
The Semantics and Pragmatics of Proverbial Dialogue

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Abstract

Language communicates the intention of the speaker to the hearer on every occasion it is used in any human interaction. Linguistics claims that language use has a semantic as well as the pragmatic content; language use is spiced with proverbs in Nigeria. There has been little or no investigation on the communicative value of the semantic and pragmatic content of proverbial language use. This study seeks to discover whether the semantic or pragmatic content of proverb in language use is crucial for communication to take place. A pragma-semantic approach is employed to investigate some proverbs using arithmetic progression method of selection. The findings confirm that proverbial constatives have both semantic and pragmatic contents; nevertheless, it is revealed that the pragmatic content of proverbial language use communicates the intention of the speaker and therefore, significant for communication between the speaker and the addressee of the proverb.

Key words: Proverbial constatives, Semantics, Pragmatics, Arithmetic progression.

Introduction

Human language is very crucial for communal or social interaction among people who use it to achieve certain purposes. 'Language in communication is capable of doing both good and evil. It can be used to cement relationship and foster togetherness among people, and can also be a source of conflict among individuals...' (Fodang &

Mmega, 2016:35) One characteristic of language use by man is proverb. As a form of language use, a proverb has both the semantic and pragmatic content. This paper examines the semantics and pragmatics of proverbial dialogue in *Two To Tango: A Play*. It is investigated in order to establish which of the two is responsible for achieving the speaker's intention in any proverbial dialogue. In doing this, the paper reviewed some linguistic concepts of speech acts (adapted to suit the study), context and proverbs. A brief on the interlocutors is done while the Pragmatic Theory of Truth and Katz Semantic Theory anchor the study. The data are obtained from a secondary source: a Nigerian literary text, and sampled using the process of arithmetic progression. The sampled data are presented, analysed, and discussed. The findings, and the conclusion wrap up the study.

Literature Review

Speech Acts

One unique feature of human being is the ability to perform several acts with speech. The speech acts Theory of Austin (1962) categorises human speech into performative and constative through which it is possible to execute any human act. Arising from this, the view of the *Linguistic Library* (2003) that a speech act is an act that a speaker performs when making an utterance is succinct. Adrian and Harnish (2001:394) further describe speech acts as 'acts performed in uttering expressions' while Alston (2000) states that they '...are a staple of everyday communicative life...'. Also, Bach (2004) posits that they are acts of communication. These scholars affirm that speech acts are voluntary and intentional linguistic utterances which are employed to carry out certain actions. The proverbs that are selected and examined in this paper are speech acts because they are employed to perform certain acts.

Illocutionary Act

According to Austin (1962) in Solomon (2012:42) the illocutionary act is 'the making of a statement, etc in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it'. Levinson (1985:236) views this concept as the act performed in uttering something, that is, the illocutionary act is what the speaker uses language to do. Cutting (2003) agrees with this assertion by affirming that the 'Illocutionary act is what is done in uttering the word'. In this vein, a speaker can perform the illocutionary act of directing, informing, sentencing and acquitting, among others. The selected proverbs are considered as illocutionary acts because they are employed to do a lot of things. Every illocutionary act has its illocutionary point which is the same as pragmatic content in this study.

Pragmatic Content

The illocutionary point of an illocutionary act is the peculiar aim of a speech act or the specific aim of an illocutionary act. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) state that the illocutionary point is the basic purpose of a speaker in making an utterance. It is observed that the people who use each of the proverbs in the data under examination set out to achieve certain goals. These aims are technically referred to as illocutionary points and in this paper, are understood as the pragmatic content.

Context

The context of any particular utterance can be linguistic; which refers to the preceding and anticipated utterances, or non-linguistic. The non-linguistic context could be physical, social -environment or general knowledge. The identification and understanding of context are significant in the pragmatic analysis of any linguistic utterance.

Adegbija (1999) states that context refers to the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance.

He presents four types of context which are: the physical, which encompasses both the environment or space and time; the socio-cultural, which refers to the beliefs, habits, value systems or cultures of the conversationalists; the linguistic refers to the syntactic environment of a word, its meaning syntactically and socio-culturally, while the psychological context relates to the state of mind of the interactants. These meanings of context have great impact on the current study as they contribute to the determination of both the semantic and pragmatic contents of the data.

Furthermore, Adrian and Harnish (2001) observes that interlocutors in conversation make contributions that both affect or reflect the linguistic context of utterances. The linguistic concept of context is viewed as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible. According to Mey (2001:49) "the context is the 'universe' of everyday language use, the sum total of what people do with each other in conversation." Context is not only the physical but also; the linguistic environment in which the conversation proceeds. Context, therefore, underdetermines the speakers' and hearers' disposition, and the linguistic layers of their interaction. The proverbial constatives of the speakers in the data are linguistic context for the uptakes of the hearers. Also, the proverbial constatives express the dispositions of both the hearers and the speakers. The utterance of the speaker becomes a context for uptake by the hearer whose uptake in turn produces a context for the subsequent utterance of the speaker. There are aspects of context, some of which are: knowledge as context, discourse as context and background knowledge as context.

Knowledge as Context

Knowledge is described as the information or the facts available to the hearer of a locution about a certain issue, subject or topic being discussed. It is also the understanding which the hearer of a locution has about what the speaker is saying or the information which the hearer has on an issue that has been raised.

Knowledge is the apprehension of a certain reality by the participants in a conversation regarding the issue being discussed. This knowledge serves as a context that the hearer of a locution relies upon to make reference in order to infer or make sense out of the locutionary act. The interlocutors are members of a community and they share the knowledge of the proverbial constatives which therefore, serves as context.

Discourse as Context

Discourse is considered as a kind of context for understanding a particular utterance. The hearers rely on discourse to understand what the speaker says and also the speaker uses discourse to communicate his intention to his hearers. The use of discourse to provide clues that enable the hearers understand what the speaker's intention is, in communication, is viewed as a kind of context for such communication. In this study, the discourses of the interlocutors form part of the context for deploying proverbial constatives.

Background knowledge as Context

This is referred to as common sense, encyclopedic, socio-cultural and real world knowledge. It is the knowledge a speaker supposes

his hearers have prior to, or independently of a particular conversation by virtue of membership in a community. It is believed that members of any community share certain types of knowledge which are often brought to bear on the language use of the members as conversationalists. Proverbial knowledge is mutually shared by members of a speech community and therefore serves as background knowledge for the context of dialogue. In this study, context as discussed above is significant to the unraveling of both the semantic and pragmatic contents of the proverbs in this study.

Proverbs

'Proverbs are pieces of popular wisdom and tradition belonging to any culture...' (De Grado, 2015:3). Nigerians employ proverbs to communicate information, express views and attitudes because as Martin (2015) avers, '...the elements of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs.'

De Grado (2015:5) asserts that proverbs have been introduced in literature; to corroborate this, Nigerian literary art has documented proverbs as important typical Nigerian speech act. Methangwane (2003:408) says 'proverbs are relatively short expressions, which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform a variety of functions.' Also, Adedimeji (2003:55) states that proverbs can be understood as an 'adage, saying, maxim, precepts, saw or any other synonym of such that expresses a conventional truth.' Beyond communication, proverbs portray cultural ethos and they invoke communal patriotism as well as kindred solidarity. In addition, when a proverb is used in a speech act, the speaker alludes to traditional authority to authenticate the speech act. Proverbs therefore lend traditional or communal support to the speaker's illocutionary act. This accounts for the reason why the Igbo and Yoruba people usually deploy proverbs with: 'our elders

say...'

Furthermore, Mieder (1985:118) states that a proverb is a short, generally known sentence that expresses common, traditional and didactic views in a metaphorical and fixed form and which is easily remembered and repeated. Proverbs communicate messages to human beings. Ajiboye (2012:313) strengthens this assertion as she states that proverbs are meant to perform certain social functions. This is true because proverbs as speech acts domesticate the act being performed in the interlocutors' social world-view. In addition, she asserts that proverbs are spiritual in that they are taken from the deep recesses of the sender and go deep into the inner-most being of the receiver. According to her proverbs are used to say things gently in a veiled way at the level of interpersonal communication. Tact is deployed through the use of proverbs to communicate a message. Odebunmi, (2008:3) argues that in terms of function, proverbs in Africa have been observed to occur on all occasions when language is used for communicating either as art or as tool.

This study agrees that proverbs are employed as tools of communication and they perform both semantic and pragmatic functions because a speaker uses proverbs to communicate to his hearer and doing so, alludes to traditional authority. Proverbs serve to authenticate the view, knowledge or attitude which the speaker seeks to communicate to his or her hearer. In Nigeria and particularly among the elderly, language use and proverbs are inextricably intertwined.

Constatives which are devoid of proverbs are considered ineffective in conveying concisely an interlocutor's view and attitude to the hearer. Proverbial constatives are thought provoking and convey soul-searching semantic and pragmatic messages. Such are context dependent for their semantic and

pragmatic contents to be relevantly functional and appropriate. Solomon (2013) states that the effective deployment of a proverb rests on the fulfillment of the felicity condition A of Austin (1962) which states that:

- (i) 'There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect'.
- (ii) 'The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure' (Levinson, 1985: 229).

Proverbs are used to perform certain semantic and some pragmatic functions. Krikman in De Grado (2015:9) asserts that proverbs function:

to promote an endorsement to...statements and opinions, forecast something, express doubt, reproach someone..., accuse something, advise against something or interdict somebody from doing something and so on.

The assertion above is corroborated by this study as the data analysis indicates.

Proverbs examined in this paper are sourced from the short play *Two to Tango: A Play*. Its setting is a fictional Umuasa Kingdom whose paramount ruler is Igwe Mgachi and the characters bear Igbo names. There are political, religious, traditional and modern scenes in the play. The language of the play is simple, direct and expressive, with proverbs as veritable means of communication. A corpus of thirty-seven proverbs is observed in the play and this preponderant use of proverbs in a short play of seventy-one pages allures one's attention. Proverbs are used in the play such that the ratio is about one proverb

to two pages. The decision to investigate the proverbs is driven by the desire to understand the semantics and pragmatics of the proverbial dialogue so as to determine their contributions to communication. Speech acts in theatrical performance either as a play or drama employs dialogue; the data for this paper are the proverbs used in the dialogue of the characters.

The Interlocutors

The interlocutors who employ the proverbs are citizens of Umuasa Kingdom. They live together and are involved in the same socio-cultural pursuits, so they have to their advantage, the three aspects of context discussed above.

Theoretical Framework

The Pragmatic Theory of Truth which holds that a proposition is true if it is useful to believe, to (Peirce and James in Bradley Dowden, 2004) is consistent with the conviction of Nigerians regarding proverbial constatives. Proverbs, for them, are the sacrosanct wisdom of the sage. The proponents of this theory declare that 'utility is the essential mark of truth' and that 'beliefs that lead to the best "payoff", that are the best justification of our actions that promote success, *are* truths.' It is in this conviction that users of proverbs deploy them. Also, Katz Semantic Theory acknowledges the rules by which a speakers' knowledge of the semantic structure of the language they use as well as which accommodate the decomposition and composition of sentences in language in order to understand the meaning of the sentences provide insight to the study.

Methodology

The preceding literature provides the framework of this investigation.

Thirty-seven proverbs are identified in the source of the data for this paper and they are grouped into four segments of nine proverbs, the fourth has an extra one. In each segment, selection was made by arithmetic progression (AP) using the formula: $U_n = a + (n-1) d$. In segment 1, proverbs 2, 6, 10, were selected while proverbs 12, 16 and 20 were selected in segment 2. In segment three, proverbs 22, 26, 30 and in segment 4; proverbs 32 and 36 were all selected by the process of arithmetic progression (AP). Therefore eleven proverbs were selected and presented below:

S/no	Proverb no.	Page no.
1	2	10
2	6	17
3	10	35
4	12	47
5	16	50
6	20	55
7	22	57
8	26	63
9	30	65
10	32	68
11	36	69

Presentation and Analysis

The data is analysed in a table showing the proverbs, the context, the semantic content of each proverb and the pragmatic content of the proverbs with their contributions to communication. These are presented in the table below:

Data Analysis of Semantics and Pragmatics of Proverbial Dialogue

Proverbs	Context	Semantic	Pragmatic	Contributions
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<p>(1)The stream whose water I shall drink would not pass me by (if he becomes <i>my father</i> in-law.) (p.10)</p>	<p>Ifedinjo reports Igwe Mgachi's statement to his wife who waits anxiously to know what the Igwe had told him.</p>	<p>content Promise to give the hearer what is due to him as an in-law</p>	<p>content Igwe Mgachi persuades and woos with royal enticement of rewards for Ifedinjo to give his daughter to him in marriage .</p>	<p>of pragmatic content Efficacious. Ifedinjo is made to understand that if he consents to the wish of the Igwe, he will enjoy unlimited free-flowing material benefits for his comfort, as the Igwe is reputed to be wealthy and influential. It indicates that First Elder and others like him are not fooled by the politicking.</p>
<p>(2)When an elder sees a bush rat it does not afterwards become an elephant.(p.17)</p>	<p>First Elder draws the attention of his hearers at the meeting of the Common Peoples Party to the deceit of the Chairman, Chief Ogba.</p>	<p>An elder does not get involved in double-dealing.</p>	<p>First Elder draws the attention of his hearers to the politicking of Chief Ogba.</p>	<p>With modesty, the (illocutionary point of this) proverb concisely enables the speaker to veil</p>
<p>(3) If your mother in-law does not know how to sit properly, you should learn</p>	<p>A discourse among women members of Heavensgate Church regarding the unbecoming conduct of</p>	<p>A moral injunction to encourage acceptable behaviour in</p>	<p>The Pastor is morally loose. He is responsible for his moral</p>	<p>With modesty, the (illocutionary point of this) proverb concisely enables the speaker to veil</p>

<p>how to restrain your eyes.(p.35)</p>	<p>their Pastor.</p>	<p>deference to elders.</p>	<p>laxity.</p>	<p>her indictment of the referent for his impropriety and unacceptable, condemnable conduct.</p>
<p>(4) The toad does not run in the afternoon without a cause.(p.47)</p>	<p>Said to Ifedinjo and those who accompany him to Isiada's house.</p>	<p>The speaker acknowledges that her guests' visit is not a casual one.</p>	<p>Isiada confronts Ifedinjo's party to declare its mission to her house.</p>	<p>It is acknowledged that certain trouble is behind the visit of Isiada's guests. (It portrays the status of the speaker who is a very senior elderly citizen of the Umuasa Kingdom.)</p>
<p>(5) A snake seen by one person is a python.(p.50)</p>	<p>Isiada is examining Inyama during the consultation</p>	<p>A one-person statement is doubtful.</p>	<p>Isiada carpets Inyama on her excuse for her alleged violation by some robbers.</p>	<p>The deceit peddled by Inyama is exposed. Hearers are warned to be wary of her story because it is not true.</p>
<p>(6) When the air is fouled by a man on top of</p>	<p>The Prime Minister's remark as he commences</p>	<p>The matter at hand confounds the council.</p>	<p>How is the sacrilegious</p>	<p>Thought provoking so as to elicit grave and diligent consideration</p>

<p>palm tree, the fly is confused. (p.55)</p>	<p>the meeting of the elders and chiefs of Umuasa Kingdom.</p>		<p>extra – marital act of the wife of the Paramount Ruler of the Kingdom to be sanctioned by the Council?</p>	<p>of the sacrilege which the Council is confronted with.</p>
<p>(7)The rope that ties the monkey ties the baboon too.(p.57)</p>	<p>First Elder’s contribution at the Council deliberation on what to do, regarding Inyama, the wife of the King, who is involved in a sacrilege of adultery with a subject to the King.</p>	<p>A call for equity and fairness to each person.</p>	<p>Each of the culprits must be sanctioned.</p>	<p>The impartial view of the speaker is concisely stated authoritatively by the proverb which represents the collective wisdom of the ancestors of the Kingdom.</p>
<p>(8) A mother of twins should have impartial breasts.(p.63)</p>	<p>Third Elder’s uptake to Ikeogu’s proposal of fine for Okewu alone, leaving out Inyama.</p>	<p>A reminder that the council ought to be fair to each of the culprits.</p>	<p>The Council must be fair to each of the culprits.</p>	<p>The Council is conscientised to live up to its moral obligation which it is saddled with naturally by custom.</p>
<p>(9) No matter</p>	<p>Ikeogu scolds</p>	<p>Reminds</p>	<p>Vents Ikeogu’s</p>	<p>Inflicts social and psychological</p>

<p>how long a pig is washed, it will always remain a pig.(p.65)</p>	<p>Inyama for her adultery which is a disgrace to his royal family.</p>	<p>Inyama of her irredeemable despicability</p>	<p>displeasure with Inyama.</p>	<p>injury on the addressee, and as well registers how deep the speaker abhors the sacrilege committed by the addressee.</p>
<p>(10) When the number that eats the vulture is complete, the meat basket is brought down(p.68)</p>	<p>The Prime Minister in Council declares the meeting open.</p>	<p>The Council is formed and the hearing can proceed.</p>	<p>Ordering the matter to be tabled before the Council.</p>	<p>It states the legality and appropriateness of the Prime Minister to commence the session by indicating that every Council member is seated and the parties involved in case before the Council are also present.</p>
<p>(11) The war that is announced does not consume a cripple. (p. 69)</p>	<p>Fourth Elder's uptake to Ikeogu's threat to disintegrate the Kingdom.</p>	<p>To be forewarned is to be forearmed.</p>	<p>Fore – warn, the threat is noted and taken seriously</p>	<p>.It informs Ikeogu that those concerned will take appropriate measures to his threat.</p>

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Discussion of Data

In discussing the data, the pragmatic content of proverbs 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11, and the semantic content of proverbs 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 are considered. This is done so that adequate treatment of the data is achieved. The pragmatic content of proverb number 1 in the table reveals Igwe Mgachi as a feudal lord and a serious suitor whose commissive act could hardly be ignored by the hearer. That of number 3 indicates that the speaker upholds the cultural norm of the community and that the individual being discussed must be held accountable for his lack of self-control, irrespective of any other person's unbecoming, immodest act or indecency.

The pragmatic content of proverb number 5 veils the speaker's objection to the deceit of the hearer's uptake, and reveals the speaker's foreknowledge which encodes her status. In addition, the pragmatic content of proverb number 7 commits the Umuasa Council to adjudicate the matter before it without fear or favour, irrespective of the status of the culprit involved in the sacrilege, while that of proverb number 9 registers concisely the speaker's disdain for both the act and the perpetrator. The pragmatic content of proverb number 11 conveys the information that the hearers should not be taken for granted. The pragmatic contents of the proverbs have contributed significantly to communication as they convey the intentions of the speakers.

The semantic content of proverb number 2 seeks to affirm the integrity of elder citizens, the semantic content of proverb number 4 is a declaration by Isiada of her knowledge that a trouble

has brought her guests, that of proverb number 6 indicates the bewilderment of the Council occasioned by the sacrilegious acts of the culprits and that of proverb number 8 asserts that the Council is duty bound not to indulge in favouritism. The sense relation of proverb number 10 declares the proceeding of the Council open and the hearing of the case brought before it to commence.

Findings

The investigation reveals that each proverb in the data has a semantic and a pragmatic content that is apparent, recognisable, comprehensible and effective. The pragmatic contents of the proverbs contribute immensely to communication as each one unmistakably conveys the intention of the speaker to the hearer who recognises, comprehends and initiates certain uptake in response to them. It is the recognition and comprehension of the pragmatic content of a proverbial constative by the hearer that is most significant for communication to succeed whenever proverbs are deployed.

Conclusion

Proverbs are employed in dialogue by typical Nigerians, essentially, for their pragmatic content to convey messages that are deeper and more profound than their semantic content. The pragmatic contents of proverbs significantly contribute to communication. Also, their comprehension and recognition are indispensable to the execution of the hearers' appropriate uptakes.

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