an absolute angel*, which can be used metaphorically to describe very good people (the expression *real angel* can be also used when describing seeing or experiencing the presence of real angels). These two expressions with this specific connotation occur 8 times in COCA. Thus, the goodness of angels can be formulated as follows:

(1d) beings of this kind are good beings

Theologically speaking, some Christian denominations believe that angels belong to nine hierarchical orders, i.e. Seraphs (highest order), Cherubs, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, and Angels (Loewenberg 1931). Whether ordinary Native English speakers know this is doubtful. Nevertheless, they may know that there are many angels and that some

of these angels rank higher than others. This is attested by the relatively widespread use of the word *archangel*, which occurs 217 times in COCA. I would argue that, when Native English speakers come across this term, they may understand that the prefix *arch-* expresses a higher place in some hierarchy, especially because this prefix is used in other words to express this idea (compare, for example, *bishop* vs. *archbishop*).³ *Hierarchy* includes the notion that someone is 'above' someone else, and that this someone can do things which others cannot do. Wierzbicka (1999) argues that the concept of *above* can be used as a universal spatial metaphor to express hierarchical relations, such as in "you are someone above other people" (182). Hence, the component that can be added to the explication is:

- (1e) some beings of this kind are above other beings of the same kind
 because of this, some beings of this kind can do some things,
 other beings of the same kind can't do these things

Angels seem to be viewed as supernatural spirits. The following two examples from COCA underpin this view:

- (3) "A human can not be angelic?" I interrupt. "Adjectives have no place in this discussion," says Matteo severely, "simply because an angel is a spirit that has existed for Eternity, whose whole purpose is the adoration of God."
 (4) Associated closely with healing was the shared cosmos of "signs and wonders," a world where dreams and visions, possessions and exorcisms, angels, spirits and all kinds of supernatural beings affected daily life.

The word *spirit* indicates that an angel does not have a body and therefore does not die. The word *supernatural* denotes that angels can

do certain things which human beings cannot do. Thus I propose adding the following components:

- (1f) beings of this kind are not like people
- people have bodies, beings of this kind don't have bodies
 - people die, beings of this kind don't die
 - people can do some things, beings of this kind can do much more

In general, people cannot see or hear angels. Yet, native English speakers appear to perceive that, if God wants to convey a message to a person, God can send him/her an angel, and then that angel would be visible, audible, or both. Linguistic evidence supports this notion, as can be seen from the examples below, taken from COCA:

- (5) ...an angel of the Lord appeared to Mary and told her something extraordinary.
- (6) And it was there that an angel appeared saying to him, *Pax tibi Marce evangelista meus!* ['Peace on you Mark, my evangelist']

Therefore, I suggest the following components:

- (1g) people can't see beings of this kind
 if God [m] wants one being of this kind to say something to someone
 this someone can see this being, this someone can hear this being, this being can say something to this someone
 because of this, this someone can know what God [m] wants to say to this someone

Although people cannot see angels, they depict them in icons, pictures, or statues as men, women, or children having wings, as well as halos or light surrounding their heads, if not their whole bodies (Knapp 1999). Linguistic evidence shows that native English speakers are familiar with such depiction; the word *wing* collocates with *angel* 149 times in COCA, with the meaning that angels have wings. The wings of angels are usually depicted in pictures and icons as white bird-like wings. The association between angels, or more specifically angels' wings, and the white color is supported by the expression *angel food cake*, which appears 142 times in COCA. This expression is used to refer to a white sponge cake (Merriam-Webster 2003), and I think that the word *angel* is used in this expression because angels are usually depicted as dressing in white and/or having white wings (compare, for example, the expression *devil's food cake*, which refers to a dark chocolate cake). The following examples, taken from COCA, lend more support to this notion:

- (7) "Angel wings," Snow said. "That's what those white things looked like..."
- (8) Father Aurelio is flanked by four small children: two boys and two girls in floor-length white robes. He calls them his angels who are there to help him pray.

As for the words *halo* and *angel*, they occur together 23 times in COCA, with the meaning that angels have halos. Thus the way Native English speakers visualize angels can be expressed along the following lines:

- (1h) people can think about beings of this kind like this:
 - beings of this kind can have bodies, these bodies can be like the bodies of children [m], these bodies can be like the bodies of men [m], these bodies can be like the bodies of women [m]

- the bodies of beings of this kind can have wings [m] like birds have wings [m], at many times these wings [m] are white [m]
- when people see beings of this kind, people can see something shiny [m] on all sides of the heads [m] of beings of this kind, people can see something shiny [m] on all sides of the bodies of beings of this kind

I should note that component (1h) starts with the sentence "people can think about beings of this kind like this:" to indicate that the sentences that follow describe how native English speakers visualize angels rather than what angels really look like.

Angels appear to be viewed as beautiful beings, a notion which can be inferred from the use of the adjective *angelic* in the English language. This adjective is used to describe someone or something that is very good or very beautiful. Table 1, which is based on COCA, shows that the word *angelic* collocates with other words to convey beauty of appearance or voice.

Table 1: Collocations with *angelic* (COCA)

	Face/s	Voice/s	Smile	Choir/s	Eyes	Beauty	Appearance
Angelic	27	13	11	6	4	4	2

Thus, the idea that angels are viewed as beautiful beings can be formulated as follows:

- if people could see beings of this kind, people couldn't not feel something good because of it

Angels also appear to be conceived of as good beings who want to do good things for people. This is evident from the common

use of the expression *guardian angel*, which is found 258 times in COCA. In these contexts, a guardian angel is described as an angel or a person that helps and protects (other) people. The following examples are illustrative:

- (9) "I'm talking to you," he tried again, "my guardian angel – the one who counters the demon assigned to tempt me."
- (10) I could have been a guardian angel. I could have been the wicked one.

Angels do not always seem to be perceived, however, as doing good things for people. If a person or a group of people do bad or evil things, they might be punished by an angel. As evidence, consider the expression *avenging angel*, which is found 46 times in COCA. As it appears in the corpus, this expression is used to express the idea that a real angel or a person causes harm to a/another person or a group of people who have done or are doing something bad to other people. Thus the relation between angels and people can be anchored as follows:

- (1i) beings of this kind can do good things for people
- (1j) if someone does something bad to someone else
 - beings of this kind can do something to this someone
 - because of this, this someone can feel something bad

Notice that, in the last component, I have not described angels as doing something bad to the person because this would contradict the idea that angels are viewed as good beings. Rather, I have stated that angels can do something to this person, the result of which is that this person would feel bad.

2.2. Arabic *malā'ika*

Similar to angels, '*malā'ika*' seem to be viewed as rational beings, who are capable of thinking and communicating with God and people. As evidence, consider the following example, taken from ArabiCorpus:

(11) *al-malā'ika fi ṭawāfihim ḥawla l-'arsh...yusabbihūna lirabbihim wayastaghfirūna lil-mu'minīn...*

"While '*malā'ika*' go around [God's] throne...they praise their Lord and ask Him to forgive people [their sins]"

Hence, the first component in the explication of *malā'ika* is:

(2a) beings of one kind

It appears that, like native English speakers, Muslim Arabs perceive that the number of '*malā'ika*' is large. Evidence for this comes from their belief that God assigns two '*malā'ika*' to each person. The two '*malā'ika*' are referred to as *kirāman kātibīn* "noble writers," and they are mentioned in the Quran in the *Book of the Splitting* (82/10-12) and in some of Sahih Bukhari's Hadiths (e.g., *Translation of Sahih Bukhari* 2009: Vol. 8, Book 76, No. 498). They are also known with the names *Raqīb* and *'atīd*. The collocation *kirāman kātibīn* "noble writers" occurs once in ArabiCorpus, and the names *Raqīb* and *'atīd* occur 6 times.

Because there are many people, it follows that there are many '*malā'ika*.' This notion can be captured as follows:

(2b) there are many beings of this kind

As ArabiCorpus data suggest, Muslim Arabs perceive that '*malā'ika*' are in *janna* 'heaven'. This is evident from the co-occurrence of the

verb *yanzil* 'descend' with *malāk*; they appear together 12 times in ArabiCorpus. While these 12 contexts do not specify where 'malā'ika' descend from, I believe that Muslim Arabs understand that 'malā'ika' descend from *janna*. This is further supported by the Islamic belief that in *Laylat Alqadr* 'The Night of Decree', the most popular night of the month of Ramadan, 'malā'ika' descend from *janna* 'heaven' (*Book of the Power* 97/4). If 'malā'ika' descend from *janna*, it can be concluded that they are there. *Janna* is believed to be the place where good and righteous people go after their death (*Translation of Sahih Bukhari* 2009: Vol. 4, Book 52, No. 48; Habib 2010, in preparation). Therefore, I will add:

(2c) beings of this kind are in the place where good people go after these people die

Akin to angels, 'malā'ika' seem to be conceived of as good beings. The popular colloquial Arabic expression *malāk nāzil mnissamā* 'malāk' descending from heaven' lends support to this view, as it is used to refer to a person who is good, well-behaved, and sometimes good-looking. This expression, though very popular, appears only once in ArabiCorpus. Thus, the idea that 'malā'ika' are good can be anchored in the following component:

(2d) beings of this kind are good beings

'Malā'ika' differ from people in various aspects. From a theological viewpoint, Muslim Arabs believe that 'malā'ika' have bodies, but these bodies are not like people's bodies.⁴ This is evident from the Quran, where 'malā'ika' are described as having wings (*Book of the Originator* 35/1), and from the Hadith, where some 'malā'ika' are depicted with huge bodies (Asqalani 1986). Moreover, Muslim Arabs believe that 'malā'ika' are superior to human beings; for example, they are more powerful, they can travel large distances (especially,

from earth to heaven, and vice versa) within a very short period of time, etc. (*Book of the Prostration* 32/5; *Book of the Overthrowing* 81/20; Ibn Kathir 2002). Part of this information is supported by linguistic evidence, as can be seen from the following examples, taken from ArabiCorpus:

- (12) *mā dāma sh-shahīdu qad raḥala...ʿalā ajniḥati malāʿikaatin yatawakkalūna bihi, falimādhā tuṣirru armalatuhu ʿalā lirtibāʿi bihi waliḥtifāzi biṣūratihī?*
 "If the martyr has departed this life... on the wings of 'malāʿika' who take care of him, why does his widow insist on being attached to him and keeping his photo?"
- (13) *...wahuṃ waṣatun bayna lmalāʿikati walbahāʿimi, faman ḡhalaba ʿaqlahu washahwatahu iltahaqa bi lmalāʿikati...*
 "...and they [human beings] are in the middle, between 'malāʿika' and animals. He who overcomes his [evil] thoughts and desires becomes like 'malāʿika'..."

The first example shows that Muslim Arabs perceive that 'malāʿika' have wings and consequently have bodies. The second example demonstrates that 'malāʿika' are perceived as superior to human beings.

Although 'malāʿika' are believed to have bodies, Muslim Arabs seem to perceive that people cannot see 'malāʿika' unless God wants them to. Linguistic data underpin this idea, as can be seen from the example below, taken from ArabiCorpus:

- (14) *...wakān gibrīlu yalqāhu fi kulli laylaten min ramadān fayūʿallimuhu lqurān.*
 "...Gibrīl used to appear to the prophet every night of the month of Ramadan to teach him [i.e. the prophet] the Quran."

Hence, I suggest adding the following components:

- (2c) beings of this kind are not like people
 - beings of this kind have bodies, these bodies are not like the bodies of people
 - people can do some things, beings of this kind can do much more
- (2f) people can't see beings of this kind
 - if God [m] wants one being of this kind to say something to someone,
 - this someone can see this being, this someone can hear this being, this being can say something to this someone
 - because of this, this someone can know what God [m] wants to say to this someone
- (2g) beings of this kind have wings [m]

Additionally, 'malā'ika' are believed to have been created from light (*Translation of Sahih Muslim* 2009: Book 42, No. 7134). Even though they have their own luminous bodies, 'malā'ika' can assume human bodies if God wants them to convey a message to people (*Book of Mary* 19/17). Linguistic data underpin the notion that ordinary Muslim Arabs are familiar with these two beliefs. As for the first belief, ArabiCorpus presents 8 contexts in which 'malā'ika' are described as having been created from light. As regards the second belief, I would give the following example from the same corpus:

- (15) ...*walmalā'ika qādirūn 'alā t-tashakkuli...*
 "...'malā'ika' are able to assume different forms..."

Hence:

- (2h) beings of this kind are shiny [m] beings
 - if God [m] wants people to see beings of this kind, beings of this kind can have bodies like the bodies of people

Muslim Arabs seem to have the idea that 'malā'ika' are beautiful beings. This is apparent from the use of the adjective *malā'ikī* 'angelic' with certain nouns, in order to convey beauty of a voice or appearance. This adjective is found in 88 contexts in ArabiCorpus, and in 26 of them it is used metaphorically to describe how beautiful a voice, face, and so on, is. Table 2 below presents the findings.

Table 2: Collocations with *malā'ikī* (ArabiCorpus)

	' <i>awt</i> "voice"	<i>Wajh</i> "face"	<i>Mawlūd</i> "baby"	<i>Ghinā</i> "singing"	<i>Naḡham</i> "tune"	<i>Ibtisāma</i> "smile"	<i>Ma har</i> "appearance"	' <i>uyūn</i> "eyes"
<i>Malā'ikī</i> "angelic"	10	9	2	1	1	1	1	1

Thus the beauty of 'malā'ika' can be expressed as follows:

if people could see beings of this kind, people couldn't not feel something good because of it

Linguistic data suggest that Muslim Arabs perceive that 'malā'ika' help people. Consider, for instance, the expression *malā'ikat arraḡma* "'malā'ika' of mercy." This expression is found 25 times in ArabiCorpus. On 7 out of the 25 occasions, the expression refers to 'malā'ika' who help people and who ask God to forgive people's sins. On 8 occasions it is used metaphorically to refer to good people in general, and, on the remaining 10 occasions, it is used to describe nurses. The singular form of this expression, i.e. *malāk arraḡma*, appears in the same corpus 4 times, and on three occasions it is used to describe a nurse. Thus the idea that 'malā'ika' help people can be spelled out as follows:

(2i) beings of this kind can do good things for people

While Muslim Arabs believe in *malā'ikat arraḥma*, they also believe in *malā'ikat al'adhāb* 'malā'ika' of torment'. The expression *malā'ikat al'adhāb* occurs 6 times in ArabiCorpus, and it is used to refer to a group of 'malā'ika' appointed by God to be in charge of *jahannam* ('hell'), where people are tortured. Therefore, I propose the following component:

- (2j) if God [m] wants someone to feel something very bad after this someone dies, some beings of this kind can do some things to this someone because of this, this someone can feel something very bad

3. *The explications as a whole*

3.1. English *angels*

- (1a) beings of one kind
- (1b) there are many beings of this kind
- (1c) beings of this kind are in the place where good people go after these people die
- (1d) beings of this kind are good beings
- (1e) some beings of this kind are above other beings of the same kind
because of this, some beings of this kind can do some things, other beings of the same kind can't do these things
- (1f) beings of this kind are not like people
 - people have bodies, beings of this kind don't have bodies
 - people die, beings of this kind don't die
 - people can do some things, beings of this kind can do much more

- (1g) people can't see beings of this kind
if God [m] wants one being of this kind to say something
to someone
 this someone can see this being, this someone can
 hear this being, this being can say something to
 this someone
 because of this, this someone can know what
 God [m] wants to say to this someone
- (1h) people can think about beings of this kind like this:
– beings of this kind can have bodies, these bodies can
be like the bodies of children [m], these bodies can be
like the bodies of men [m], these bodies can be like the
bodies of women [m]
– the bodies of beings of this kind can have wings [m]
like birds have wings [m], many times these wings [m]
are white [m]
– when people see beings of this kind, people can see
something shiny [m] on all sides of the heads [m] of
beings of this kind, people can see something shiny [m]
on all sides of the bodies of beings of this kind
– if people could see beings of this kind, people couldn't
not feel something good because of it
- (1i) beings of this kind can do good things for people
- (1j) if someone does something bad to someone else
 beings of this kind can do something to this someone
 because of this, this someone can feel something
 bad

3.2. Arabic *malā'ika*

- (2a) beings of one kind
(2b) there are many beings of this kind

- (2c) beings of this kind are in the place where good people go after these people die
- (2d) beings of this kind are good beings
- (2e) beings of this kind are not like people
 - beings of this kind have bodies, these bodies are not like the bodies of people
 - people can do some things, beings of this kind can do much more
- (2f) people can't see beings of this kind
 - if God [m] wants one being of this kind to say something to someone,
 - this someone can see this being, this someone can hear this being, this being can say something to this someone
 - because of this, this someone can know what God [m] wants to say to this someone
- (2g) beings of this kind have wings [m]
- (2h) beings of this kind are shiny [m] beings
 - if God [m] wants people to see beings of this kind, beings of this kind can have bodies like the bodies of people
 - if people could see beings of this kind, people couldn't not feel something good because of it
- (2i) beings of this kind can do good things for people
- (2j) if God [m] wants someone to feel something very bad after this someone dies, some beings of this kind can do some things to this someone
 - because of this, this someone can feel something very bad

4. Discussion

As can be seen from the analysis and the two explications, the English and Arabic terms seem to be similar, notwithstanding a number of

differences. In respect of the similarities, these supernatural beings seem to be viewed as creatures that can, among other things, think, speak, and communicate God's messages to people. They also seem to be viewed as being good, beautiful beings who are in the place to which 'good' people are believed to go after they die. In addition, they appear to be perceived as different from people because they are able to perform some actions which human beings cannot.

Regarding the differences, it appears that angels are believed to be immortal whereas 'malā'ika' are not. The immortality of angels stems from the fact that they are spirits, and spirits do not die. Muslim Arabs believe that 'malā'ika' have bodies, which suggests that they are mortal. Even so, there are no linguistic data that underpin this notion. Therefore, in the explication of *malā'ika*, I have not mentioned whether they are mortal or not. However, I should note that, from a theological point of view, Muslims believe that only God is immortal, and consequently, anything else will ultimately perish (*Book of the Beneficent* 55/26; Asqalani 1986; Ibn Kathir 2003).

Additionally, linguistic data denote that angels are perceived to live in a hierarchical world, where some angels are superior to other angels. However, no linguistic evidence has been found that indicates that some 'malā'ika' are perceived as ranking higher than other 'malā'ika.'

Angels and 'malā'ika' seem to differ also in their (visual) appearance. Native English speakers perceive that angels are spirits and do not have bodies, but nonetheless, they do picture them in a certain way. Muslim Arabs, on the other hand, are not allowed to produce drawings, paintings, or statues of 'malā'ika', or even imagine what they might look like (King 1985; *Translation of Sahih Bukhari* 2009: Vol. 3, Book 34, No. 299). Therefore, unlike component (1h), components (2g)-(2h) should be read as what Muslim Arabs believe that 'malā'ika' are or have, and not how they imagine them to be. Therefore, whereas an angel can be imagined as having two wings, a 'malāk' can have (and not "can be imagined to have") two or more wings. Native

English speakers picture an angel's wings as white bird-like wings, while Muslim Arabs can tell nothing about the color or appearance of the wings of a 'malāk.' Angels are depicted as having halos above their heads or light radiating from their bodies; 'malā'ika', on the other hand, are believed to have been created from light.

More differences are seen when considering the relationship between the supernatural creatures and people. Both angels and 'malā'ika' are perceived to be supernatural beings who are capable of doing good as well as bad things to people. However, unlike Muslim Arabs, Native English speakers do not have the notion that angels play any role in tormenting people after their death.⁵

Even though the two terms do not overlap perfectly, they are still similar in many aspects; therefore, I would argue that they can contribute to cross-cultural communication. The similarities can certainly promote understanding between native English speakers and Muslim Arabs. As for the differences, their influence depends on the interlocutors' attitudes toward each other's beliefs and convictions. They can cause tension, if each of the interlocutors believes that s/he possesses the 'absolute' truth. On the other hand, they can be a source of interest if the interlocutors are ready to tolerate differences and are interested in knowing more about the others' beliefs.

Furthermore, the analysis of the two terms can provide cultural outsiders (not only from among native English speakers and Muslim Arabs) with access to the insider perspective of each term. This access can be provided to any outsider speaking any language because the explications are constructed from simple and universal human concepts, which enables the translation of the explications into all languages.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to shed light on the terms *angel* and *malāk* as viewed by ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs,

respectively, by providing an explication for each term. It has been demonstrated that these two terms are similar in some aspects but different in others. Native English speakers and Muslim Arabs seem to categorize an angel and a 'malāk' in the same manner, and they also seem to perceive their habitat, nature, and relation with people in similar ways. In addition, the two groups regard angels/'malā'ika' as in some aspects superior to people. They also regard them as messengers of God. However, differences emerge when it comes to the supernatural creatures' immortality, the hierarchy between them, and how people visualize them.

This study can be viewed as a contribution to cross-cultural communication. The kind of communication that I have in mind is not one that is restricted – intentionally or unintentionally – to formal settings (such as in interfaith dialogue). Rather, it targets communication between two or more people who intend to learn more about each other's beliefs. It is hoped that the similarities between the two terms explored here would promote understanding between native English speakers and Muslim Arabs, while the differences are being respected. It is also hoped that the analysis and explications of the two terms can help cultural outsiders gain knowledge about the two terms discussed in this paper.

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Notes

1. I italicize the words *angels* and *malā'ika* only when I refer to them as words or terms. When I refer to them as creatures, I put *malā'ika* and its singular form *malāk* in single quotation marks since they are not English words.
2. Allolexes are different forms of the same word/lexeme; as an example, consider *I* and *me*.
3. The prefix *arch-* is also used to signify that someone or something is greater or worse than others of the same type (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2005); for example, the word *archenemy* means a principal or main enemy.
4. I should note, however, that one of 'malāk' Gibrīl's titles is *arrūḥu l'amīn* 'the Faithful Spirit' (see the *Book of Poets* 26/107), and Gibrīl is described in the Quran as being *rūḥ* 'spirit' (see, e.g., *Book of Mary* 19/17).
5. Except implicitly: in Christian theology, devils are believed to be 'fallen angels' – who fell along with Lucifer, the Prince of Light, who became Satan, the King of Darkness. [Editor's note]

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