

A COMMUNICATIVE VALUE EXPLORATION OF SELECTED NUPE PROVERBS AND RIDDLES

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ABSTRACT

This study is an interpretive exploration of Nupe proverbs and riddles. It is intended to underscore the instrumentality of proverbs and riddles in engendering unity, peace and development. A total of twelve proverbs and six riddles are gathered and analysed. Ideational and interpersonal metafunctional parts of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic theory (SFL) which are premised on how experience and the relationship between participants or context influence not only the choice of a language system or an utterance in a speech event or community but also the meaning potentials of such an utterance is explored as the theoretical framework of the study. The findings of the study reveal that people, especially the elderly, exploit proverbs to caution, admonish, and challenge their addressees, while ensuring that the face (public image) of such addressees is neither threatened nor perceived to be threatened so that there may be peace. The findings also reveal that riddles are explored to engage the young for the purpose of socialisation and intellectualism and consequently unite them for development. The author therefore, concludes that proverbs and riddles are effective for correcting the wrongs in the society and discouraging individualism for social cohesion.

Keywords: Nupe Proverb, Riddles, Peace And Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In every society, there are, age wise, three classes of people; the children, the youth and the elderly. The children and the elderly are the dependents. They rely on the strength of the youth for their economic survival or living. In other words, the able bodied men and women (youth) are expected to fend for the elderly and the very young. For the socio-cultural and political survival of the society, however, the youths depend on the elderly from whose wealth of experience they tap. Analogically therefore, while the youth are the machine that produces what the members of the society eat to survive, the elderly are the lubricant needed to forestall friction and ensure alignment between the parts of the machine. One of the main tools that the elderly use for their lubrication-role or contribution for the social, political, cultural wellbeing, and development of the society is proverb.

Furthermore, while the elderly wane as they age further, the young (especially the children) are subconsciously engaged in critical thinking through riddles and jokes among other folk narratives and practices in the society in order to prepare them for future responsibilities. Based on this, Okoh (2008, p. 134) opines that "riddles generally involve finding a solution to a problem." Therefore, proverbs and riddles are sine qua non socio-politically, culturally and intellectually in most African societies. The rationale for combining proverbs and riddles in this study lies in the symbiotic relationship between intellectualism which riddles represent and wisdom which proverbs embody, two of which are necessary requirements for unity and development. To the best of the researcher's

knowledge, while proverbs are linguistic property of the elderly who represent wisdom, riddles which encourage intellectualism are mainly associated with the young in most Nupe communities. As Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2018) observes, “folklores [which include proverbs and riddles] are characterised by their potential to discover and renew old perspectives.”

Statement of the Problem

Nupe proverbs and riddles are functionally rich. However, their rich communicative potentials are not academically fully explored through the medium of English. In other words, it is unfortunate that some native Nupe scholars show little or no interest in investigating the functional values of these proverbs and riddles and exploring them to eradicate or drastically reduce social vices, (i.e. hate speech, restiveness, corruption and insecurity, etc.) and consequently engender unity and socio-political and economic prosperity. Therefore this study aims to unravel the interpretive possibilities of Nupe proverbs and riddles in relation to the current socio-political and economic challenges threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria.

Orature

Oral literature in Africa is as old as the continent itself (Sonde 2011, p. 156). The earliest Africans communicated among themselves prosaically, poetically, and dramatically, depending on the occasion and purpose, and handed down these mediums from generation to generation. Akporobaro (2004) describes oral literature as “the heritage of imaginative verbal creation, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed down from one generation to another through spoken word”.

Contrary to the popular belief as spread by the west, artistically, not all that is written is literature and not all that is unwritten is non-literary; spoken words that meet literary standard, whether they are used by the literate or the illiterate can equally be considered literature, hence oral literature. Every literary artist, literate or not, creatively uses language to express his/her personal experiences, emotions and ideas for pleasure and/or moral education (ibid). It is therefore unfortunate for the white to fail to realise that literature of Africa does not begin with writing. It is equally unhealthy and bias to connote that the literature of a people is crude or primitive on the ground that it is spoken. In fact, spoken literature is even more affective because it requires physical contact of the artist and his audience. Some forms of African oral literature are fixed and these include proverbs and riddles which are the scope of this study.

Proverb

Proverbs can be described as one of the most striking means by which human beings communicate their feelings, worries and concerns to their fellow human beings. The communicative value of a proverb is mostly covert. However, the addressee who is functionally competent in the language of a proverb can fathom or guess the communicative force or value of a proverb from its context even if he/she has never heard it before. According to Okoh (2008, p. 124), proverbs are terse, fixed, pithy and audience enlivening sayings that express some fundamental truth of human life or experience, even if such truism is abstract. Similarly, Akporobaro (2004, p. 85) submits that ‘proverbs conduce to shortness, definiteness, and impressiveness of speech [and that] Nigerian proverbs are often very humorous, delightful to hear, morally instructive, philosophic in outlook and figuratively ornamented. Thematically, proverbs deal with serious issues in man’s life and as a result, they are employed by adults and the elderly. They are mostly current and always deeply

integrated into everyday speech and discussions. Achebe (1958, p. 6) describes proverbs as “the palm oil with which words are eaten.” Similarly, Arewa (1970, p. 431) opines that of all the various forms of folklore, proverbs are the most frequently used in all manner of situations. All these point to the fact that part of a speaker’s functional linguistic competence is his/her ability to use appropriate proverbs in appropriate contexts during a speech event. In fact, the more one is able to use proverbs appropriately, the more oratory one is adjudged to be and the more spellbound one’s audience are likely to be held. Equally, Finnegan (1970) views proverb as a saying in more or less fixed form marked by ‘shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it.

Both the young and the old use proverbs but in most African societies, proverbs are mostly the linguistic characteristics of the old. It is only in few instances that the young use it among themselves and in fewer instances they do use it when addressing the older ones. This is because the communicative force of most proverbs concern warnings, advice, prophecies or predictions (on the possible consequences of an action), which the elderly explore to influence the wills, actions and inactions of their addressees (Akpobaro 2004, p. 87). Therefore, the young use disclaimer or apology when using proverbs before the old. For example: ‘it is you, the elders who say...’ or ‘in the words of the elders...’. According to Okoh (2008), elders employ proverbs to teach how the world was (as every generation decries the loss of the good old days), how it is currently and how they expect it (from their experiences) to be. Behind the use of every proverb is one’s face (positive public image) protection. In other words, proverbs are mainly used to save the face of an addressee. Face is a functional linguistic concept which concerns self-image or self-esteem which every participant in a linguistic transaction wants his/her co-participant to recognise and protect (Osisanwo 2003, p. 102; Mbisike 2008, pp. 189 – 190; and Arua 2008, pp. 215 – 216).

Riddles

A riddle is a form of folklore. It is intended to sharpen the wits of children, sensitise or educate them about how their society conceives the world around them or the universe at large (Okoh (2008)). In other words, riddling is a kind of question and answer session in traditional African children’s night play. That is, unlike proverbs, riddles mainly deal with what we may describe as children’s intellectual or educational entertainment (Finnegan 1970). Madonsela (2020, p. 45), characterises the riddle as intellectual discipline or artistic expression which occurs in performance context and in which all the participants want to enjoy the game. In his words, ‘riddling is a social occasion that values entertainment and quick wittedness.’ He also submits that like proverbs, ‘riddles often involve metaphorical or poetic commentary on a society and its value systems’ (p.46). In traditional African societies, children gather themselves, usually after dinner for riddles and jokes and in the process, subconsciously develop their physical and mental wellbeing in readiness for their duties and responsibilities in future. In the view of Ben-Amos (1975, p. 23), ‘in many African societies, the riddle is the child and youth folklore form per excellence. It serves as a verbal instructive device enabling young people to acquire the cultural concepts and categorisation of the natural and social world around them.’ It clear from the above that the kind of functional linguistic exercise we engage ourselves in as members of a society at a particular time or context is a clue to our age and position in the society. To buttress this, Wortham and Locher (1999, p. 110) submit that speakers inevitably give off cues about themselves and their position with respect to others and their positions.

The riddle performs entertainment and socialization functions in traditional African cultures which discourage individualism and whose philosophy is that individuals owe their existence to the existence of the group to which they belong; the social group in which a person exists is regarded as essential to the success of the society. Riddles improve the ability of children to as a member of the community interact with other people in a sociable and harmonious manner in order to contribute to social unity and cohesion. In other words, riddles improve children's critical thinking skills, creativity, deductive reasoning, listening skills, patience and persistence, communication skills, confidence, problem-solving skills, and ability to adapt to any challenging situation.

Nupe Language

Nupe is a language spoken by a people in the north central states of Niger, Kwara, Kogi and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Approximately, Nupe has a population of about four million people, predominantly in Niger and Kwara States (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nupe>...). It also has dialects such as Dibbo, Ganagana, Basange, Kakanda, and Gupa. With the exception of Dibbo dialect, whose speakers are found in Lapai Local Government Area of Niger State, all other dialects above are found in Kogi State and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The intelligibility between the "Mother-Nupe", (largely spoken in Niger and Kwara States) and the above dialects is unidirectional. In other words, most (if not all the) native speakers of Dibbo, Ganagana, Basange, Kakanda and Gupa do speak 'Mother-Nupe' but the native users of 'Mother-Nupe' hardly speak the above dialects. Therefore, being a Nupe man from Bida area, the researcher limits his sampled proverbs and riddles to those used in 'Mother-Nupe'.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ideational and interpersonal metafunction parts of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic theory (SFL) is chosen as the framework for this study. The thrust of Halliday's ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of language is how experience and the relationship between interlocutors or context influence the choice of language system (i.e. proverb, riddle) and interpretation of such choices in a linguistic exchange or speech event. According to Ogungbe (2007, p. 39), by SFL, Halliday underscores the functions of language especially the ways in which the field (theme), tenor (the social relationship between the interlocutors) and mode (the medium or channel of communication) of discourse influence linguistic choices and meaning construction. Therefore, this study x-rays the actual values of the proverbs and riddles under consideration as may be determined by the situational contexts of their use and relationship between the user and his target audience. To further paraphrase Ogungbe (ibid), interpersonal linguistics ... has within its purview the functional choices that language users make, the constraints they encounter when making such choices and the effects their choices have on other participants.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative. The explicit and implicit communicative values of the sampled data are analysed, using Systemic Functional Linguistic theory. The context of use of each of the sampled proverbs is highlighted. The author interviewed the elderly men and women in and outside his community for his data gathering and interpretation. The interviewed were requested to explain the efficacy of the selected proverbs in solving the problems of hate speech, restiveness and insecurity bedeviling Nigeria at the moment. Each of the twelve proverbs in this study is presented

in Nupe language before it is functionally interpreted. Related proverbs are collapsed in some of the sampled texts. The author further presents and translates six Nupe riddles.

Presentation and Analysis of Proverbs

Text 1: *Egi iwara gauzovo akugwa wa.*

Translation: You cannot eat *iwara* to a finish if you continue to shake your fingers. *Iwara* is a kind of food prepared or cooked with a lightly wetted corn powder put on top of beans being cooked some few minutes before the beans is done.

Context of Use: This proverb is often used as a caution to the warring parties or individuals in a conflict to avoid insulting statements or alluding to the ugly or unpleasant pasts of each other so that there may be peace.

Functional Value: The import of this proverb is that whether in a conflict situation or not, one's ugly past or ugly side of one's life should always be spared by all means, especially in public. Hence, everything about this proverb functionally bowls down to the concept of face, one's public image or self-esteem which every participant in a speech event will like his co-participant to protect even in the face of face-off or misunderstanding. The proverb is therefore an urge that we guard our utterances because as the saying goes 'a word is mightier than a sword'. This proverb can be likened to another Nupe proverb: *elaga kamia ama misu'wukpe nyana wuga ga na*, which means that one should be self-regulatory or self-controlled in any kind of linguistic exchange.

Text 2: *Ankalie latuzo nugu'o.*

Translation: The beans at the boundary of two beans farms are harvested with care.

Context of Use: This is often said to someone who is leaving his or her environment for another person's, (i.e a lady or a bride leaving her father's house for her husband's). It means that for her to establish close rapport in her matrimonial home, she must learn to stay clear of what does not concern her in the house.

Functional Value: In general, the value of this proverb is that we should avoid unnecessary interference in others' personal lives. This proverb is akin to another Nupe proverb: *egwa za wukpa wulawu gaje mi'iu*, which means that one should mind one's business. It is often used by one of the two relatives engaged in a fight and directed at an outsider who intervenes or takes a side in the quarrel. It is equally akin to another Nupe proverb: *ewo misu zeni ala tsuku'a*, which literally means that as a judge in a case, one should give fair hearing to the parties in a conflict before giving a ruling. All these emphasise the need for justice and fairness as the panacea for unrest and insecurity. It is against what Nigerian police refers to as "First Information Report" (FIR) upon which (most Nigerians believe) the police decisions are in most cases based. Justice begets peace.

Text 3: *Zhitsu na labo ezhi chialena, wugega zhitsu na tuyangba ezhi chia lana.*

Translation: A leader whose cowardice leads to the survival of his people is better than a leader whose bravery leads to the destruction of his people.

Context of Use: This proverb is especially used by elders at a meeting when there is a conflict between factional members of a society or between one society and another. It is intended to stress the importance of peace. The anti-war member of the community uses this proverb to advise the leadership of the warring parties to toe the path of peace. Similar to this proverb is "*Tsukun na'ana zaye na daga bakpako boe nauvo'o*", which literally means that a stick that can make one go blind is avoided from afar.

Functional Value: As a leader, it is better to surrender to avert danger, conquest or make peace with an adversary that is more powerful than you are than to put on a brave face and endanger the lives of your people.

Text 4: *Waga gaga aga gba'oma, wogani kinmma.*

Translation: If you do not want to be dragged, do not ever fall.

Context of Use: This is often directed at someone who complains of disregard from another person such as his wife, younger brother or younger sister. In certain contexts, this proverb is equally a caution against shameful acts.

Functional Value: The communicative force of this proverb is that honour and respect are given to the people who deserve or merit them. This is akin to the popular English saying 'nothing comes easy'; you have to work for it. In other words, the proverb implies that for one not to be underrated or disregarded one has to live up to one's responsibilities. This proverb encourages handwork, dedication and commitment to success and discourages laziness.

Text 5: *Eye gago nawuwo wa lena kechi ye.*

Translation: An eye that endures smoke will surely see fire.

Context of Use: It is said to someone in pursuit of success or greatness.

Functional Value: This implies that one who endures difficulty eventually becomes a shining success. It is a counsel for patience, commitment, determination or relentlessness in pursuit of triumph or victory. A similar Nupe proverb is '*etulo wuga yi gba enya deo*', which means that the wheel of every success is hard work.

Text 6: *Daga kinbo'e pakara nuwo'o.*

Translation: The luggage for water transportation is prepared ashore.

Context of Use: This proverb is especially used to condemn parents who lament over waywardness of their children after they (the parents) had failed to give the children proper upbringing.

Functional Value: This proverb is functionally akin to the popular saying 'he who fails to plan, plans to fail'. That is, for one to be a success, one must be fully prepared for challenges of life even before they come one's way. Related to this proverb is "*daga funfuru'e ka ika'o*", which means that a fish can only be curved when it is fresh. This underscores the importance of inculcating good values in children at their formative ages.

Text 7: *Egwa nni'e lakara loti'a.*

Translation: A hand cannot lift a (heavy) load onto the head.

Context of Use: This is used to emphasise the need for unity.

Functional Value: It is a warning against 'can-do-it-alone' mentality, self-conceit or pride. Another version of this proverb is "*ibichi gani ide bai gagwa gani*", which means that 'we are stronger together' or 'in unity lies our strength'. It is a call to act and speak with one voice as a group or as a people so that success can be guaranteed.

Text 8: *Waga gaga nuwaza gbiyan, nya wotso ma'a dzukumbwa.*

Translation: If you do not allow someone's water to boil, yours will never be warm.

Context of Use: It is used when a calamity befalls a member of a community who is believed to be after the failure of another member.

Functional Value: The inference here is that we should love for others what we love for ourselves; one becomes better or worse than what one wishes others. It is akin to the English saying ‘what goes round comes round’.

Text 9: *Sokun nnie liya wuka nakena bafia.*

Translation: Removal or disappearance of a broomstick does not stop the rest of the broom from sweeping.

Context of Use: This is used in a situation where a member of a group opts out or betrays other members of the group after a collective resolve to act in unison.

Functional Value: It is used as a fillip to a group of individuals to carry on with their plan no matter the distractions from any of the members of the group. We can describe this proverb as a validation of the popular saying ‘majority carry the vote’.

Text 10: *Enya na nunsu shikinbo chi leyena, ka dzakangi gaguta fiti’o waliyuya.*

Translation: What the elderly see sitting down, the young cannot see it even if they climb the tallest mountain.

Functional Value: This is a warning intended to underline the importance of experience. It is an indirect counsel to the young not only to consult the elderly or the experienced but also to give heed to their advice before embarking on a course. The proverb re-affirms the crucial place of history or experience in human life. Communicatively, this proverb is related to another Nupe proverb; *dukun woro won dau gbigbakoga*, which means ‘the new cooking pot should ask the old one.’

Text 11: *Kpami’e wukpa ga kpami tsua.*

Translation: An okro plant does not grow taller than its grower.

Context of Use: This proverb is used against the deviant in the society. It is used after all the efforts (proverbial and otherwise) to get an erring person to conform to the norms of the society or obey his/her parents failed.

Functional Value: This is a warning. It implies that the user is ready to use force against the addressee. This proverb affirms that the use of force to maintain law and order in the society is sometimes necessary and should be justifiably applied at appropriate time and accordingly.

Text 12: *Zandongoga dipe’a chia enya kafiti’ona, ka’e wugawu epe’a ga wadi’o.*

Translation: Whoever raises his heels to hang something will definitely have to raise his heels to bring it down.

Context of Use: This proverb is used when someone who is over ambitious fails to succeed.

Functional Value: This is a caution against ingratitude, discontent and over ambition. It is akin to the popular idiom, ‘cut your coat according to your cloth’.

Presentation and Translation of Selected Nupe Riddles

In the riddles below, letter ‘S’ stands for statement, ‘Q’ stands for question and ‘A’ stands for answer. The riddles are first presented in Nupe language and then translated into English language.

Text 1:

S- *Miche’a lozhi eko chida saguba mima dau gubaba.*

Q- *Kiyi eko wuchio?*

A- *Tsaka.*

Translation

S- In the course of my journey one day, the road split into two and I followed the two roads at the same time.

Q- What is this road?

A- Trousers.

Text 2:

Q- *Enya kichi dabo 'e yeswa nyo?*

A- *Nawu.*

Translation

Q- What is it that can never be stored?

A- Smoke.

Text 3:

Q- *Enya kichi deka 'a wuma 'e laza da dzuku 'o?*

A- *Ebi*

Translation

Q- What is it that has no thorn but does not allow one to walk freely or normally when one's bare foot steps on it?

A- Excreta

Text 4:

S- *Gbodonji nni ke 'ete ga dazhiyibo zandondo 'e yaba kpe 'o.*

Q- *Kiyi gbodonji wuchi 'o?*

A- *Edzoshichi.*

Translation

S- We have only one dumping ground in our village and that is where everybody disposes his/her refuse.

Q- What is this dumping ground?

A- The village head.

This implies that a leader is supposed to be an epitome of patience - he is supposed to be able to accept the blames for the follies of his followers.

Text 5:

Q- *Yan gichi kichi 'e bazagi 'o?*

A- *Lubasa.*

Translation

Q- Which food makes one shade tears if eaten?

A- Onion.

Text 6:

S- *Tsuwona bichi guni mideo, inannama bichi mia keguba, ama esu bichi mia yi guta.*

Q- *Kimiayi esu wuchio?*

A- *Ndanunsagi*

Translation

S- Yesterday I was a four-legged person but today I am a two legged one and hopefully, I will be a three legged one tomorrow.

Q- What will I be tomorrow?

A- An old man

The four legged person here is a crawling baby while the two legged person is our walking life after crawling stage and the three legged person is an old man using a stick to support his two legs while taking a walk.

4. THEMATIC DISCUSSION

The first three proverbs examined in this study emphasise the need for patience, good rapport, and peaceful co-existence among people. Specifically, while the first sampled proverb admonishes us to be always silent on someone's ugly past even if there is misunderstanding, the second sampled proverb centres on the need to avoid unnecessary interference in matters that do not concern us. The third proverb cautions us against putting on a brave face - we should always toe the line of peace with anybody we come across in life. Texts 4 - 6 underscore the importance of industry or hard work. Text 4 indicates that the more hardworking one is, the more accomplished and consequently revered one becomes in one's family and society. Text 5 shows the importance of perseverance and tenacity in a journey towards greatness while text 6 reveals the need for planning from the outset of an endeavour in order for the desired aim and objectives in the endeavour to be achieved. The central theme of texts 7 - 9 is unity. Text 7 reveals that a group or society divided against itself is most unlikely to be triumphant. Text 8 cautions us against ill-wish for a fellow human being while text 9 admonishes us not to be deterred by betrayers in our well intentioned cause. Text 10 stresses the advantage of old age or experience (which is described as the best teacher) in life. Text 11 encourages us to use force to achieve peaceful co-existence among people but only when it appears to be the last resort or the only option. The last sampled proverb (text 12) is a warning against over ambition, lack of content or ingratitude. Finally, most Nupe riddles are in sentence, question, and answer forms and are mainly intended to sharpen children's wit or reasoning faculty and broaden their intellectual horizon for future responsibilities.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on its findings, this study concludes that there are Nupe proverbs that are effective tools for encouraging hardwork, and fighting violence, disunity and laziness. As observed by Madonsela (2020, p. 45), this study also concludes that like proverbs, riddles often involve metaphorical or poetic commentary on a society and its value systems and that they particularly improve children's critical thinking skills, creativity, deductive reasoning, listening skills, patience and persistence, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and ability to adapt to any challenging situation for the overall development of the society.

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