

Proverbs as Circumstantial Speech Acts

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Abstract

Oral Literature constitutes one of the major linguistic activities of an unwritten culture. An unwritten culture operates in a society which mode of communication, information transfer and storage from one generation to another is basically oral. But since the publication of Ruth Finnegan's epochal text, *Oral Literature in Africa* in 1970, most if not all forms of communication in vernacular have been classified as oral literature. Although a critical analysis of the form of proverbs shows that proverbs share similar characteristics with the genres of Oral Literature, their contents exemplify the pattern of oral communication in folk societies. Proverbs are circumstantial speech acts frequently used in conversations, public speeches and oratory to embellish, conceal and adorn such speeches. The paper therefore posits that for effective understanding of language use in traditional societies, proverbs should be incorporated into the study of Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics and Semantics of African folk languages.

(Oral Literature, linguistic activities, vernacular, proverbs, speech acts, folk languages, discourse analysis, pragmatics)

Introduction

Oral literature constitutes one of the major aspects of linguistic activities of an unwritten culture. An unwritten culture operates in a society of people whose mode of communication, information storage and transfer from one generation to another is basically oral. The orthography of the languages of most traditional societies is not developed and so the art of writing is not as profound as that of the western European societies. This had been the nature of African traditional societies before the advent of writing in some of them. Then, Ruth Finnegan a British social anthropologist came to Africa to do her research on Oral Literature of Africa. Since she published her epochal text, *Oral Literature in Africa* in 1970, in which she devoted a chapter to proverbs, proverbs have continued to be studied as a genre of *Oral Literature*. Finnegan who began her discussion on proverbs by asserting correctly that "*proverbs seem to occur almost everywhere in Africa... and in some African language (proverbs) occur in rich profusion*" generalizes that,

the literary significance of proverbs in Africa is also brought out by their close connection with other forms of Oral Literature. This is sometimes apparent in the local terminology, for proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art.... This overlap in terms is fairly common in Bantu languages and also sometimes occurs in West Africa too (OLA, 390-391).

To most literary critics and even linguists of African origin (who use proverbs in both private and public daily speeches), Finnegan seemed to have propounded a canon for the study of proverbs. But the fact that "proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art" or that "there is an overlap in terms" does not mean that proverbs constitute basically only a literary genre. They are also items of African folk languages and the languages depend on them for survival. Finnegan further asserts correctly that proverbs also occur frequently in general conversation and oratory to embellish, conceal or hint. Proverbs in short are closely interwoven with other aspects of linguistic and literary behaviour". Since Finnegan's dogmatic exposition in 1970, scholars including those of even African origin have investigated (perhaps erroneously) only the literary significance of proverbs with no major inquiry into the role of proverbs in linguistic studies, particularly in Semantics, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis. Even when these scholars themselves use proverbs to enrich their conversation and oratory in particular, it is often with due apology to the listeners.

Finnegan's chapter on proverbs reveals her own lack of knowledge of the difference between proverbs and other verbal art forms. Hear her;

the close connection of proverbs with other literary forms raises a difficulty. How, particularly in an oral culture, we can distinguish proverbs from other forms of oral art? Or indeed, from ordinary cliché and idioms and from such related but different forms as maxims and apophthegms? (OAL, 393).

Finnegan and many other collectors of African proverbs were foreign scholars and perhaps not conversant with any of the languages in Africa. Finnegan herself was a British social anthropologist who spent only a few years

in Africa before embarking on a research on what has generally and variously been referred to as African verbal arts (Bascom, 1965, Bauman, 1975, Peek, 1981), Folk Literature (Cerulli, 1922, Utley, 1965), Unwritten Literature (Green, 1948.), Oral Arts (Herskovits, 1961), Spoken Arts (Berry, 1964), Traditional Literature (Nwoga, 1975), Orature (Chinweizu, Jemie & Maduduike, 1980), Orature (Yankah, 1984). Finnegan states that “she carried out her research through assistants and interpreters who themselves although were Africans, could not interpret their own language(s) into English” and in the preface to her book *Oral Literature in Africa*, she says: “when I first became interested in research into one particular form of African Oral Literature in 1961, I found to my surprise that there was no easily acceptable work to which I could turn to give me some idea of what was known in this field, the various publications available, or the controversies and problems that demanded further investigation”. She appeals that a better “knowledge of the situations in which proverbs are cited may also be an essential part of understanding their implications...” (OLA, 394). The revelation above shows that Finnegan had no knowledge about African Oral Literature or the languages. Therefore, her findings cannot be treated as a canon for the study of even Oral Literature in Africa. Finnegan in her lack of understanding of the African folk languages still acknowledges the role of proverbs in all African languages:

Of the proverbs in many African societies we are told that they are consciously used not only to make effective points but also embellish their speeches in a way admired and appreciated by their audiences. It is part of the art of an accomplished orator to adorn his rhetoric with apt and appealing proverbs... Proverbs are also used to add colour to everyday conversation.... proverbs are essential to life and language: ‘without them, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul’ (OLA, 415).

Although Finnegan classifies proverbs as a genre of Oral Literature (because they share similar characteristics with literary genres), they are indispensable and fundamental items of African languages. Indeed, African languages are rooted in their proverbs. J.L Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Parker (1974), Christophersen (1974), Garfinkel (1972), Gumperz and Hymes (1972) disagree with Finnegan’s sweeping and swift categorization of proverbs as a genre of Oral Literature. These writers classify proverbs as Circumstantial Speech Acts. Speech Act Theory (a concept in Semantics and Pragmatics) according to Austin (1962), analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour, circumstance, attitudes of the speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. It is the communicative ability defined with respect to the intentions of the speaker while talking and the effect of his utterance on the listener. Proverbs are such utterances with communicative purposes depending on the speech context. According to Traugott and Pratt (1980), such utterances are governed by a wide range of contextual factors, including social and physical circumstances, identities, attitudes, abilities, and beliefs or participants and relations, holding between participants. The essence of the speech act theory is that the utterances are acts in themselves capable of producing enormous and far-reaching consequences. One of the major aims of using proverbs in a speech is to create an impact in the thinking of the listener toward the speaker’s desired goal. Firth (1972) points out philosophically, a circumstance that may lead to a spontaneous proverbial utterance thus;

At some notable moment of his life, perhaps at a time of stress, of imminent danger to himself or the tribe, or maybe even when confronted by death itself, a man of rank, preserving his composure, makes some remark which displays such aptness, picturesqueness and facility of phrase that it (proverb) strikes the ear of the bystander and lingers in the memory. This is repeated later in the communal meeting-house, where the details of the whole event are narrated to an eager crowd of listeners—the usual Maori habit. There this remark so appeals by its fitness to the occasion and happy turn of phrase that it is treasured in the mind of the community, is told and retold, becomes adopted to common use,....

Unlike a fable, parable, story or folktale, a proverb is not a literary creation that is stored somewhere to be used but a speech act that occurs sometimes involuntarily in a speech so that the speaker may create a picture of his idea. That proverbs are apt and picturesque, is a general characteristic of a folk language in a folk culture.

Most parts of a folk culture still retain its natural habitat despite the encroachment of infrastructural development. Proverbial language is woven around vegetation, animals and natural objects that can be seen, felt and touched. Because the flora and fauna of the community are not yet tampered with as a result of modern development, the unlettered folk still retain an exceeding knowledge about animals, their names, their characteristics and behaviour. Consequently, communicative situations in such a natural habitat are often woven around natural objects that are clearly picturesque. This is why natural objects, animals and their behaviours often dominate the contents of proverbs so that the folk can easily visualise and memorise such situations. Malinowski (1926) describes language use in a natural habitat as aural-oral or visual language. A visual language is one that can not only be heard but also seen, felt and touched. Perhaps Finnegan (1970) was aware of the fact that in most unlettered communities in Africa language use is extrinsic and not intrinsic. An instance of her own words may suffice her observation of extrinsic use of language;

In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wordings, usually in metaphorical form. This also emerges in many of the native words translated as “proverbs” and in the general stress often laid on the significance of speaking in symbolic terms. Indeed, this type of figurative expression is sometimes taken so far as to be almost a whole mode of speech in its own right (OLA, 390).

In literate cultures where the art of writing evolved, abstract ideas (like others) may be documented graphically and through this process, they may be recalled. But in most African traditional societies where the art of writing is still unknown, language is used referentially to the objects of the natural habitat of the folk in order to concretise abstract ideas for easy memorability. Another device inherent in proverbs is their sound quality that may easily strike the memory of the users. Because information is not documented, proverbs keep the oral information visible and fresh in the memory of the folk through their sound quality. Thompson (1981) who acknowledges the freshness which proverbs bring into conversation and public speeches through their sound quality says that,

...as an oral form, proverbs are easily remembered and transmitted. The proverb is very valuable to preliterate people, for when words cannot be read they are more highly valued when heard. The very sound of the words of a proverb coming out of the mouth gives delight in itself beside the specific subject of the words themselves.

Akin to the sound quality of African proverbs is also Finnegan's discussion on drum language which she erroneously describes interchangeably as drum literature. In Africa we call it the talking drum. The talking drum does not send out messages in plain language but in a chain of proverbs. In common with other African languages, the language of the talking drum is tonal and the drum reproduces the tone of the language almost exactly the way it sounds in normal speech. The language is highly poetic and metaphorical because of the speaker's deliberate tendency to rub in local colours. For instance, each person or object has a drum name in his community and such names are often derived from the behaviours of certain animals or the attributes of the person. Although these names may sound alike, the drummer plays the drum text in such a way that one word is not confused with another. It is this relationship between names and objects of the environment that produces figures of speech when they are intoned in a drum. The African talking drum has no patent verbal structure although it plays a significant role in proverbial language. Finnegan (1970) in distinguishing between two types of drum language in Africa claims that,

The first is through a conventional code where prearranged signals represent a given message; in this type there is no direct linguistic basis for communication. In the second type, that used for African drum literature... the instrument communicates through direct representation of the spoken language itself, stimulating the tone and rhythm of actual speech. The instruments themselves are regarded as speaking and their messages consist of words (OLA, 481).

The African drum language is a system of language which operates on the basis of verbal signals and symbolic gestures and this system of communication through symbols is characteristic of the proverbial language. Finnegan (1970) further agrees with this description of language use consciously or unconsciously when she states that,

*Perhaps even more common than the metaphorical generalization is the form in which a general or abstract idea is conveyed not through any direct generalization at all but through a **single concrete situation** which provides an example of the general point... This hinting at a general or abstract idea through **one concrete case**, either direct or itself metaphorical, is a common proverbial form throughout the continent (OLA, 397-398). (emphasis mine).*

Allusive use of language in the African communities explains why figures of speech abound in African languages in general and proverbs in particular.

It was Brooks (2010) who claimed that “a writer does not write in an intellectual vacuum” and Malinowski (1926) pointedly affirms that “language is about its immediate environment”. Therefore, both the writer and speaker are influenced by their immediate environment. If western European languages are influenced by the heavy industrialization of their environment, African languages are about things of her natural environment because of the less presence of modern infrastructures. Malinowski (1926) further stresses that “there is a strong affinity between language, culture and the environment”. African proverbs as circumstantial speech acts are characterised by figures of speech because the speakers constantly refer to things of their natural habitat in various speech situations. African proverbs share common characteristics with genres of Oral Literature because they originate from the same environment, but proverbs are short sentential utterances commonly used in conversations, private and public speeches. If Finnegan was a Yoruba, Igbo, Ghanaian or Bantu etc. and could

understand any of these African languages, she would have been able to differentiate between a proverbial expression and a folktale, fable or parable even though both oral forms are rooted in the same flora and fauna.

A contextual illustration of how these proverbs are used in speeches may suffice in our discussion. The theme of the discussion between father and son during which this proverb was used was on caution and hard work. The child who had complained about the difficulty of the Senior School Certificate Examination was now preparing for his university semester examination and his father cautioned:

If a lizard bites, you will fear the crocodile

Although the lizard and crocodile look alike and they are both reptiles, they are not of equal strength. The crocodile is bigger and stronger than the lizard. It is therefore commonsense that if the lizard that is smaller bites you, you may have to run faster for your life on sighting the crocodile. The images of the lizard and crocodile in relation to the two examinations are clear in this context. The child does not need to be told that if SSCE was difficult, a degree examination will certainly be more difficult and that the child needs to work harder if he has to pass the degree examination. The next example satirises the selfishness and greed of the highly placed in the society:

If a crocodile eats its own eggs, what does it do to those of the lizard?

Again, the relationship between the crocodile and the lizard comes out clearly from the fact that they are both reptiles, they look alike and they both lay eggs that look alike also. Hence, if a crocodile cannot recognize its own eggs and preys on them, will it spare those of the lizard? If someone is selfish to even oneself, one's neighbours should not expect any act of generosity from him or her. The next proverb is used in a situation in which the speaker is urging the listener to adopt a certain social behaviour as a member of the community. It is also used to validate or justify social norms:

If the fowl did not intend to roost would it have come to the door post?

The fowl is symbolic of one who is in a state of dilemma and unwilling to yield to a certain position or carry a responsibility as may be required by the community. Being a member of the community, one's action must conform to certain norms. One's membership of a community is an indication of one's willingness to conform to these norms. If one is hesitant to take a decision or carry out responsibility as a member of that community like the fowl that is dilly-dallying at the door post, the proverb is used to urge one to do so.

In most traditional societies, there are always clashes between individuals, families and communities over forests and farm lands. In the course of settling such clashes between the individuals, families and even communities this proverb is often used to advocate absolute boundary demarcation:

Long beans do not cross the boundary for they are not short beans.

The proverb is used especially in a situation of anger among individuals in the same family or a group of families. The proverb warns that people may belong to the same family stock, but they may be different in temperament. This is seen in the difference between long beans and short beans. There is therefore the need for even brother of the same mother to live separate from one another to avoid conflict. The illustrations above show that although proverbs may share some figurative similarities with other genres of Oral Literature, they are sentential utterances prevalent in daily speeches and an analysis of a discourse in vernacular is not equivalent to one of the genres of Oral Literature.

By their nature, proverbs are indispensable sentential utterances that are commonly used in both private conversations and various forms of public speeches. Okoh(2002) acknowledges the indispensability of proverbs in conversations and public speeches thus,

... it must be said that strictly speaking, proverbs do not boast an independent existence, as say the tale form. This simply means that the proverb has no life of its own, it only comes alive when it is "performed" as part of a wider context, especially that of discourse. In contrast to the situation in the tale genre, for example, it is clear that people do not assemble to trade or exchange proverbs. Rather we encounter such lubricating elements of speech on virtually every occasion.

Although Finnegan has asserted that proverbs share similar characteristics with genres of Oral Literature, a research on proverbs is not done in the library like these genres. In African traditional society, proverbs are an essential device for embellishing speech, a factor which derives directly from especial use of language. In traditional society where much importance is attached to competence in speech, such a rhetorical device is not only prominent but extremely used. A high degree of competence is required of any user of proverbs especially as the genre constitutes a very wide area of linguistic activities. The competence of a speaker on a matter is measured by his ability to use proverbs perfectly, competently and appropriately to buttress his point. Indeed, Sir Francis Akanu Ibiam (1975) observes that "perhaps the most striking quality of the Igbo Language is its proverbs... A good Igbo speaker, especially the-altogether-illiterate has an easy knack of interspersing his speech with proverbs to bring out more fully and clearly what he wishes to convey to his audience and listeners".

A speech that is intermingled with proverbs is heralded by the audience as having expressed a universal truth and the mind of the community. Such circumstantial speech acts occur involuntarily as a result of the speaker's creative and competent reflection on his immediate phenomena and cultural experiences which are of common knowledge to his listeners. Majority of the African folk in non-literate society demonstrate a great passion for language and even more sensitivity for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive language. Thus, the folk enjoy the compressed quality of the language by which proverbs express some universal truth and philosophical thought. The aesthetic force of these proverbs that are used circumstantially derives from the life experiences and environment – cultural, political and social life of the speaker who has coined them. According to Utley (2009), in a folk community where majority are unlettered the use of picture language is common and in order to establish a visible relationship between the listener and the idea, language is used referentially. This generates the abundance of metaphor, metonymy, allusion, personification, parallelism, paradox, parable, simile, irony and innuendo in African proverbs. This is a major impetus for literary scholarship, otherwise proverbs are richer for linguistic studies as circumstantial speech acts.

It is important to state here clearly that proverbs belong to the aspect of applied linguistics which comprises Semantics, Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics and Stylistics. Looked at from the point of view of the search for meaning in language, proverbs can be studied from the perspectives of Discourse Analysis, Semantics and Pragmatics. Discourse Analysis examines the function of an utterance in a particular context as a specific contribution to a developing discourse. Hence, according to Ayodele (2011) "a proverb is the vehicle of conversation; when the conversation drops a proverb revives it". To the Arab, "a proverb is to speech what salt is to food". To the Bosman "proverbs in conversation are torches in darkness" and to the Bantu "what flowers are to garden, spice to food, gem to a garment and stars to heaven, such are proverbs interwoven in speech. Proverbs belong specifically to the aspect of Discourse Analysis known as Ethnography of Communication. Propounded by Dell Hymes, ethnography of communication is an approach to discourse which seeks to analyse patterns of communication as part of cultural knowledge and linguistic behaviours, and the fact that such behaviours are integral part of what members of a speech community know and practice as members of a particular culture. There is an intellectual relationship between Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics. Pragmatics is concerned with the context-dependent aspect of meaning and we have already asserted that proverbs are sentential utterances, the meanings of which are derived not from their lexical and syntactic combination, but from the context in which they are uttered. Whereas the linguistic meanings of expressions in Semantics are often explicit, pragmatic meanings are implicit. Implicit meanings are those which are not clearly stated in words but which can be understood contextually if the speaker and the listener share a common cultural and mutual background.

There are three fundamental factors that enable the hearer to discover the implicit meaning of a proverbial expression. The first factor is the situation in which the utterance is produced. Proverbial utterances are often uttered in a conversational situation where both the speaker and listener are physically present, and hence, the speaker does not provide too much detail. The second factor is the shared previous knowledge or common cultural background between the speaker and listener, often referred to as interlocutors. There are certain aspects of meaning that are often taken for granted because both the speaker and listener share a similar background about the subject matter of the discourse. The third is the linguistic context in which a particular proverbial expression is used. What precedes or follows an apparently vague expression might lead the hearer to the speaker's meaning of the expression. In other words, implicit meaning is recoverable from the surrounding linguistic context of the discourse.

Pragmatics therefore, takes into consideration such notions as the intentions of the speaker, the effects of the speaker's utterance on his listener, the implications that follow from using a particular proverbial utterance and the knowledge and beliefs about the situation upon which both the speaker and listener rely when they interact. A proverbial utterance has great implications on the listener and the entire discourse when the listener is able to decode its meaning. Hence, Ike (2012) says that "the proverb has significance when it falls into the ear of the man who understands, when the-good-for-nothing hears it he merely shakes the head till he staggers into the bush." The study of proverbs therefore belongs to the domain of Pragmatics known as implicatures. The term Implicature is ascribed to H.P Grice (1975) who used it to work out his theory of language use in communication and to refer to the possibility of deriving a deeper meaning outside the lexical and syntactic meaning of an utterance (Babalola, 2012). The meanings of a proverb are not derived from its lexical constituents but the conversational and conventional circumstances in which it is used.

Conclusion

The paper began with an assertion that Finnegan's classification of proverbs as solely a genre of Oral Literature because they share similar characteristics with folktale, fable, parable, story, riddle, etc is erroneous. Her erroneous classification was predicated upon the fact that as a foreign scholar she was not familiar with

either African languages or the environments in which the languages are spoken. Proverbs are obligatorily sentential items common in African languages. Because most of the languages are not written down, the folk pattern their expressions along physical objects that can be seen, felt and touched so that they can be remembered. Since proverbs are used in both conversations and public speeches, they cannot be classified solely as genres of Oral Literature because not everything that is said in vernacular is Oral Literature. It is the contention of this paper that the study of proverbs as items of African languages belongs in the main, to the domain of applied linguistics which comprises Semantics, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics and Stylistics. Scholars of African Languages may understand their subject better through the study of proverbs not as a literary genre but items of folk languages.

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