



A Sociopragmatic Study of Igbo Proverbs: A Paradigm of Akokwa Paremiology

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the contents and forms of the proverbs of Akokwa-Igbo people and the social norms surrounding their usage. A descriptive research design was used in this investigation. 50 proverbs were analyzed using the sociopragmatic theory launched by Leech in 1983. The theory elucidates the phenomenon of language in culture. Findings show that proverbs are one of the culture-bound aspects of a language and can only be demystified by the knowledge of the cultural, traditional and social norms of the particular linguistic community that uses them. They have also been found to be effective elucidators of intricate matters relating to all areas of human life- medical, marriage, justice administration, peaceful coexistence, child-bearing, philosophies of life, religion, etc, provided the participants in the verbal interaction are knowledgeable in the content of the subject of discourse and also in the semantic intricacies of the proverbs deployed. Akokwa people use proverbs extensively for communication and they affect their lives, orient them morally towards more beneficial and positive socio-cultural goals.

Keywords: Sociopragmatics, Igbo, Proverb, Akokwa, Paremiology

Introduction

Proverbs are deeply rooted in African culture and almost everybody who understands his/her indigenous language is a living carrier of proverbs. Mbiti (1995) states that the language of proverbs has a rich vocabulary of words, phrases, combination of words, symbols, images, allusions, associations and comparisons. He argues further that proverbs are drawn from the whole society and that every part of the society is captured in the proverbs. Perhaps, it can be argued that proverbs mean different things to different people. According to Chinua Achebe (1958), proverbs

*Odeeokaa Journal of English
and Literary Studies, Vol. 1 No.
1. July, 2024*

are the salt with which words are eaten. They are symbols of communication packed into short sentences or even anecdotes and stories, sometimes carved on wood, stone or other materials, or even sung or danced. They display veritable role in literary discourse and other fields of study such as Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, Social Sciences, Law and others. Proverbs are drawn from and refer to all activities of society, natural objectives and phenomena. In many African languages, proverbs act as a catalyst of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals which provoke further reflection and call for a deeper thinking and consideration of issues. They are the vehicle with which socio-cultural and philosophical thoughts underlying social values, issues, ethnic and religion are transmitted across generation. Moreover, a tree that has no root will soon bow to the wind. This paper, however, examines the contents and forms of proverbs especially those of the Akokwa-Igbo people.

Statement of the Problem

Studies has shown that proverbs and adages are used interchangeably. While a proverb gives advice, an adage tells us the truth about the effects of our daily actions on our life as humans. These proverbs constitute most of our spoken language yet not many studies have attempted to investigate their forms, contents and the socio-cultural norms guiding their usage. Some fundamental questions like when is an expression regarded as proverbial? What is the content and form of the proverb, are yet to be answered. This research, therefore, investigates the various forms of proverbs as well as the literary contents that qualifies a spoken word as a proverbial. Form is the style of expression while content is the meaning attached to that expression.

Conceptual framework

Sociopragmatics

The concept of ‘Sociopragmatics’ refers to the social use of language (Ekwelibe, 2021). It is the way conditions of language use derive from the social norms and situations. In other words, it involves the study of both the forms and functions of language in a given social setting. As an aspect of sociolinguistic competence, socio-pragmatic competence borders on the ability to use language appropriately and politely to convey messages while observing the social and cultural conventions guiding such usage in a particular speech community. Proverbs are one of the culture-bound aspects of a language which require adequate knowledge of the social linguistic laws guiding appropriate usage in order to decode meaning and enhance performance.

The Relationship between Sociopragmatics and Pragmatics

The beginning of Pragmatic Studies brought a controversy as regards its overlap with such areas as Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Pragmalinguistics and others. Pragmatics, therefore, cannot be easily distinguished from societal factors. It goes hand in hand with Sociolinguistics. Sociopragmatics becomes, therefore, the common label for the study of sociolinguistics and pragmatics which is aimed at helping the learner of a language to understand how language use is realized in the social life of a speech community and presents learners with what variety of language is, and how usage differences are realized in different contexts. Leech describes this as the competence of using appropriate terms by following the social rules (74). For instance, in the Nigerian social setting, Adetugbo points out:

It would be considered rude for me to address my father's peer as 'Dear Mr. Oni, by letter. In native English usage, this is appropriate. The best I can do in the Nigerian situation is to write, 'Dear Sir', considered inappropriate in native English use, or better still, 'Dear Father' which gives to a native reader a completely different picture of my relationship with the person being addressed. Native English users studiously avoid the use of imperatives when making requests, and resort to the indirect statements because the use of the imperative has come to be regarded as either impolite or condescending. In the Nigerian situation, however, this is the form used with politeness shown by the adjuncts please and kindly (171).

Paremiology

The word, 'Paremiology' takes its origin from the Greek, 'Paroimia' which means Proverb. It is the collection and study of paroemias (proverbs). Proverbs are formed in any society where there are wise elders. Hence, they are referred to as the quintessential wisdom of the elders. They are suffused with the values the elders need to impress on the younger generation. In view of this, Aristotle submits (in Mieder 2003) that proverbs are the fragments of an elder's wisdom which, on account of their brevity and aptness, had amid a general wreck and ruin been preserved. It is the most important aspect of oral literature and it is believed by scholars that there is hardly any situation under the sun for which it cannot provide an apposite citation. Proverbs are literary forms which offer the traditional artists, speakers, philosophers, orators and priests a veritable medium for projection and fulfilment of a variety of socially desired goals. They can take different forms, such as couplets, idioms and analogies. They are often concise and memorable, which makes them effective in sharing knowledge and experience.

The Akokwa people and Proverbs

Akokwa is a small town in the Ideato-North Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The town's population of roughly 4,000,000, primarily comprises of Igbos. It is located at the Northern axis of Imo State boundary with Anambra State. They also speak the Igbo language as their major means of communication. Known for her organized culture and hospitality, Akokwa is made up of six autonomous villages, namely: Umuokwara, Umuezeaga, Akwu, Owerre-Akokwa, Umuopia and Umukegwu. However, there is an undisputed and central cabinet office otherwise known as the Obi of Akokwa which serves as her supreme council.

Akokwa people celebrate their different cultures every year; "Di Ji (new yam festival)" is celebrated every August. Akokwa masquerade is celebrated every December.

Theoretical Review

The method adopted by the researcher in the analysis of data collected for this study is Sociopragmatic Theory of Language Use. This theory is originally owed to Jerry Thomas and was given wide currency by Geoffrey Leech. Leech and Grimshaw (1983) maintain that there exists a set of underlying conventions which govern the use of speech acts in every sociocultural context. Some of them include sociopragmatic competence which incorporates linguistic and sociolinguistic competences, maintaining mutual intelligibility and relationship, observation of social power, etc. Sociopragmatics is typically value-linked, so that in a given culture and/or situational context, there are norms or preferences regarding the use of language, and any failure to implement the principles as expected, may result in mild to strong evaluative judgments. Malinowski (1923) states that sociopragmatics involves those socioculturally based rules that guide or influence people's productive and interpretative use of language, especially the speech acts since they are culture-specific. It looks into the form or the different realizations of speech acts, the intention of the speaker and the cultural context which encompasses the language user's understanding of the norms of behaviour and speech, which incorporates the moral code, laws, cultural norms and behavioural expectations governing interpersonal relationship. In Nigeria, for instance, the cultural component of context is relatively more stable, and is referenced by both speaker and hearer in encoding or decoding the linguistic meaning conveyed during interactions. Hence, rather than limiting the notion of context to the speaker and hearer as in SAT (Speech Act

Theory), Sociopragmatics considers the cultural context, politeness, norms and values that influence appropriacy and meaning in interpersonal relationship and language use.

Methodology

A total of 50 Akokwa proverbs were randomly selected for this study. The primary sources of the data were the 'Mmonwu festival' celebrated every December and which was attended by the researcher, songs sang in Akokwa dialect during the ceremony, marriage ceremony (Igba nkwa) attended by the researcher and online videos on Akokwa proverbs. Other secondary sources include, books on Akokwa proverbs and Popular African proverbs by Nze Anisionwu Okoro. These proverbs were analyzed using the sociopragmatic theory of Geoffrey Leech.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Here, the researcher highlights some extracts of Igbo proverbs and discusses their contents/meanings and forms in the English language based on the socio-cultural interpretation and usage by the Akokwa-Igbo people.

1. **Proverb:** Otu mkpuru akwu adighi efu n'oku.

Content/Meaning: The fewer things we have, the more careful we are about them.

Form: It is used as a piece of advice, and in a situation where one is encouraged to observe carefulness in life endeavour.

2. **Proverb:** Ihere adighi eme onye ara ka o na-eme umunna ya.

Content/Meaning : Relations are concerned most with a person's behaviour.

Form: It is used as a piece of advice, and in a situation where one is encouraged to observe carefulness in life endeavour or sometimes, to be conscious of one's dressing.

3. **Proverb:** Otu onye tuo izu, o gbuo ochu.

Content/Meaning: Knowledge is never complete; two heads are better than one.

Form: This is a wise saying to promote unity and solidarity.

4. **Proverb:** Ihe ehi huru gbalaga oso, ka okuko huru na-atu onu.

Content/Meaning: Fools rush in where the angels fear to tread.

Form: It has the form of an antithesis and expresses caution and humility as important virtues in the human life.

5. **Proverb:** Oge adighi eche mmadu.

Content/Meaning: Time and tide does not wait for anybody.

Form: It is an idiomatic expression used to warn against laziness and procrastination.

6. **Proverb:** Nwanyi muta ite ofe mmiri mmiri, di ya amuta ipi utara aka were suru ofe.

Content/Meaning : One should learn to change tactics to suit a situation.

Form: This encourages flexibility and suitability to succeed in life.

7. **Proverb:** Onwu egbuchughi ji e ji chu aja, emesie o puo ome.

Content/Meaning: Things will definitely improve despite the present difficulties.

Form: Patience in life is very essential for healthy living.

8. **Proverb:** A maka mmiri si baa n' opi ugboguru.

Content/Meaning: Who can explain this puzzle?

Form: A wise saying aimed at promoting integrity and brotherhood.

9. **Proverb:** Were ututu chowa ewu oji

Content/Meaning: A stitch in time saves nine

Form: An idiomatic expression aimed at promoting doggedness and exterminating procrastination.

10. **Proverb:** O biara egbu m ga egbu onwe ya.

Content/Meaning: Anyone who wishes to kill me will die.

Form: This has the form of a couplet and expresses a prayerful wish for one's enemies.

11. **Proverb:** Nwata kwochaa aka, o soro ndi nze rachaa aka.

Content/Meaning: If a child washes his hands he could eat with kings.

Form: A wise saying aimed at encouraging hard work and resilience.

12. **Proverb:** Onye ulo ya na-agba oku a dighi achu oke.

Content/Meaning: One whose house is on fire, do not run after a rat.

Form: A wise saying to stress doing the important thing first.

13. **Proverb:** Onye ujo na-ado ogu mgbe O huru onye O kariri.

Content/Meaning: When a coward sees a man he can beat, he becomes hungry for a fight.

Form: It stresses unity in diversity.

14. **Proverb:** Onye na-egbu opi na-chicha imi.

Content/Meaning: Anyone who works hard, deserves a reward.

Form: It is an advice on hard work and appreciation.

15. **Proverb:** Oka mma na mmiri ghafuru karia na ite tiwara.

Content/Meaning: It is better the water is spilled than the pot broken.

Form: This is used as a form of consolation for a woman who lost her child to the cold hands of death.

16. **Proverb:** Onye siri na ya anaghi ata anu nkita, arakwala mmiri ofe ya.

Content/Meaning: He who abhors dog meat should not eat dog-meat soup.

Form: It is an advice on integrity and astuteness.

17. **Proverb:** A tuoro omara omara, a tuoro ofeke, ofenye isi n' ohia.

Content/Meaning: If you tell a wise one, he understands; tell a dunce, he runs into the bush.

Form: This has the form of a synecdoche and is aimed at promoting humility.

18. **Proverb:** Onye buru chi ya uzo, O gbagbuo onwe ya n' oso.

Content/Meaning: Exercise patience.

Form: It is an advice on patience.

19. **Proverb:** Okuko nyuo ahuru, ala achuwa ya oso.

Content/Meaning: He who does evil runs indiscriminately.

Form: It is a couplet and advises on the importance of honesty in life.

20. **Proverb:** Uzu na amaghi akpu ogene, lee egbe anya n' odu.

Content/Meaning: The blacksmith that does not know how to forge a metal gong, should look at the tail of a kite.

Form: It is an advice on humility and cooperation.

21. **Proverb:** Agwo emeghi ihe o ji buru agwo, umuntakiri achiri ya hie nku.

Content/Meaning: If a snake does not show its venom, little children will use it to tie firewood.

Form: It is an advice on firmness of purpose.

22. **Proverb:** Otu onye adighi ahu ihe nile di n' ohia.

Content/Meaning: No one person can see everything in the forest.

Form: An adage on the importance of unity and solidarity.

23. **Proverb:** Ome ngwa ngwa na -emeghara odachi.

Content/Meaning: Water is better bailed out when it is still at the ankle's length before it reaches the knee.

Form: An idiomatic expression as in A stitch in time saves nine.

24. **Proverb:** Adighi ekpuchi anwuru oku.

Content/Meaning: The human character is like smoke and cannot be covered.

Form: No one can pretend for a long time.

25. **Proverb:** Nkita na-agbo uja adighi ata ata.

Content/Meaning: A person who always threatens people, seldom takes an action.

Form: It is metaphorical and expresses the need to desist from fear. Also, silence is golden.

26. **Proverb:** No matter how big a butterfly is, it cannot be called a bat.

Content/Meaning: Contentment and Humility are the keys to a life of integrity.

Form: It is a comparative proverb which hinges on self-contentment and humility.

27. **Proverb:** If you kill the cockerel for dinner, do not expect it to crow the next morning.

Content/Meaning: You cannot eat your cake and have it.

Form: It is an idiomatic expression.

28. **Proverb:** Emegbuna onye aka ya di ocha.

Content/Meaning: Anyone who spits at the sky, ends up soiling his own face.

Form: It is an advice on good human relationship.

29. **Proverb:** E jighi oku etinyu oku.

Content/Meaning: You cannot use fire to put out fire. Conflict or violence cannot be resolved with a disagreement.

Form: It is an adage on conflict resolution.

30. **Proverb:** Awo adighi agba oso ehihie n'efu.

Content/Meaning: If you see a toad jumping in the daylight, you know that something is after its life.

Form: It is an adage which means that nothing happens in vain.

32. **Proverb:** Anya ka eji ama oka chara acha.

Content/Meaning: You can tell a ripe corn by its look/ You can judge a character by his/her appearance and demeanour

Form: A wise saying on strength and ability.

33. **Proverb:** Aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu

Content/Meaning: Hard work pays.

Form: It is an advice on the need to embrace hard work.

34. **Proverb:** O bughi ihe nile na-egbuke egbuke bu ezi ihe.

Content/Meaning: All that glitter are not gold./ External appearance can be deceptive.

Form: A wise saying on being cautious about attractive external appearance of something or somebody.

35. **Proverb:** Ihe I huru anya ka mkpa karia...

Content/Meaning: A bird in hand is worth more than two in the bush.

Form: An advice on contentment with what one has.

36. **Proverb:** Osiso osiso na-ebuta mmebi.

Content/Meaning: Haste makes waste.

Form: This is an advice on the importance of the virtue of patience in life.

37. **Proverb:** Otu aka ruta mmanu, ozuo uwa onu.

Content/Meaning: When one finger is dipped into oil, it spreads to the rest. It is the ripple effect of doing things without caution.

Form: A wise saying on being conscious of all our actions and their respective consequences on others.

38. **Proverb:** Ukpala okpoko gburu, nti chiri ya.
Content/Meaning: The grasshopper that is killed by a crow is deaf. /Once forewarned of danger, a wise person should run.
Form: It is an advice on the importance of obedience.
39. **Proverb:** Ijiji nti ike na-eso ozu ala n'ili.
Content/Meaning: The stubborn housefly is usually interred with the corpse.
Form: It is a proverb that discourages disobedience.
40. **Proverb:** A tuoro omara, omara, A tuoro ofoke, ofenye isi n' ohia
Content/Meaning: If a wise person is counseled, he understands, but if you counsel a dunce, he runs into a bush.
Form: This is an advice on adherence to good counsel.
41. **Proverb:** Nwoke na ibe ya ha bu n'onu.
Content/Meaning: Some men are braver than some.
Form: This is an advice on humility.
42. **Proverb:** Mma nwanyi bu agwa ya.
Content/Meaning: A woman's beauty is in her character.
Form: It is a proverb on good behaviour as the real beauty of a woman.
43. **Proverb:** Onye ayiyo mebe ihere, aguu egbuo ya.
Content/Meaning: If a beggar becomes ashamed, he will die of hunger.
Form: This is an analogy between 'begging' and 'hunger' as both are attributes and images of a beggar.
44. **Proverb:** Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ogo do ayochie ya anya.
Content/Meaning: If a child disrespects his father, he wriggles in shame and disgrace.
Form: This is a proverb on maturity and obedience.
45. **Proverb:** Nwata erughi eru juwa ihe gburu nna ya, ihe gburu nna ya, egbuo ya.
Content/Meaning: He who seeks to know what he should not know, kills himself.
Form: Maturity and experience make a man.
6. **Proverb:** Ewu adighi eri ihe onye mu anya.
Content/Meaning: The goat does not eat the food of a wakeful person.
Form: The proverb is an advice against cowardice and irresponsibility.
47. **Proverb:** Ewu adighi eri ihe onye mu anya.

Content/Meaning: The goat does not eat the food of a wakeful person.

Form: The proverb is an advice against cowardice and irresponsibility.

48. Proverb: Enwe si na obu nani nwa obu n'afo ka o ga-anuchitere iyi.

Content/Meaning: The monkey says, "I can only vouch for the child in my belly, and not the one strapped on my back."

Form: It is an advice against unreliability.

49. Proverb: Onye obula kpalitere agha, ga-eji isi ya ebu ya.

Content/Meaning: He who shoots the king must be prepared to bleed more.

Form: It is an advice against war in the land.

50. Proverb: O dighi ulo obula ga- ada ma oburu na ceiling amaghi maka ya.

Content/Meaning: No house can fall down without the knowledge of the ceiling.

Form: This proverb warns against pretence.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher has tried to buttress the phenomenon of language in culture. The paper has revealed to a great extent the importance of the sociopragmatic study of Akokwa people's proverbs which has shown that proverbs do not exist in a void rather they are part of the life of the people. It has also validated the fact that they cannot be isolated from the culture, belief and situational contexts of the owners of the language. To the Akokwa people, proverbs add style, glamour, exoticism and sometimes, socio-political correctness to ordinary conversations. Proverbs are used to beautify speeches, proffer advice, caution, warning and sometimes, to give correction.

However, no effort exerted in a paper like this can really exhaust the Akokwa-Igbo proverbs or capture all their character and significance. The researcher had not set out to achieve such a feat. But the much we have said, utilizing these fifty proverbs – and by extension African – is that the proverb in Akokwa, Nigeria and Africa as a continent is a living project. Some other folklore forms may have exhausted their life-cycles, but not the proverb. Even as we talk or write, new ones are being churned out in their hundreds, not by great philosophers or philosopher-kings, but by common people who are endowed with some gnomic talent.

This research has, therefore, succeeded in demystifying the content/meaning, form and socio-cultural context of Akokwa-Igbo proverbs. It has also shown the significant relationship among the socio-cultural context, norms, beliefs and knowledge of the people which the user of the language should have to facilitate the interpretation and comprehension of the proverbs.

It is the opinion of the researcher that 'to decode' a proverb and especially Akokwa-Igbo people's proverbs, knowledge of the cultural norms, beliefs, mutual background knowledge of the people should form the parameters or yardsticks for the realistic actualization of the project.

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