

## THE POETICS OF YORUBA PROVERBS IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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### Abstract

Proverbial expressions and aphorism are short witty lubricants of communicative events which are essentially used in achieving far-reaching effects of language use. In the African setting generally, and in the Yoruba culture in particular, the effectiveness of communicative mode is measured by the extent to which proverbs have been deployed to 'oil the wheel' of discourse. Hence, the foregrounding principle becomes relevant in the stylo-rhetorical study of proverbs whose functional essence rises beyond the literal communicative function of language in the commonplace. This paper reports the peculiar linguistic artistry employed in the recreation of typical Yoruba proverbs rendered in English language, using proverbs in randomly selected literary pieces as reference points. The study reveals that the sociological construct of language use is the nuclear source of linguistic expression, as the crop of linguistic configurations which are indices of creativity, drift and shift evident in the sampled proverbs was basically constrained by nuances of the motivating socio-cultural background which triggered their use in the first place.

### Introduction

The Whorfian hypothesis (1956) that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language underpins this study. Nigerian literary artists, in a bid to express the native worldviews and concepts in English as a non-native language, resort to stylo-linguistic creativity through nativisation of the medium of expression. This mode of presentation foregrounds the fact that the antidote to the social ills, among others, being raised is cultural and indigenous. In addition, since the use of proverbial expressions has

also been established as an age-long vehicle of culture transmission, its adaptation in the English mode of expression becomes imperative. The tendency for such adaptation triggers a switch of the 'mind style' into the indigenous mode of linguistic expression; and only through which an intensive appreciation of the discourse intent can best be captured. The motivation, the totality of the linguistic variables, choices and use are context-constrained. Firth (1926: 134) is of the view that the essence of proverbs becomes manifest when credence is paid to its social circumstance. Odebunmi (2008: 75), citing Ogbaa (1981: 5) in the words of Achebe attests to the fact that proverb is both a functional means of communication and also a very elegant artistic performance in itself. It serves a utilitarian purpose which is to re-enact the lives of people using apt and elegant imagery. Hence, the foregoing explains why proverb constitutes a foregrounding device in poetry generally.

Since poetry is considered as an outburst of a mind duly possessed by philosophical idea wrapped in elevated language, it is amenable to infinite stylistic investigation at virtually all levels of linguistic analysis. The markedness of the prosodic ingredients is a potential which adequately encapsulates and conveys the loaded and 'impregnated' meaning; both expressive and impressive. Consequently, readers or audience of poetry would need to put in force their extra-perceptual skills to unravel the semantic mysteries entangled in the webs of poetic expression; thereby facilitating its semantic decomposition. In the words of Sinclair (1982: 171):

Poetry... uses two routes of communication: one conventional, where words are built into phrases along accepted lines, decoded in a manner that in principle could be automated; and the other a problem solving system, where unique combinations are suggested that have no conventional meaning. Though they are latent in the structure of the language, the language does not typically make use of them. By this route, the meaning of a latent pattern is assessed in relation to conventional, precise and basic meaning.

Given the understanding that poetry exhibits some quality – force, intensity, density, texture, incandescence, metapragmeme – which

makes it exceptional, its language has a life beyond its most obvious function, which is to 'mean'. Reading poetry is an experience demanding and receiving more of the reader's attention than is the case with non-poetic texts. An intricate fusion of loaded semantic import borne by images of varying proportions with elevated, highly intoned 'configured' expression as the linguistic medium is imperative. 'This evokes extensive impressions through the intensive expressions which have symmetry with the thematic concern of the discourse itself in alignment with the motivating context' (Alabi 2010b: 90). Therefore, the analysis of the sampled data for this study will be done in the light of the foregoing on socio-cultural context and poetry.

#### **Theoretical Frame of Discussion**

Language is not mere abstraction of sounds or graphic symbols. It is a system of differences and distinctions which characterize human communication. The realizations of these abstractions are codes – used to codify human intent in interactional situations. So language is an activity, a practical consciousness that concretizes the abstractions of human thoughts and expressions in practical contexts which perpetually mould their meanings as communicated. With a view that meanings are borne by interaction which are, in turn, context-constrained, the linguistic form of a discourse exists for the speaker only in the context of ideology surrounding the discourse in question. It is true that words are loaded with meanings and contents drawn from behavioural pattern or ideology, the 'intended' or 'envisaged' meaning is determined by its context. The implication here is that there are as many meanings of a word/structure as there are contexts of its usage. This view is also shared by Lehtonen (2000: 38) as he writes:

Meanings are necessarily contextual. They are bound to intersubjective social relationships. Therefore, the signs of language are also not internally restricted and immutable units, but active elements of speech, whose meaning changes depending on the social intonations, assessments and connotations they condense within themselves in each social situation.

Since intonations, assessments and connotations mutate the heterogeneity and different interests in linguistic communities and discourse situations; a sign is not more than a neutral element of a given structure when it is decontextualized. Therefore, if meanings are contents resulting from a communicative activity in a social situation, to study the structure of a text independent of its context would ultimately end in undesirable subjectivity. Instead, necessary attention should be paid to those 'connections of use' in which texts are posited and from where they obtain their meanings (Lehtonen, 2000: 39); an attempt at foregrounding the fact that language is a social event of interaction implemented in utterances.

Similarly, meanings are not generated from innate tendencies but from the distinctions with which a language expresses reality. In essence, it is the socio-cultural and spatio-temporal realities, and norms which cohere to stabilize the ever-spinning wheel of human language. When credence is lent to the circumstance surrounding text composition and use; 'empirical' insights are given into the discourse intention, the illocution and the envisaged perlocution. All of this forms a formidable basis of assigning empirically verifiable meaning to a given language use on a given occasion. As concepts are not autonomous entities but acquire their meanings as part of the system, they are determined in the light of their relationship with the co-text; a position they acquire in the linguistic chain and even in the extralinguistic context.

Saussure (1959) presents language as an abstraction which comprises chains of signs. A sign is used to express a signifier whether in speech or in writing without any stringent connection (whether phonetic or visual) between them. This perception of the arbitrariness of the signifier extends to its unmotivated relationship with the signified. Hence, it is possible to think that language is a mere nomenclature with arbitrarily selected codes used to label referents (whether objects or concepts). This invests the vocabulary of a language with a force which signals, distinctively, the sense conveyed precisely with its exact corresponding signifier from the array of choices a language offers. This Saussurean view has been expressed by linguists over the decades in different dimensions with considerable impact in the area of stylo-semiosis. A 'linguistic

turn' from structuralism to functionalism in the last one-third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had necessitated a sporadic change of focus in linguistics and language studies to how and what language is used to achieve on a given occasion of use. This is essentially the focus of stylistics. Birch & O'Toole (1987: 1) opine that:

A major function of style is to bind the many discrete linguistic elements into a unified text... And yet, there is a meta-style, a set of stylistic choices that function to bind the disparate voices into an appearance of unity that enables us to assign a text to a nameable genre [\*and consequently work out its accurate semantic value]. \*Interpolation mine

This view is also shared by Halliday & Hasan (1985: 24). They maintain that an in-depth decoding of a text requires that exploration be made into both the internal (linguistic clues) and the external (situational clues) evidence. Where the evidence is external, Hasan (1984) is of the opinion that the meaning of the text tends to be implicit. Thus, since a poetic text emanates from a discourse which is highly context-dependent, implicitness of meaning becomes its inseparable feature.

Principally owing to the much desired aestheticism in literary composition on the one hand and the taken-too-far literary licence to accomplish same (especially in poetry) on the other hand, the social character of language is highly foregrounded over and above the structural units. Thus, the socio-cultural, psychological and temporal mutability of language is the basis for a thorough investigation of textual and textural patterns of proverbial expressions.

### **Methodology**

This work is intended to take qualitative form. Ten popular proverbs (of Yoruba oral source) would be randomly selected from works of three Nigerian poets. These poets are Tayo Olafioye, Tunde Olusunle and Bayo Adebawale. By virtue of the exegesis of the Nigerian terrain, some of the indigenous Yoruba proverbs which have been translated into English in their poems would constitute our data. The choice of the sampled works was informed by the fact that the writers/poets were quite faithful in their translation of

indigenous Yoruba proverbs used in their poems. The qualitative nature of the investigative approach would require that the data are analysed in the light of their thematic underpinning along the cline of their functional motivation. This is envisaged so that the concerns of each item of the data can be placed on the socio-functional templates of its motivation in order to determine the level of effectiveness of textuality as a medium through which propositional content is exhibited.

Distinction should, at this point, be made between microstylistics and macrostylistics. Microstylistics investigates language features within the grammatical categories below or at the sentential level; i.e. style markers and sets within the sentence or within units smaller than the sentence. Macrostylistics concerns investigation of sentence sequences and its interrelation with context. Enkvist (1964: 46) subscribes to the foregoing by maintaining a stance that ‘the study of features not statable in terms of contextual probabilities of linguistic items, style markers, stylistic sets and shifts of style is not the task of stylists but of other levels of linguistic and literary analysis’. Macrostylistics is therefore going to be the approach of our preoccupation in this study. This stance is taken with a view to appropriately situating textual explication in concrete, observable and practical terms. In the process, emphasis would be placed on the text-context alignment as a basis for textual effectiveness of the medium and pragmatic appropriateness of the entire discourse within the framework of the wider situation – i.e. the social construct.

Tayo Olafioye, Tunde Olusunle and Bayo Adebawale, whose works have been randomly selected for investigation in this study, are all contemporary Nigerian poets. They all hail from proverbially rich Yoruba socio-cultural backgrounds, and as such, use proverbs in their poetic compositions to fortify not only the information structure but also foreground the functional essence of their thematic focus.

#### Presentation of Randomly Selected Data

Item	Sampled Proverbs in English	Original Texts in Yoruba
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Datum 1	The wise cripple forewarned never tarries to hear the crackle of cannons; never waits to see the bruises of battle ( <i>Olusunle, 1996: 67</i> )	Ogun asọtẹlẹ kii pa arọ ti o ba gbọn
Datum 2	(Let them rethink that) Wise sayings muttered in fragments make whole sense to the thoughtful mind ( <i>Olusunle, 1996: 68</i> )	Ọrọ diẹ l'ansọ fun ọmọluabi, t'ọ ba de'nu ẹ, a di odidi
Datum 3	When the elephant falls, the forest beholds a festival of assorted knives ( <i>Olusunle, 2001: 17</i> )	Orisiirisii ọbẹ l'anri l'ọjọ iku erin
Datum 4	If you cannot cover kola nuts with more leaves, do not strip it of the ones already there ( <i>Olafioye, 2002: 29</i> )	Bi a ko ba le ra asọ fun oku, a kii gba ti ara ẹ
Datum 5	He who over stays at the graveyard must surely see a ghost ( <i>Olafioye, 2002: 29</i> )	Ẹni ti o ba pẹ l'ori igbõnsẹ yoo ri abuke esinsin
Datum 6	When the fool contracts leprosy, he lives alone in the grove ( <i>Olafioye, 2002: 30</i> )	A kii ni ki eniyan o ma dẹtẹ t'ọ ba ti le da inu igbo gbe
Datum 7	A dog does not bark and lose its teeth ( <i>Adebowale, 2005: 4</i> )	Gbigbo aja kii pa aja
Datum 8	The hen that defecates inside the soup pot messes up her own grave ( <i>Adebowale, 2005: 5</i> )	Adiyẹ to ya'gbẹ si'nu isasun, ile ara ẹ lo n bajẹ
Datum 9	The missile thrown at the palm tree comes back hitting the thrower on the nose ( <i>Adebowale, 2005: 12</i> )	Oko ti a ba sọ mọ ọpẹ l'ọpẹ n sọ mọ ẹni
Datum 10	He who tries to catch rain water with basket deceives himself ( <i>Adebowale, 2005: 75</i> )	Af'asẹ gb'ọjo n tan ara ẹ jẹ

### Discussion of Data

**Datum 1:** *The wise cripple forewarned never tarries to hear the crackle of cannons; never waits to see the bruises of battle* (Olusunle, 1996: 67)

The use of proverbial and idiomatic expressions is a prominent means of exerting subtle influence on the audience to make them accept one's views. Olusunle utilizes his fertile socio-cultural background in deploying peculiar expressions whose imports are very convincing and persuasive. Owing to his impeded mobility, a cripple who is wise (meaning someone who suffers from a deficiency) would not waste time in getting a task done since his incapacitation is likely to affect the speed with which the task is accomplished. This proverb is complementary to *Ọna rere ni oloju jinjin ti n muẹkun sun* (A person with deep eye socket would need to weep an extra mile for tears to roll down his cheeks).

The proverb reiterates the wisdom in a timely heed to precautions earlier given. The entailed import of the proverb is that adversity awaits an individual who disregards the social order or who flouts the cultural expectation of the people. Generally, the proverb is used to instill decorum such that the addressee is persuaded and warned against actions inimical to established social norms and standards.

**Datum 2:** *(Let them rethink that) Wise sayings muttered in fragments make whole sense to the thoughtful mind* (Olusunle, 1996: 68)

It is interesting to admire the rhetorical markedness of his proverb most especially where the poet uses it to sound a note of finality in his collection. The opening stanza contains a wise-saying and the poem closes with another. The stylistic significance of this device in connection with the connotations of 'Message' is the emotive influence which it exerts on the readers' sensibility to seriously consider the warnings wrapped in-between the lines, and eventually yield to his opinions. The proverb generates a persuasive implication of making the reader or audience, as the case might be, agree with his point of view paraded so far in the collection.

It needs to be stated that the proverb in question is complementary to the general truth in the Yoruba culture that 'only



the wise can dance to the tune of *agidigbo* (the proverbial drum). It should also be brought to the fore that these proverbial expressions were sourced from the linguistic context of Yoruba socio-cultural milieu to foreground the beauty associated with succinctness and conciseness of expression. Knowing full well that ‘the word is an egg’ (Osundare, 2000), people should be watchful of their utterances as unguided expressions are hallmark of epistolary discourse.

**Datum 3:** *When the elephant falls, the forest beholds a festival of assorted knives* (Olusunle, 2001: 17)

An elephant is considered the highest prize any hunter can take for his hunting game. The size of the beast is a metaphor of enormous treasure. So if the animal ‘falls’ (is hunted down), then all and sundry would have a fair share of its meat as *atari ajanaku kii se eru omode* (the elephant’s head is more than what a single household can consume). ‘Assorted knives’ here means people of different status: the high and the low; the rich and the poor; the young and the old; etc will partake in sharing its meat. Even the vultures and other beasts of the jungle will have their share of its crumbs. This proverb is used to show the colourfulness and mixed grills that accompany celebration of a prominent personality. The proverb contains an undertone of communal philosophy that binds Yoruba people together regardless of the prevailing indices of social stratification. Particularly in the context of Olusunle’s poem, the proverb is used to instill vividness of description and intensification of meaning in addressing issues relating to nature and natural human interactions.

**Datum 4:** *If you cannot cover kola nuts with more leaves, do not strip them of the ones already there* (Olafioye, 2002: 29)

Literally, the freshness of kola nuts is preserved by covering them with leaves. So if one removes the leaves meant for preserving the nuts, then, the nuts are exposed to risk of pest attacks among others. This proverb is used to advise the addressee on how best to handle a phenomenon to ensure its continued usefulness to the social system/humanity. The phenomenon may be tangible (e.g.

make practical effort to maintain clean environment; one should not litter it) or intangible (e.g. promoting cultural ideals like decent dressing, instead of abating indecency). It is a euphemistic transliteration of its original form in Yoruba which is 'If you cannot clothe the dead/corpse, do not strip it of his burial garment'. The ideology of brotherhood in Yoruba culture affirms that one should always be his brother's keeper. If it is not possible for one to alleviate the burden of another, one should not compound his problem. In other words, if one finds it difficult to complement the effort of his neighbour to make life easier for him, one should not engage in any act that will create additional burdens for him.

Hence, on a general note, the proverb is used to discourage one from doing anything that may hinder the smooth running of the social system if one cannot do anything to promote or accelerate it.

**Datum 5:** *He who overstays at the grave yard must surely see a ghost*  
(Olafioye, 2002: 29)

The proverb admonishes one not to stay longer than necessary on a contentious issue. The direct transliteration of the original source is 'Someone who stays longer than necessary in a toilet will definitely see a lame fly'. This wise saying encourages promptness and diligence. The understanding is that when one unduly prolongs the execution of a given task, or does not carry out an assignment as and when due, the result, when eventually completed may not be favourable or appreciated. For instance, if one's responsibility to the social system is not effected to meet the societal needs and expectation in good time, the appreciation of the gesture is either lost totally or its glory diminished. Just as 'a stitch in time saves nine', a social role receives more recognition when it is timely performed. The bottom-line is that the Yoruba people appreciate a timely and speedy execution of state projects to the benefit of all and sundry instead of allowing staleness and diminishing returns to set in.

**Datum 6:** *When the fool contracts leprosy, he lives alone in the grove*  
(Olafioye, 2002: 30)

In a typical Yoruba socio-cultural setting, a leper is considered as one who has incurred the wrath of the gods; and as such, should be an outcast for the rest of his life. It is a usual practice for a leper to be banished into the forest where he is expected to spend the remaining part of his life to prevent the spread of the wrath incurred to others. In other words, the jungle is considered a proper place for him to stay for the rest of his life. The proverb is used to warn the addressee against contracting leprosy – i.e. fomenting troubles – just like ‘as the wood-insect gathers sticks, on its own head it carries them.’ This warning is equally echoed in the last clause of the second extract (i.e. Olafioye: 29). The images of a fall by those in the position of rulership (as ‘who is down needs fear no fall’), of being a ghost of the former able-bodied (and influential) self, and of being reduced to a lonely and rejected fellow (after the ‘esteemed’ position might have been relinquished) parade the extracts. The effect of all this is to deter an individual from doing things that would eventually alienate him in due course.

**Datum 7:** *A dog does not bark and lose its teeth* (Adebowale, 2005: 4)

This translates to mean that we can never fight in the just cause of what is due to us and lose our prestige and dignity in the process. Hence, this serves as morale booster in the attempts at making the nation an ideal, humane and responsible society. The images erected in ‘hen fluffing feathers’ – as it relates to its memory being resuscitated in the poem from where the poem is cited – leaves the people with the consequence of their actions depending on the choice(s) made. They either fight for the *uhuru* and be vindicated as heroes or are passive to reap the unthinkable reward of depression and oppression. This is a form of incantatory proverb that is used to fortify the expression for divine invocation. For instance, barking is a norm to a dog and it does not affect the animal negatively. So the expression is used to foreground the fact that whatever the user does in the circumstance surrounding the expression would not have any negative repercussion. This proverb has an undertone of encouragement for one who is fighting a just cause – that the best form of defence is attack and the only way to consolidate peace is to be battle-ready.

**Datum 8:** *The hen that defecates inside the soup pot messes up her own grave* (Adebowale, 2005: 5)

Literally, a hen / chicken is raised for food. It is used for a special delicacy in the Yoruba culture. The proverb denotes that the end of a chicken is in the soup pot. So any hen that stools in the pot (while still alive) is seen to be defiling his final abode. An intoned linguistic configuration as we have in the citation above is an emotive rendition of the iconic apparels which, apart from the textual beauty it suspends, has a peculiar way of ‘conjuring’ reverberation of the message. The proverb is normally used to warn the addressee against embarking on a course of action that will eventually spell doom for him.

However, in the context of the poem where it is used at reprimanding the bad eggs in society, Adebowale accompanies the proverb in quick succession with more subtle and image-building icons. Such iconic signs exhibit a stringent connection with the universal understanding of phenomena in social systems. This device, depending on the accuracy of representation on a given occasion of use, is used to foreground the imitation of the reality to which the linguistic form refers.

**Datum 9:** *The missile thrown at the palm tree comes back hitting the thrower on the nose* (Adebowale 2005: 12)

In the Yoruba culture, a palm-tree is taken to be somewhat invincible, considering its hardened bark that repels any foreign body. In fact, the bark of a palm tree does not give in so easily to the blade of even a machet. So there appears to be a kind of metaphorical transfer of the natural truth in the context of the proverb. As a way of engendering its pragmatic essence, this proverb is laced with confrontational tone; warning that the hypocritical moves of the leaders would be adjudged by posterity; that the time is imminent when the table shall be turned by nemesis and they would be forced to reap the scornful reward of having thrown pebbles at the palm-tree. Adebowale (p.12) philosophically uses the proverb in the context of an incantatory poem as follows:

We know this would boomerang ...

When the snail defecates  
It wipes the mess on the ground  
With its own chest...  
The missile thrown at the palm tree  
Comes back hitting the thrower on the nose.  
Soon, the High Court of Nemesis  
And the Appeal Court of Nemesis  
Will sit in judgment,  
And dogs that vomit  
Shamelessly will return  
To consume their own vomit

Considering the adjoining cues of expressions in which the proverb is studied in the sampled poem, the natural law of retribution is what the proverb generally enunciates. This extract equally captures a protest scenario with optimism as the motive force behind the struggle. In the fight against the menace of alienation, the proverb is useful as an encouragement to spur the people on in their march towards equity and justice.

*Datum 10: He who tries to catch rain water with a basket deceives himself*  
(Adebowale 2005: 75)

A basket is an object with many holes in it like a gauze or a mesh. Even if it is dipped into an ocean, it cannot hold water. Hence, the proverb is used to foreground the impossibility associated with the subject of discourse in which it is deployed. Also generally, in response to an intimidating challenge, this proverb can be used as a pragmatic means of fortifying oneself against the arsenal of the adversary. Beyond aestheticism, the force of illocution in the proverb is for an affective end, i.e. to strengthen and embolden self in an attempt to resist the intimidating advances from another (addressee or a third party being referred to). At this level, given the clues supplied by the context, it becomes easier to 'trace out' the intended meanings of some of the highly embellished structures and word forms which abound in our data. The examination of these peculiar lexico-semantic choices made by the writers, in short, enables analysts of texts as this to gain access to

implicit and extensive bits of structural form in poetry, most especially the adapted indigenous proverbs.

### **Conclusion**

A proverb is said to be a textual manifestation of the worldview of a people. Its structure, wording and use are a mirror of the mind set, ideology and heritage of a given people. Apart from their persuasive potentials in spoken discourse, they offer the text a unique identity of being a viable vehicle of cultural expression. The peculiar figures of comparison which are common in Yoruba trigger effective delivery of the subject matter. This device also consolidates the pragmatic motivation for their linguistic stylization, even in their translated version. This indirectly serves a cohesive purpose too of linking the print version of the poetry to its oral source.

The clue given in the foregoing is that the socio-cultural milieu motivating the expressions or 'style' is crucial in forging ahead, beyond the overt structures, into the ocean of intended meaning and other embellishments. It can be categorically stated that, based on its motivating forces, the use of proverbial expressions and switches cohere into a forceful foregrounding strategy of implicating solidarity and cultural re-orientation of alienated minds. Overall, proverbs are an inseparable component of conversational exchange involving an adult in the Yoruba culture. Their meanings rise above literal deductions made from the overt linguistic structures without recourse to their pragmatic motivation in speech contexts. Hence, for an effective use and interpretation of translated proverbs, an intensive consideration of the socio-pragmatic variables of the source language is imperative.

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