



A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF OGBA PROVERBS AS TOOLS FOR COHESION

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ABSTRACT: *Sociolinguistics means many things to different people. It is a field that studies the relationship between the users of language and the social structures in which they live. “A sociolinguistic analysis of Ogba proverbs” focuses on the study of Ogba proverbs, exploring the sociolinguistic aspects. Its aim is to explore and analyse Ogba proverbs from the sociolinguistic perspective in the context of English as a second language in Nigeria. This will go a long way to offer a sociolinguistic insight to the contributions of Ogba language, culture and way of life. The data for the study were collected orally through interviews of competent Ogba first language speakers and translated to the English language for analysis. The qualitative and descriptive research designs were adopted for the analysis. In all, twenty (20) proverbs were analysed using Dell Hyme’s Ethnography of Communication Theory as the major analytical framework with insights from Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This is because of the relevance of Dell Hyme’s Speaking which accounts for such sociolinguistic variables as setting, scene, participants, act sequence, instrumentality and genre as is evidenced in the data, and how the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis allows this paper to relate its data to aspects of Ogba worldview and culture. This paper establishes that Ogba proverbs are relevant to both oral and written communications within and outside the Ogba environment. They are employed to embellish, spice and beautify oral and written communications commonly but proudly exploited in Ogba people’s interpersonal relations through conversations. On typology, Adedimeji’s (2003) typological classification is applied for the classification of the data into types. It was discovered that Speaking allows for the comprehensive understanding of the data for this paper which is as a result of its explicit and analytic potential, while Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis shows aspects of Ogba Culture that manifest in Ogba proverbs.*

KEYWORDS: Sociolinguistic, Analysis, Ogba, Proverbs, Cohesion.



INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are determined by socio-geographical experience. This is to say that the nature of the imagery and the forms in which the truth in proverbs are expressed to a very large extent reflect the socio-cultural milieu in which the people live. The “repertoire” of imagery implicit in the proverbs of the southern people are different from those dominant in the proverbs of the north. This is because proverbs reflect the beliefs, hopes and aspirations of the people; hence, the proverbs of the Ogba people reveal their values, beliefs, hopes and aspirations. There is a strong traditional story that prior to the advent of the western culture into Ogba society, there was a common practice of oral form of education, especially in the use of proverbs. Among the Ogba in the past, there was the art of rendering proverbs skillfully in spoken communications and being mindful of the prevailing situations. It was seen as a mark of honour and its use was correspondingly applauded by the audience.

Throughout that period in retrospect, proverbs were the traditional yardstick in assessing one’s unquestionable identity as an indigene of communities in the Ogba kingdom. This was because conversations were effected purely in Ogba language and were naturally laced with corresponding and accompanying proverbs.

The knowledge of Ogba proverbs and their effective usage, that is, applying them in relevant and specific contexts and occasions was seen and recommended as a mark of “wisdom naturally” on the part of the individual concerned.

However, it appears now that the trend is no longer in vogue in Ogba tradition as a result of westernisation and advancement in culture. This does not imply the avoidance and denial of traditional practice by Ogba people who hitherto introduced varieties of proverbs in their daily conversations; it is only western culture infiltration into this age-long traditional practice.

Ogba proverbs are genderised as only the adult male gender who is competent and versed in Ogba language is allowed to use proverbs in conversations and dialogues. The elders who are respected and perceived as the custodians of the customs and tradition of the society expectedly and skillfully defend their responsibility as they frequently and, whenever occasion demands, display their wit and wealth of experience through the use of proverbs. It is often viewed as a show of mastery and oratory. They at times gather youths, adults and even infants in their living room to teach them Ogba proverbs, x-raying the relevance to them in both oral and written tradition.

In Ogba, as it is in other societies in Africa, the acquisition and skillful mastery of the use of proverbs in conversations and dialogues and the knowledge of the specific situations of application by an individual is seen as a mark of oratory and competence in Ogba language and literature. Proverbs are used euphorically to reduce the effect of hurtful experiences. The Ogba people use proverbs to express ideas of man and his affairs in the society.

The aesthetic flavour and didactic implication of Ogba proverbs in human interactions and communications have attracted the attention of scholars in Ogba and beyond to venture into its study. Litter wonder, Wilfred (1956) writing on the nature of proverbs explains that proverbs are “short but sayings that are used to illustrate one form of truth or the other” (p. 86). Considering proverbs from the foregone definition, one could agree that proverbs are by nature likened to metaphors and epigrams in that they are short but wise sayings that illustrate one truth. This is aptly described by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* that a proverb is the “palm



oil with which words are eaten” (p. 5). Proverbs are described in edible terms, thus revealing their importance to speech as in their underlying meaning. This accounts for why they owe a “daily metaphor for daily living” (Ngaage, 2000, p. 37). The introduction of proverbs in literature and oral communication is a common practice in African culture.

Proverbs are used to emphasise the words of the wise and a stock in trade of the old people, who use them to convey precise moral lessons, warnings and advice, since they make a greater impact on the mind than ordinary words (Taiwo, 1986, p. 26).

To the Akan people of Ghana, the use of proverbs is significant not only to their literature but also to their very lives. And in demonstrating this belief, they, according to Finnegan (1970), cited in Ngaage (2004), maintain that: “Proverbs reveal the thought of the past, express unique ideas, and are means of overcoming hackneyed expressions” (p. 34).

The Significance/Functions of Proverbs

Indeed, the significance of proverbs is noticed and felt in various ways: they are used to educate the younger generation; they are a way of avoiding hackneyed language; to embellish and as well beautify our speech; and they are also employed to illustrate one truth or the other. Besides the above functions in Ogba (African) literature, they also expose our philosophy of life as they overlap with other forms of literary devices to buttress our practical way of living. In Ogba culture, the use of proverbs in spoken and written literature is seen in different perspectives: in the words of the elders, proverbs are used to gladden the ears, retain the heart of the matter, entertain the audience, and economise long words. Proverbs are interestingly described in various levels of understanding. This development supports the notion that their usage is an important aspect of a society’s culture, for they tend to reflect realities of the given society that coined them.

Proverbs are seen by the Igbos as “a living speech tradition, a heightened and compressed form of language based on metaphors of daily living and experience” (Chukwuma, 1994, p. 26). The influence of proverbs, therefore, is married to the daily experience of mankind as symbolised in the Igbos. Similarly, the Hausa would see proverbs in “an emotional manner.” To them, proverbs are “like lubricants used in softening rough joints.”

In every culture, they are nuggets of popular wisdom, expressed in the form of concise sayings. Other terms such as adage, maxim and precepts are also used (Crystal, 1957, p. 53). Crystal adds that in many cultures, especially in Africa, proverbs are important and frequent elements in ordinary conversations. Mbisike (2002), citing Finnegan (1970), states that “proverbs are generally terse figurative expressions which are frequently anecdotes in a nutshell” (p. 228).

Different scholars have given definitions of proverbs in line with its importance, significance and function in the society. “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder, 2004, p. 3). Lamidi (2012) gives a definition which is not too different from Mieder’s, and according to him, “a proverb is a witty saying that captures the logic, culture and observations of a people” (p. 61). Whiting (1994), cited in Mieder (2004), summarises a proverb thus:

A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth – that is, a truism – in homely



language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short but needs not be; it is usually true but needs not be. Some proverbs have both a literal and figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense, but more often they have one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of contiguity, and, since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. This last requirement we must often waive in dealing with very early literature, where the material at our disposal is incomplete (p. 2).

Sociolinguistics and the Structure of Proverbs

Structurally, proverbs display inter-language similarities with their reliance on vivid images, domestic allusions and word play. “Proverbs evolve from traditional love, history and religion and are usually attributed to elders as they embody the wisdom of elders or ancestors in society” (Olatunji, 1988, p. 61). Although there are speculations that proverbs are at the verge of extinction, Mielder (2004) contradicts this by saying that “nothing could be further from the truth” (p. 4). He categorically states that proverbs are very much alive and well; this same belief resonates in Ogba as regards the use of the proverbs, its functions significance and importance in the lives of Ogba people.

Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991) opines that “proverb is considered one of the longest surviving non-material artifacts of heritage” (p. 3). From pre-literate times, the wisdom of proverbs has been a lamp unto the people in their social interaction. It is succinct and pungent, and it is used to add grandeur to an otherwise flat and ordinary speech. Ogba people sometimes find it difficult to understand a proverb since the meaning is not easily decoded from the surface. This results from the fact that the language of proverb is elevated from the ordinary language of everyday communication.

Meanings in proverbs can be analogous to happenings in the real world. Proverb is based on the wisdom, beliefs, culture, experiences and history of its society, and it is therefore easily interpretable within the society. “Proverbs are understood in relation to a background of assumptions and values, so they are primarily a social phenomenon” (Akporobaro, 2006, p. 46). Although, proverb is mainly used among the elderly, it is sometimes used in interpersonal discourse by both the old and young in appropriate contexts. This context must include topic, participants, setting and subject matter. The context is mandatory for their correct interpretation because they indirectly provide a message.

They are learnt through social interaction and for social propose, and they are at the vanguard of social values. This is to say proverbs promote the values that are held in high esteem in a socio-cultural milieu. Therefore, Ogba proverbs play the above roles: where the proverbs are only interpretable within the cultural environment, they constitute an interesting and informative source of folk knowledge that portrays certain cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, it is a sociolinguistic fact that most minority languages of the world are facing the threat of possible extinction. It is the proverb that can make languages not to go extinct. Language cannot be mentioned without references to society since it does not exist in a vacuum. There is no society without a language. Therefore, language and society have a symbiotic relationship. “This leads to the sociology of language or sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 2014, p. 527). Similarly, Hudson (1980) distinguishes sociology of language from sociolinguistics: “Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society while sociology of language is



primarily concerned with the study of society and how the society uses language” (p. 21). In this definition, there is an overlap between the two concepts. It is glaring that society is a very important issue in the relationship between it and language. There are certain things that bind members of a society together; these include language, culture, beliefs, religion and others.

Sociolinguistics also studies how language serves and is shaped by the society. In its broadest sense, sociolinguistic analyses the many and diverse ways in which language and society entwine. This vast field of enquiry requires and combines insights from a number of disciplines including linguistics, sociology, psychology and anthropology. For clarity purpose, the term “sociolinguistics” is derived from two disciplines of sociology and linguistics. Sociology studies the society and social institutions such as home, peers, language, genders, and ethnicity, while linguistics studies language as a means of communication.

However, the study of language and the society could be viewed under two perspectives: micro and macro sociolinguistics. This paper, “A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Ogba Proverbs as Tools for Cohesion,” speaks volumes of the importance, function and significance of Ogba proverbs in the conversation and dialogues of Ogba people, and how Ogba people in their locality make use of proverbs as language. Since proverbs are spoken by a class of people (elders) in the society, proverbs (language) cut the society into ranks or classes, while at another, the society shapes the language. Therefore, sociolinguistics studies how language varieties differ between groups separated by certain social variables, for example, ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education and age. There is no gainsaying the fact that proverb is proved to adhere to these roles in Ogba society. Finnegan (1970) elucidates that: “Now proverbs often imply some general comment on the way people do, or should, or should not behave” (p. 131).

The importance of proverbs in literary usage cannot be overstressed. Proverbs are virtually and somewhat indispensably found to be so useful in conserving meanings as well as adding flavour to both oral and written literature that they are in almost every work of art and used as any other literary device. In the Ogba communication culture, the importance of proverbs is numerous. Proverbs in Ogba oral culture are stylistically and imaginatively employed to spice words.

In addition, proverbs are also skillfully presented in a condensed form as the core meaning of an utterance. Every communal gathering, elders’ forum, age grade, social functions, marital and burial ceremonies, inter-personal conversations and even peer group associations is conducted with the use of traditional proverbs.

Nature and Types of Ogba Proverbs

Ogba people cherish proverbial expressions and their culture is rich in the use of proverbs. There is always a proverb that captures a particular idea or situation. In fact, the definition of a proverb can be explained using a proverb. For instance, when a question is asked, What is a proverb? *Kini la bu elu?* The question can be answered using a proverb. “Proverb is an epigrammatic language of elders” – “*Elu bu olu eknurnu ka nde agadi.*”

The Ogba people believe that proverbs are the beauty of conversations. It is the flower used in garnishing talks. The proverb is a symbol of strength, beauty and wisdom of the elders. When an elder is short of words or speechless, proverbs help to find the right set of words to use in such instances of perplexity. The use of proverbs by Ogba elders is considered to be an embodiment of ancient wisdom, ideas as well as knowledge.



Every situation has its specific type of proverb. The occasionality of use of proverbs is very necessary in Ogba. Proverbs of specific situations and with corresponding meanings are masterly used by speakers in their utterances and communications with other members in the speech community. There are proverbs for dispute resolution, lamentation, entertainment, decision making, difficult moment, explanation, encouragement, warning, rebuke, etc.

Proverbs are euphemistically used to take care of any situation or event at the time of occurrence and to keep the audience emotionally enlivened or stable. There are proverbs for:

Dispute Resolution: “Case does not cook a good food”: *uka esi ga irni oma.*

Lamentation: “If death is food, I will not eat”: *ownu bu irni, ado ma la ori.*

Entertainment: “Tortoise said that if the music is melodious, he could jump across his mother-in-law’s legs”: *mbekni kuru la egwu kira uso akpo ya ntu ghno-ghira ya nno-ogo a ukwu,* or “A flute player must dry his running nose”: *ogbu opi zniga-imi.* This proverb implies that there necessarily must come a time for the determined and industrious to take out time to enjoy a moment of rest:

Advice: “There is a way out for every situation”: *whne adi kpa wo eme a, kpa wo eme a la di.*

Caution/Warning: “A little piece is bigger than the carcass of an elephant”: *tutu kpari la ka oznu eyini.* It is cautiously used by speakers in Ogba speech communities to warn a stubborn individual of the consequences inherent in certain antisocial practices. To an individual, with feelings of peaceful dispositions and non-violent nature, the proverbs could make him/her have a rethink and weigh the worth of the adventure he/she wants to undertake and the likely consequence(s). “A person who became blind as a result of drops of rainfall does not raise his/her eyes up when it is raining”: *oyne ntirna mini tnakpuro eyina ewo liga eyina elu ma mini li ozno.* This means that a person should be cautious and limits himself/herself to his/her disability.

Difficult Moment: “When the spirit accepts a sacrifice, it pays with life”: *agbra nira eja awuro ndnu ku ugwo.* In Ogba, proverbs dedicated to moments of difficulty, when introduced, have the therapeutic effect of relieving the individual of the pains or uneasiness which may have come with the attack of such predicament.

Decision-Making: “The crab said that when a play extends to swinging of arms, he will voluntarily withdraw”: *nsiko kuru la egwu pia maghni la ichila eka aznu la adiwo aya.* In an intense moment of decision taking/making, corresponding proverbs are used in situations that task the speaker of his ingenuity in the use of proverbs to manipulate both artificial and natural development.

Explanation: “The woodpecker said that he would use hardwood to make the casket of his late mother when she dies but before the date of his mother’s burial, a big boil (swollen) covered his beak”: *otukpokporo kuru wo la osi oji ka eme me ya igbe oznu ili nnakuwo, ma tupu ka oruru ubachni yna eso ruchni a onu.*

Encouragement: “Where is the grave of the childless woman?”: *ndala ili ka oyne ewno nwna?.* Whatever a woman with children can accomplish, the childless woman is also endowed to accomplish it.



Rebuke: “When a woman is advised to adjust her wrapper, she complains of sexual advances on her”: *wo knuni nwaagiri wo obnasi ekwa ka oka, ya wo la otula wo onu*. This is a rebuke to someone who grumbles because he/she is not allowed to do certain things which those who prevent him/her from doing it know to be dangerous.

As earlier highlighted, Ogba proverbs have the national therapeutic touch and effect on every situation; they can penetrate hard hearts and make individuals’ co-existence practically possible. In fact, the list of proverbs that perform these functions is inexhaustible. For instance, there are conversational proverbs for moments of relaxation, recreation and labour free times in Ogba. This practice resonates during new yam festivals, moonlit game time, marital ceremonies, and resting periods after the day’s labour and other similar occasions. Interestingly, the flow of proverbs in such periods is endless as the participants entertain themselves by introducing one proverb after another.

At such conversational moments, corresponding proverbs are rendered and psychologically and emotionally, the aesthetic effects are felt by conversers.

Features of Ogba Proverbs

Ogba proverbs are used to address various issues. These issues may be delicate, serious or sympathetic. Each Ogba proverb has a number of features that enables it to communicate something based on the mutual intelligibility of the speaker(s) and participants(s). These features include: relevance, contextual interpretation, socio-cultural theme and symbol.

Relevance: Ogba proverbs are related to the issues being discussed. The relatedness of the proverbs with the issue adds flavour and meaning to the discussion. For an Ogba speaker to use a proverb, there must have been a prior discussion which the speaker will use to buttress what is being said in order to pass across the intended message in the most effective manner.

Contextual Interpretation: This refers to the meaning of a proverb within its context of use. Context refers to the situation within which language functions; it is the foundation of any linguistic enterprise. Since every utterance occurs within a “culturally determined context of situation,” meaning is tied to that context about the speaker and the ways he perceives himself, his roles in the society and his relationship with other members of the society. This includes the physical context, socio-cultural context, psychological context and linguistic context.

In physical context of pragmatics, we have the participants, the activities, the place and the time. Socio-cultural context evolved because a language belongs to a speech community and it is used for the purposes of communication. However, a language may be exposed to different socio-cultural backgrounds and speech acts that socio-culturally, will need a reliance on adequate interpretation. The psychological context looks at what exactly is the state of mind of the interlocutors: is it that of sadness, joy, anger, happiness, boredom, excitement, bitterness or sorrow? Sometimes, utterances made may not easily reflect the state of the mind on the surface but sometimes through the unspoken form of language, the analysis or listeners succeed in discovering the exact state of mind of the speakers.

Linguistic Context: The context of every utterance is expected to be objective in nature and comprises the actual fact about the speaker’s time, place and possible world in which it occurs. Some scholars such as Stalker see context as basically subjective, a matter of common ground, that is, shared beliefs that serve as a common pre-supposition for interpretation of assertion.



Relationship between Socio-Linguistics and Proverbs

Sociolinguistics as an aspect of linguistic study studies the relationship between language and the society, and the main tools in the study of sociolinguistics is the speech community and language use.

A speech community is a group of people who use a given language or dialect. In terms of language use, a speech community makes use of all aspects of a language and its components including songs, folklores, proverbs, riddles, jokes, etc. (Lyons, 1965, p. 326).

Hence, proverb is one of the language aspects used by people in the society. The proverb as a genre in oral literature is couched in high philosophical tapestry of a language. It constitutes a special form of language use, which attracts the attention of a language teacher, linguist and promoters of indigenous language learning. Indeed, proverbs are transmitted through language. A proverb cannot exist without a language. Language houses proverbs, and sociolinguistics studies languages. Therefore, proverbs are integral parts in the scope of sociolinguistics because proverbs are used by the people in the society through the vehicle of language to transmit their wisdom, knowledge, experiences, and feelings. Consequently, the study of proverbs in sociolinguistics specifies the usage of proverbs in the society showing what people do with proverbs, how they use it, and the functions it performs in the society.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs are speech ornaments used by Africans to embellish and beautify oral and written communications. They equally emphasise words of wisdom to convey precise moral lessons, warnings, advice as they make greater impacts on the minds than ordinary words. They are used to gladden the ears, retain the crux of the matter. If adequate encouragement is given to the communities in terms of developing orthography of the proverbs as well as compiling the proverbs in a comprehensive document, it will go a long way to preserve them for posterity.

“Proverbs are pieces of brief and popular sayings, generally in the form of a phrase.” They are commonly used to illustrate a specific point. Knowledge of proverbs is important since it increases vocabulary and enhances social skills. Therefore, the use of proverbs in conversations is important since it expresses a perceived truth based on common sense or experience (Ohia, 2021, p. 275).

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