AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 11 Number 2
October, 2024

A Pragmatic Study of Forms and Functions of Proverbs in Nigeria

Ifeyinwa Obiegbu
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ir.obiegbu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract
Thoughts and ideas are consciously or unconsciously conditioned by the culture of a society, and it is almost impossible to use language without a cultural base. One significant aspect of culture is language, and proverbs constitute one of the parameters for gauging the richness of a people's culture. Proverbs are figurative expressions that are usually rich in imagery. In this paper, proverbs across cultures in Nigeria are discussed; in particular, three (3) proverbs each from Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba cultural environments. The purpose is to examine their literary and linguistic forms, as well as pragmatic functions in Nigeria. The nine (9) proverbs are thus translated into the English language, and analysed by: (1) identifying the figurative expression that each proverb conveys, and (2), employing presupposition to examine the knowledge of the 'world' of the proverbs and their contexts of utterance. The conclusion is that proverbs are in the literary forms of metaphors, aphorisms, and sometimes paradoxes and antithesis. Also, they are employed to perform pragmatic functions of cautioning, warning, satirising, rebuking, etc. in various cultures in Nigeria.
Keyword: culture, proverbs, pragmatics, language, form, function

Introduction
Nigeria is a plural society with multicultural background. That plurality justifies a discourse of multidimensional scholarship on issues of language and culture in Nigeria. In all communities,

language has continued to remain a veritable tool for projecting cultures. However, in the course of using language, man either encounters or induces problems which affect comprehension, particularly in the areas of the use of proverbs which is not an ordinary on-the-street type of language use. In other words, the problems of language use are as old as language itself (Mey, 2004:189), one of which is how to connect the words of our language with the things of our world. However, the truth remains that language is an integral part of culture.

In this paper, the forms (literally) and functions (pragmatically) of proverbs in three Nigerian indigenous languages are examined, with a view to discussing the common cultural elements of proverbs in Nigeria. The author's position is that proverbs in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba can be taken to be modestly representative of the proverb situation in Nigeria, hence the choice of the three languages. Again, the selection of the three Nigerian languages is predicated on the premium placed on the three indigenous languages, by the 1999 constitution, which recognises Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as Nigeria's major languages, which could co-function with English in the National Assembly.

The significance of looking at proverbs in Nigeria is premised on the belief that 'culture is the sum total of the learned behaviour of a group of people which are generally considered to be the tradition of that people, and are transmitted from generation to generation' (Rich and Ogawa 1976: 25). However, it remains a doubt if proverbs are being transmitted from generation to generation, in contemporary Nigeria, because of urban migration and the influence of pop-culture, prevalent among the youths. It will further prove the position that language remains the medium through which human experiences are processed and expressed, and a good barometer of the belief and attitude systems of a given society.

This paper shall examine the literary flavours in proverbs and proverbs as an agent of cultural configuration in Nigeria. It shall then analyse the proverbs collected in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages, before drawing a conclusion based on the analysis.

Literary Flavours in Proverbs

Language acts as the spice of literature. For any literary piece to be worthy of attention, the language must be elevated. The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are potent tools in conversation, in cracking jokes, and in expressing anger. The oral tradition is very important to the Hausas, Igbos and Yorubas, in particular, and Nigerians, in general, because their behaviour, thoughts, languages and rhetorics are moulded and shaped by their tradition. Proverbs constitute a subset of oral prose which is an integral part of tradition and literature.

Indigenous oral Nigerian literature embodies the literary aspects of Igbo oral performances, such as folk tales, proverbs, riddles, incantations, chants, songs, anecdotes, myths, legends, tongue twisters, etc., and world-view are usually reflected in oral literature. Just as Igbo literary tradition can be said to be rooted in the language and culture of the Igbo (Igboanusi, 2002:3), the same can be said of both Hausa and Yoruba literary traditions, languages and cultures. Mbesike (2002:228), quoting Finnegan, has defined proverbs as 'generally terse figurative expressions, which, in a nutshell, are frequently anecdotes'. In other words, one can say that proverbs are rich in imagery, with pithiness and economy of words. The effectiveness of proverbs greatly relies on the aptness of their usage, in a particular context. They are tactfully introduced into speeches at crucial moments in different cultures.

Proverbs exhibit a great use of metaphor, because they are not for general kind of pedestal usage. It is considered to be the exclusive use of the elders, sages and people of great intellect. This is so because proverbs, according to Mbesike (2002:229), usually 'occur

in situations where there is conflict and they help to conceal the tensions to prevent the conflict from being too open and personal. So, for someone to employ proverbs effectively, he or she must be well versed in the oral tradition of the language, including its ironies, innuendoes, aphorisms, epigrams, epics and other oral forms repository in the cosmology of the language and culture.

Proverbs as Agent of Cultural Configuration

According to Igboanusi (2004:179), culture refers to "the totality of the people's way of life which defines a certain outlook on life, a certain morality, a certain disposition, a certain spirit of the people". By this definition, culture would include material and social culture, arts, general codes, and ideas; and all these aspects of culture are related, and they all combine to define a particular society. As a collective identity, culture is closely related to civilization.

Culture indicates all the learned behaviour, part of which consists of language, ideas, and values. And in the view of Oyekanmi (2005:82), we learn our culture from our fore-bears and contemporaries, and then pass it to future generations. And, such can be said to include all the human phenomena in a society that is not the product of biological inheritance. It is instructive to note that every culture configures its own set of proverbs to preserve belief-systems, ethos and cosmology. These proverbs deal with different aspects of people's life- belief in God or gods, social and moral values, respect for institutions such as family ties, age grades, womanhood, gender, traditions, industry, perseverance, and other values. A typical Nigerian user of proverb is a product of a cultural environment, and through proverbs he expresses his cultural experiences in words, and by so doing, strengthens his society. A people's culture and tradition, no doubt, influence their existential experience and also inform their creative operations in life (Ajadi, 1994).

Proverbs are used for various purposes. They are used to comment on how people behave or should behave, and useful for embellishing speeches. It is, however, pertinent to state that one needs some knowledge of the cultural background of those who utter particular proverbs in order to grasp the high points of such proverbs. In other words, proverbs are better interpreted within the contexts of utterance. In interpreting proverbs, their presuppositions rely greatly not only on the knowledge of their world, but also on their context of utterance for the communication to be successful. This suggests that it is pragmatic and not semantic or logical presupposition that is required for the interpretation of proverbs, because semantic presupposition does not take into consideration the context of the utterance, while pragmatic presupposition does.

Human beings often interpret the meanings of utterances from personal or individual cultural perspectives, and this is wrongly viewed, at times, as something universal (Emuchay 2002:192-195). Thoughts and ideas are therefore consciously or unconsciously conditioned by the culture of the society, as it is not possible to use a language without a cultural base.

Literary Forms and Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba

Proverbs, in form, are complete sentences or statements. They are also speech-embellishing ingredients which the Igbo regard as 'the sauce with which speeches are eaten''. Thus, 'the use of appropriate proverbs to suit a particular occasion is considered a mark of polished speaking or oratory...' (Nnabuihe 2004:201). Proverbs, according to Adeoye (2005) are relatively ossified language, in form. In other words, a proverb can be self-contained, self-referential so that it can change or modify its structure or lexis. In terms of functions, proverbs, generally, are useful for illustrating the communal life that is prevalent in a typical traditional society. Proverbs, in all climes and times, function as master speech acts, in

that they are employed to communicate more than what is usually expressed. Proverbs in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba cultures are useful in giving advice, comments, warring, encouragement, and in reproach.

Proverbs are utterances, because every proverb uttered has a context that induces or produces it. If that is taken, then a proverb can perform a locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act, following Austin's (1962), and later Searle's (1979) discussions (though several later views and reviews have been carried out; for instance, see Saddock 1974, Leech, 1983, Mey, 2004). In all cultures, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba inclusive, words are believed to be very powerful; they are indeed veritable means of according fortunes, just as they can also be potent weapons of disseminating malediction. Let us now examine the proverbs, in Nigeria's indigenous languages. Data for this study was collected from native speakers in Zaria (Hausa), Awka (Igbo) and Oyo (Yoruba), all in Nigeria.

The study Assistants, who were native speakers of the various indigenous languages, engaged elders from the native areas in discussions on the significance of proverbs in promoting cultural values. Through their interactions, five proverbs were randomly recorded in the three towns, in each of the languages. At the end, only three proverbs each are eventually presented for analysis. The proverbs in the three languages with their English translations are presented, before their forms and functions are discussed.

Data Presentation

A) Hausa Proverbs (henceforth HP)

(i) 'Dan gatarin ka ya fi sari ka bani'

Literal translation

'Self-reliance is much more preferable than depending on others.'

Meaning

'One should rely on one's limited resources'

(ii) 'Inda ba kasa ake gardaman kokuwa'

Literal translation

"There can never be smoke without fire'

Meaning

'Every action or situation has an initiator.'

(iii) Da wari in ji makaho, an ce mashi 'ga ido'

Literal translation

'You cannot give what you do not have.'

Meaning

Your ability to offer assistance largely depends on your pool of having."

B) Igbo Proverbs (henceforth IP)

(i) Nwata bulie nna ya elu ogodo awuchie ya anya

Literal translation

"If a son carries his father up, the father's wrapper will cover the son's eyes'

Meaning

'Anyone who tries to bring his father into shame will suffer for such an action.'

(ii) 'Were ututu chowa ewu ojii'

Literal translation

'Look for the black goat in the day time before it is dark'.

Meaning

'One should make the best use of any given opportunity'.

(iii) Nti n'anu ihe abughi ma oha ka okpu'

Literal translation

"The ear that will listen does not depend on its size'

Meaning

'A word is enough for the wise'

C) Yoruba Proverbs (henceforth YP)

(i) Ojú tí yóò bá ni kalë, kìí tàárô ýepin

Literal translation

"The eye that would lead one into old age does not spill pus in its early years'

Meaning

"One should be able to recognise a later support, in life, right from the beginning".

(1) Igběraga nii siwajil iparun

Literal translation

Pride leads to failure or destruction in life'

Meaning

"A display of arrogance is a precursor to disgraceful fall

(in) "Bí ckòlô bán tả wõlnwõin bí ejð, à ápa á nípa ejò ni

Literal translation

"If the earthworm strides like a snake, we kill it like we kill a snake."

Meaning

We treat a situation the way it comes or appears'

Analysis and Discussion

The proverbs above: HPs i-iii, IPs i-iii and YPs i-iii, in the various indigenous languages, are full sentences in form. They are also characteristically metaphoric. Some of the proverbs are divisible into two halves, which Milner (1999) labels as head (the first half) and tail (the second half), e.g. IP ii, iii, YP iii. However, we can observe that there is a close relationship between some of the proverbs structure and riddle structure. It is perhaps valid to state that both proverbs and riddles, generally, depend upon topic comment constructions, though proverbs which have the topic-comment structure may be oppositional, while there are some that are non-oppositional, and such consist of a single descriptive element, as we have in IP ii, YP ii.

In specific terms, the three HP proverbs above (i-iii) have been literally translated into English, but the meanings may be lost in

the problems generally associated with translation in cross-cultural communication. Apart from dialectal differences, the use of scholarly rather than vernacular language can contribute to potential meaning clash. This situation is general, and applicable to all the proverbs, in use, in this study. In particular, the three Hausa proverbs are full sentences with two essential parts and except their contexts of use are known or provided, the meaning of the individual words constituting the utterances may not reveal so much about the contextual meanings of the proverbs. But let us examine the possible contexts of the proverbs.

Also, the IP proverbs presented above, in terms of form are full statements, and they essentially result from native dialogues and general conversations. Just as Chukwuma (1994:27) has stated, Igbo proverb "is part of a living speech tradition, a heightened and compressed form of language based on the metaphor of daily living and experience". In the three proverbs, the identities of the addressed are generalised, and that accounts for the use of 'a son..., his father' in IP i, and "The ear..." in IP 'iii'.

The Yoruba proverbs (YPs i-iii) glossed above, just as we have for both Hausa and Igbo proverbs, are full sentences in form. None of the three is an interrogative. Two of them also are divisible into two halves (YP i, YP iii); the head and the tail. We need to make one or two remarks about presupposition, at this point, because our discussion of the functions of the proverbs under study is largely based on pragmatic presupposition. In many discussions, presupposition is treated as a relationship between two propositions. As Yule (1996) observes, the notion of presupposition is speaker-dependent. Adegbija (1999:190) opines that in the context of doing things with words, participants almost always share a common ground or take the truth of some propositions about the context, the speaker or the addressee for granted. This is the basis for having faith in the substance of a discussion. Scholars have recognized two main types of

presuppositions: semantic and pragmatic. Semantic presupposition refers to the logical relations that hold between sentences. In essence, it is part of sentence meaning. We can have access to semantic presupposition if we fully understand the meanings of the words used. Semantic presupposition is thus considered to be part of sentence meaning, but distinct from what is said.

On the other hand, pragmatic presupposition refers to the conditions necessary for a speech act to be appropriate in a particular context. In other words, it is concerned with conditions that the world must meet in order for an utterance to make literal sense. Pragmatic presupposition has also been used to refer to the assumption and beliefs about context. From the speaker's perspective, Stalnaker (1978:321) opines that the presuppositions of a speaker are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted as part of the background of the conversation. However, we wish to add that the knowledge of presupposition is vital to the general appreciation of any discourse or talk-exchange, and that it requires the comprehension of cooperative principle maxims (See HP Grice 1975), to fully appreciate the role of presupposition in utterance analysis.

In terms of function, the pragmatic presuppositions for all the proverbs are similar, the knowledge of the 'words' and the 'worlds' of the three languages cultures are taken for granted. Specifically, HP i on the strength of the presuppositions is a note of caution and warning from elders to the younger generation. The context derives from the image of one's small axe seen as a more secure tool than relying on somebody's big axe to achieve a goal. As a master speech act, this is a note of caution to a greedy or impatient youth or somebody who is easily attracted by some other people's success. The significance of the proverb is that one should rely on one's limited resources.

In HP ii, the context that can induce a proverb such as this is the presupposition that every action is justifiable. In other words, an

individual should view a current action/situation as a product of an earlier action/situation, and we have a near equivalence in the Yoruba language, which is: "Tí kò bá nidií, obinrin kif jë Kámolű, which literally translates to 'If there is no reason, a woman does not answer the name 'Kúmola' (death has snatched the prominent one). Invariably, when a woman is addressed by the name Kúmolú, there must be a reason(s), one of which may be that all the male members of the family are dead. The pragmatic function of the proverb is that of reminding or call for restraint.

In HP iii, the meaning here is that it is only what you possess or can possess that you know its value, and it is that, only, that you can give (this can range from advice, wealth, experience, knowledge to concrete objects). In other words, you cannot give what you don't have, or simply put, "Your giving ability largely depends on your pool of having'. In term of function, this proverb is useful in cautioning people with excessive traits. Just as the Hausas generally attach much value and respect to the act of giving out (e.g. alms, dresses, etc.), caution is being preached here. The identifiable speech act here is assertive, but characteristic of all proverbs, this proverb is a master speech act of rebuke or warning.

IP i illustrates the prominence that the Igbo society places on the reverence of elders (fathers). No Nigerian culture rubs its elders in the mud. The pragmatic import of this proverb is the need to protect the institution of fatherhood. Every proverb in every Nigerian culture gives respect to the elders. The proverb is a declarative act.

IP ii is a warning on the need to do whatever one wants to do on time (timeliness). The import of this proverb is that when it is dark, darkness will definitely eclipse a black goat as it will become invisible; hence there is danger in any form of delay. The English language and culture has a near equivalence of this, in 'Make hay

while the sun shines'. It is the same with almost all the cultures in Nigeria.

IP iii is also a caution and warning. The 'ear' is used here as a metaphor of heeding advice. The belief here is that every culture is rich enough in non-formal tradition to teach moral values and rites. In other words, the tradi-cultural environment is sufficient enough for a member of a society to imbibe the presuppositions which a proverb offers. Thus, the three Igbo proverbs perform indirect speech acts of warning and cautioning.

YP i, takes for granted the comprehension of the 'worlds' of words that translate to mean 'eyes', 'old age', 'pus' and 'early years' by the addressee or hearer. The import of this proverb is that in Yoruba culture, everyone is seen as one's brother's keeper. As observed by Adeoye (2005:8), Yoruba proverbs are especially useful in giving advice, comment, warning, encouragement, and even reproach. While proverb YP 'i' is a piece of advice on the need to be wary of the type of company one keeps that is one should only keep a reliable company.

YP 'ii' is a reproach to the 'proud'. This proverb has equivalence in Igbo parlance: 'Nganga buru uzo odida esoro ya', which translates to 'Pride comes before a fall. This also corroborates the view that proverbs, across cultures, perform similar functions.

Proverb YP 'iii' is a form of advice that two or three situations may not be approached in the same way; it is the way a situation arises that will determine the approach to tackle it. The imagery of similarities between an earthworm and a snake is presupposed, and the import here is that if an earthworm behaves like a snake, it deserves the type of treatment that a snake deserves. The function of this proverb, therefore, is that of caution, through a representative speech act (See Yule 1996) in which the speaker states what the he believes to be the case. In essence, all the

proverbs under study share certain things in common. This accounts for the similarities in their forms and functions, as analysed and discussed above.

Conclusion

From the work done so far, it is obvious that proverbs in Nigeria are used not only to add beauty to expression and style, but, more importantly, they project a vital aspect of our tradition. They embellish the priceless values of doing what is right, living peacefully in a communal manner. Proverbs also illustrate the communal life that is prevalent in a typical Nigeria society. The conclusion is that proverbs in the Nigeria indigenous languages have similar forms, in terms of literariness. They also constitute profound literary resource, through their forms, as metaphors, while their functions are infinite. One thing that is common to them is that the proverbs perform pedagogical functions in the various community-owners of the language. Elders, most of who use proverbs, often communicate more than what they actually say. That position is supported by Bach and Harnish's (1979) view that 'a speaker does not always mean what he says, whenever he says a thing. He sometimes means more or less than his words convey.' What he means largely depends on the context in which he is making the utterance. Culture is closely related to civilization, and our proverbs constitute a measure of our cultural essence and civilization.

References

Adegbija, E.E. (1999). Titbits on Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics In E.E. Adegbija, (ed.) The English Language and Literature in English. An Introductory Handbook, Ilorin, MEL Department, University of Ilorin.

Adeoye, A. O. (2005). Creative Manipulations of some Yoruba Proverbs. Paper delivered at Uyo Conference on Language and Literature. University of Uyo, Nigeria. 2005.

Ajadi, G. A. (1994). Tradition and Modern African Liletrature. In Olu Obafemi, (ed.) New Introduction to Literature. Ibadan: Y-Books.

Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do Things with Words. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Babatunde, S.T. & D.S. Adeyanju, (Eds.) Language, Meaning and Society. Ilorin: Haytee Press.

Bach, K. & R. Harnish (1979). Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

Chukwuma, H. (1994). Igbo Oral Literature: Theory and Tradition. Abak: Belfot.

Grice, H.P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts, (pp 43-58). New York: Emuchay, J. (2002). Cross-cultural Pragmatics me and you. In Academic Press.

Igboanusi, H. (2002). Igbo English in the Nigerian novel. Ibadan: Enicrowrfit Publishers.

Igboanusi, H. (2004). Understanding the Igbo Culture: A Literary Approach. Ihafa, 5(1), 179-193.

Leech, G.N. (1983). Principles of Pragmatics. Oxford: Longman.

Mbesike, R.C. (2002). Semantic and Pragmatic presupposition in proverbs: A Case Study of Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God. In S.T. Babatunde & D.S. Adeyanju,(eds.) Language Meaning and Society. Ilorin: Haytee Press.

Mey, J. 1. (2004). Pragmatics: An Introduction. Oxford: Blackwell.

Milner, G. (1999). Quadripartite structures Proverbium 23: 887-894.

Nnabuihe, C.B. (2004). Language Use for Literary Creativity in Obike's Eke Une. In S. Awonusi & E. A. Babalola, (Eds.) The Domestication of English in Nigeria. A Festschrift in honour of Abiodun Adetugbo. Lagos: University of Lagos.

Nnabuihe, C.B. (2004). Rhetoric and Oratory in Traditional Igbo Society. Ihata, 5(1), 194-206.

Oyekanmi, D. F. (2005). Language, Culture and National Development In A.T. Ezeigbo & K.K. Aribisala (eds.), Literature, Language and National Consciousness. Lagos: UNILAG Press.

Saddock, J.M. (1974). Towards a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts. New York: Academic Press.

Searle, J. (1979). Indirect Speech Acts, in its Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stalnaker, R. (1974). Pragmatic Presuppositions. In M. Munitz & P. Unger (eds.), Semantics and Philosophy. New York: NYU Press.

Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.