

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*

Nwabudike, Christopher E.

*Department of Languages and Linguistics
Federal University, Dutsin-ma, Katsina State
cnwabudike@fudutsinma.edu.ng; 08101876061*

Abstract

This paper examined the sociolinguistics of the proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Proverbs form a notable part of both spoken and written discourse in real-life and literary situations. In the Yoruba speech community of Nigeria to which Ola Rotimi belongs and in which the play is set, proverbs are considered as multifunctional and flexible instruments of communication. They are employed to reflect social relationships and for performing routine communicative activities. These proverbs reveal the values of good conduct, respect for elders, the place of royalty, cordiality and cooperation for peaceful co-existence. Though some studies have been carried out on the use of proverbs in literary texts, the sociolinguistics of proverbs in this popular play by Ola Rotimi had not been explored as this paper sets out to do. The study adopted the historical-descriptive design. Data for the study were analysed using Dell Hymes' Ethnographic acronym, "S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G" to show the nature or gender, age, class and contextual dynamics in the use of proverbs in the play. The study shows that there is male dominance in the use of proverbs; elders and leaders are more disposed to proverbial expressions than young and common individuals and proverbs are conditioned by the circumstances of their users. The researcher recommends that the study of African proverbs be introduced into the school curriculum to help growing children appreciate their culture and those of other people and avail themselves of the moral lessons that proverbs offer.

Keywords: *Sociolinguistics, Proverbs, Yoruba, Socio-cultural, setting, Language*

Introduction

Many scholarly works have been carried out on the study of proverbs. This may not be unconnected with the fact that historical information, thought, customs, beliefs and values of a society can be obtained through their proverbs. Besides, Nigerian proverbs in particular are a literary device used to embellish speech. Owomoyela examined the implications of proverbs on African philosophy of communication and described how the application of such a philosophy to the problem of a more complex modern Africa might aid in resolving the crisis of communication that obviously exists in the continent. The author used the Yoruba as prime example, but also cited other practices by other African peoples (3). Fasiku worked on *Yorùbá Proverbs, Names and National Consciousness*. The study offered a critical exposition of the general nature of Yorùbá proverbs and an exploration of the dialectical relationship between Yorùbá proverbs and names. It argued that this relationship instantiates a descriptivist theory of reference of names in the philosophy of language, with concluding particulars that critically espouses the values and virtues embedded in selected Yorùbá proverbs and names (1).

On his part, Daramola carried out a study on *Semiotics of Aspects of English and Yoruba Proverbs* and established the fact that proverbs form a significant part of the general concept of metaphor. His analysis showed the semiotic relevance to the interpretation of some English and Yoruba proverbs with reference to Eco's thought on the global space of meaning. The study also identified some elements of the semiotic essence of English and Yoruba proverbs (107). Taiwo attempted a discourse and structural analysis of Yorùbá proverbs collected from oral interviews and native Yorùbá texts. The study revealed that proverbs are used to achieve different discourse acts and communicative goals by speakers; native speakers use the proverb as a linguistic strategy of negotiating deep ideas and intentions and; the Yorùbá proverb is structurally characterized by some lexical and grammatical devices which help to reinforce its communicative intelligibility and textuality (71).

Bolaji and Kehinde analysed the proverbs that the Yoruba live by. They posited that in the Yoruba society, proverbs had been and still remained powerful and effective instruments of transmitting ideas, motive, knowledge and social morality from generation to generation because proverbs reflect societal values of the people. The investigation underscored the fact Yoruba are interested in the maintenance of personal health and hygiene; as a result, several Yoruba proverbs could be used to ensure good health. This study concluded that proper teaching and usage of proverbs might be veritable tools for enhancing good health and hygiene (1). Coming from the angle of pragmatics, Odebunmi examined the crisis-motivated proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and concluded that two types of crisis – motivated proverbs characterized the text, namely, social crisis-motivated proverbs and political crisis-motivated proverbs. The social ones are situated in the events of the outbreak of epidemics in Kutuje, divination/riddle of birth concerning Odewale and the contest between Odewale and King Adetusa over a piece of land in Ede. The political ones are found in scenes where Aderopo brings a message from Baba Fakunle, where the killer of King Adetusa is sought, and where Baba Fakunle makes physical presence (14).

Deploying Hyme's Ethnography of speaking and Brown and Levinson's Face theory, Ajayi provided an analysis of verbal indirection in Yoruba. He affirmed that Yoruba language was one of the richest languages in the world in terms of how words and expressions could be employed beyond their conventional meanings. He opined that the deployment of verbal indirection which is a strategic avoidance of speaking directly in order to achieve a communicative goal is one way of achieving unconventional meaning of words and expressions in the language. The study found that verbal indirection could be deployed as a face-threatening strategy in the Yoruba language, as against the earlier claim that it was a face-saving strategy (68).

Scholarly as the works cited above are, they do not focus on sociolinguistic interpretation of proverbs as this study aims to do. A sociolinguistic analysis of proverbs as intended by this work will provide a strong springboard for the development and appreciation of indigenous knowledge. In this way, individuals and societies can be enriched and positively disposed to appreciate other people as they understand the world view of these people with different cultures and traditions. In more specific terms, the work aims to present the thought patterns

of Yoruba speakers as a strong background for the appreciation of proverbs as used in the play under study.

The aim of the study is to analyse the proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, sociolinguistically, so as to bring to the fore, the effect of each proverb in both the play and the contemporary world of Nigerians and Africans at large where proverbs serve as conversational strategies for effective talk exchange. The specific objectives are to explore the contextual peculiarity and universality of the proverbs used in the text; to establish the place of age, sex and status in proverbial usage in the text and; to ascertain how they contribute to the achievement of the goal of the playwright.

The study is a sociolinguistic analysis of written proverbs used in the Nigerian context, especially the ones by the renowned Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi. The work is limited to his popular play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* published in 1971. The choice of the text is informed by the rich proverbial expressions with which the writer ties his language and how these lasting linguistic materials have helped to enhance the message of the play. The study is very significant because linguists, translators and interpreters will benefit immensely from constantly updating their understanding and use of these nuggets of wisdom, since they offer specific cultural insights through the analysis of proverbs. Also, the use of proverbs can be a key element in the language acquisition process. Idioms and proverbs provide a snapshot of other cultures that allow for a more thorough understanding of both language and culture. Without a firm grasp of the meaning of these types of sayings, people are limited to a unilateral understanding.

The Concept of Proverbs

It is important to provide a background explanation of what we exactly mean by proverbs. Dougall views proverb as "...a saying popularly known and repeated usually expressing simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or practical human experience" (1087). Mieder carried out a study, from which he summarized the meaning of proverb thus:

A phrase, saying sentence or expression of the folk which contains above all, wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation (5).

In the words of Yusuf and Methangwane, proverbs are "relatively short expressions, which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of social functions" (408). Such functions often include the teaching of morals as earlier mentioned. In all, proverbs help to shroud some parts of one's speech in secrecy, leaving only the "initiated" to decode the hidden message in the words.

Proverbs are used by people from all parts of the world for the transmission of their wisdom, knowledge, experiences and feelings. As Carter puts it, "every language has its thesaurus of proverbs" (63). This, in turn, has made proverbs to become current and innovative. In every speech community proverbs are used to achieve certain purposes or objectives. In the words

of Fanany Rebecca and Ismet, “Proverbs in many societies are used to offer advice, resolve problems between individuals, and indicate comradery and good will” (122). English proverbs may be seen as closely related to English folk wisdom even though many of them have literary origin. In Africa, proverbs are of immense importance to the people. This explains why African proverbs have origin or background and explanation that are rooted in the socio-cultural life of the people. Coker states,

Among Africans particularly, proverbs occupy a strategic position given the pre-literate nature of indigenous African societies. In particular, among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, proverbs are regarded as a cherished form through which the worldview, philosophy and knowledge transfer across generation lie. The use of proverbs among the Yoruba, especially among elders, in everyday discourse ensures the sustenance, understanding and dissemination of traditional values (53).

Proverbs have been with humanity just like language. In Nigeria, some of the indigenous languages have been translated into English. The English Language has been with Africa, particularly West Africa and especially Nigeria, for quite some time. Gradually, it was seen that Nigerians and other second language users of English use the language in a special way. In other words, there exists certain distinctiveness in the way Nigerians use English. There appears to be no doubt that several of the proverbs in English used by Nigerian writers have been largely translated into English from some indigenous languages.

As in all cultures, proverbs function like moral codes, conventional wisdom and explicit rules of conduct. These proverbs describe and prescribe the patterns of behaviour. They state the experiences, moral intuitions and guidelines for living that people generally have found to be desirable and helpful. At the same time, they contain the wisdom of the sages in the form of prescriptions and counsel for a successful life.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Dell Hymes’ Ethnography of Communication. The theory derives from Hymes’ earlier theory of communicative competence (Hymes, 28). Hymes contends that communicative competence is the knowledge needed by a speaker or hearer, which is broader than the mere linguistic competence of Chomskyan linguistics (Hudson, 224). More than the knowledge of grammar and rules, a language user needs the ability to use linguistic forms appropriately. The notion of communicative competence thus subsumes linguistic competence. According to Hymes, the goal of a language student should be to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence to know when to speak, when not, as to what to talk about, with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire at speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate accomplishment by others.

Thus, the thrust of his ethnography of communication is to portray how the conventions of language use, its forms, relate to aspects of social behaviour. Adeyanju (28) conceives Hymes’ ethnography of communication as “a speaker’s knowledge of what variety of language to use

in what situation, how to vary style with the audience addressed, when to speak or remain silent....” Hymes captures the social variables around which interactants use language in context/setting/situation by construing “speaking” as an acronym, with each of the letters signaling the factors involved in speaking. The acronym stands for settings, participants, Ends, Act sequence, key, instrumentality, Norms and Genres. Hymes posits that to properly learn a language, one needs to examine words and conversations in the light of the time and place of speech (settings), the speakers and hearers (participants), the purpose or aim of the speech (Ends), the forms and order of the events in the speech (Act sequence), the tone or manner of speech (key), the forms and style of speech (instrumentality) the rules governing the speech (norms) and the speech act (Genres)

Methodology

Fifteen (15) proverbs were randomly selected from the text, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), by Ola Rotimi. Many of the proverbs are used by King Odewale himself. One was spoken by Queen Ojuola; some by King Adetusa and elders, and the others by common people. The tool for the analysis of the selected proverbs is the Ethnography of Communication theory by Dell Hathaway Hymes. Each proverb was analysed based on the Settings, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentality, Norms, and Genres as required by Hymes’ acronym: S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Proverbs Spoken by King Odewale

- (1). “He who pelts another with pebbles asks for rocks in return” (P.7)
- (2). “The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come” (P.30).
- (3). “All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell which lizard suffers from belly ache?” (P. 23).
- (4). “Two rams cannot drink from the same bucket at the same time! They will lock horns” (P.34).
- (5). “A bush does not sway this way or that way, unless there is wind” (P.60).
- (6). “Joy has a slender body that breaks too soon” (p.8)
- (7). “Only a madman would go to sleep with his roof on fire” (p.11)

The peculiar nature of King Odewale as a king in a land where he is a stranger is reflected in his proverbs. The first proverb actually shows his self satisfaction and the justification of the defeat of the people of Ikolu. The second proverb shows Odewale’s feeling of insecurity and his suspicion of the genuineness of the love the people of Kutuje claim they have for him. It is the same suspicion of the sincerity of the Kutuje Chiefs and indigenes that propels the use of the third proverb. The fourth proverb is uttered to reveal the competition between him and his stepson, Aderopo. The fifth proverb explains why he fled Ijekun Yamoja, his supposed native land, to Kutuje where he is now king. The sudden turn of events which made Kutuje that experienced peace and progress for eleven full years but suddenly became overwhelmed with incessant deaths is what is expressed by the sixth proverb. When the suffering citizens of Kutuje accused King Odewale of inaction he presents his defence by the seventh proverb.

Proverbs Spoken By King Adetusa

- (8). "No termite ever boasts of devouring rock" (P.48).
- (9). "Venom of viper does nothing to the back of a tortoise" (P.48).

King Adetusa appears on stage briefly only in the flashback scene, but he still utters these two proverbs to show kings' penchant for proverbs. The scene is one of serious scuffle between him and Odewale over a piece of land. He utters these two proverbs to indicate the superiority of his power to that of his opponent.

Proverbs Spoken By Elders

- (10). "Is it not ignorance that makes the rat attack the cat?" (p.28)
- (11). "The butterfly thinks himself a bird" (p.59)
- (12). "Secrets of the owl must not be known in daylight" (p.62)

Yoruba elders are held in high esteem in the society with old age as part of their qualifications. It is customary in Africa for chiefs and elders to form part of royal councils and take part in deliberations and decisions that have to do with governance. Even outside governmental issues, the words of elderly people are taken as words of wisdom and as such they are taken seriously. Their words and roles are therefore mainly to advise or reprove and these reflect in their choice of proverbs. The first proverb is Baba Fakunle's response to King Odewale's directive to send the seer away from the palace because he (the seer) castigated the king for his tantrums. The second proverb is a sarcastic remark directed at King Odewale by his supposed uncle. The king recalls that that utterance made him flee Ijekun Yamoja. By the third proverb, Alaka requests King Odewale to provide privacy for further talk between both of them after revealing before Queen Ojuola and the chiefs that hunter Ogundele and his wife, Mobike were not Odewale's parents.

Proverbs Spoken By Common People (Citizens)

- (13). "When the head of a household dies, the house becomes an empty shell" (p. 9).
- (14). "When the chameleon brings forth a child, is not that child expected to dance?" (p.9).

These two characters (1st Citizen and 2nd Citizen) are mere townspeople who speak out of the crowd when they converge at the king's palace to complain of the plague ravaging the town. The two proverbs question the king's role since the beginning of the plague and what he has done to alleviate the sufferings of the people. The speakers seized the opportunity of being in the presence of the king (a rare privilege) to speak. Noble persons would prefer a more private audience with the king rather than address him in public so as not to undermine his authority.

Proverbs Spoken By a Woman (Queen Ojuola)

- (15). "The horns cannot be too heavy for the cow that must bear them" (P.20).

In the entire play, just one woman uses a proverb and only once. This proverb by Queen Ojuola is aimed to persuade her son, Aderopo, to disclose the message from the Ifa Priest to the king in council without fear or favour. This philosophical proverb means that nature takes care of itself and providence does not burden man beyond the realm of his capacity.

Discussion and Findings

The analysis of the data shows that the physical Settings or places where the proverbs are used are three: the king's palace, on the farm and in the land of Kutuje. Most of the proverbs are uttered in the palace and the implication of this is that the palace, although only a part of the society, actually stands for the society as a whole. The Yoruba people, like others, regard the palace as the fulcrum of the society. When the palace is in disarray, the society is in trouble. Conversely, once the palace is at peace the society can get necessary administrative attention. The palace is where major decisions that affect the community are taken and as such it naturally serves as a centre for proverbial exchange.

On the Participants, the addressers are King Odewale, King Adetusa (referred to as old man), Queen Ojuola, the citizens and elders like Baba Fakunle, Alaka and Odewale's supposed uncle. This reveals that most of the proverbs are spoken by King Odewale and most of his proverbs reflect the peculiar nature of his kingship in a land where he is a stranger. His proverb "*The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come*" shows his feeling of insecurity and his suspicion. King Adetusa (referred to as Old man), who appears briefly in the flash back scene, still utters two proverbs to show that use of proverbs is kings' stock in trade. Very prominent among the users of the proverbs in this text are also chiefs and elders. In the society, elders are considered as custodians of proverbs. Chiefs in Yoruba land are high up in society and old age is part of their qualifications.

Only one woman utters a proverb in this play, that is, Queen Ojuola. Her persuasive approach contrasts sharply with that of the king and his chiefs who frown sternly at Aderopo's disturbing silence. She achieves her purpose as Aderopo speaks up immediately after her intervention. However, the fact that most of the proverbs are spoken by men is reflective of their dominance in the traditional African society. Women have little or no say especially in the palace where decisions that affect the lives of the people are taken. From the addressees, the analysis shows that the proverbs are directed to kings, chiefs, servants, elders, citizens, men and women. This shows that proverbs serve all social categories of people in society.

The Ends are diverse and varied. The proverbs serve the purpose of justifying, suspecting, cautioning, explaining, opposing, mesmerizing, praising, daring, persuading, challenging, cajoling, appealing and reporting. The Act sequences are numerous. The proverbs help to reinforce themes, instruct and teach, persuade and depict character as well as serve rhetorical functions. The Keys reflect instances of sarcastic, serious, jovial, tensed, harsh, sad, authoritative, satirical, melancholic, lamentational, persuasive, appealing, sombre, angry, suspicious, firm and sober tones.

The Instrumentality, Norms of interaction and interpretation and Genre are general in scope. The data are sourced through the instrumentality of a written medium (A play). These

proverbs are normally and appropriately used in interaction and are successfully interpreted by the different participants for whom they are meant as a result of the sociolinguistic competence that is in force among the various interactants. All the data belong to the genre of proverbs and in different shades as axioms, maxims, aphorisms, adages and clichés.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistics is a veritable tool for the analysis of proverbs. It is an area of study that deals with language and society. The S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model used in the analysis of the data brought out different aspects of communication which other sociolinguistics theories or tools would not have revealed. It is suggested that sociolinguistic investigation be applied to areas like myths, anecdote, stories and folklores as other levels of language analysis like semantics, phonology and syntax cannot effectively analyse cultural aspects like sociolinguistics.

Finally, the introduction of African proverbs into the school curriculum will in no small way help young people appreciate their own culture and that of other people. Also, their lives will unarguably be reformed by the didactic opportunities that the study of proverbs provides.

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