

PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED HAUSA PROVERBS

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ABSTRACT

Hausa is a member of the West Chadic cluster of the Afroasiatic phylum with sister languages, such as Bade, Warji, and Kamwe. There abound in literature several works on the creativity, aesthetics, and pragmatic value of Hausa proverbs, including Maimako (2007), Liman (2015), and Adamu (2019), among others, but not much attention has been paid to the pragmatics of Hausa proverbs. This study examines twenty (20) selected Hausa proverbs collected from interview sessions and focus group discussions in Nasarawa State, Keffi, Nigeria. The survey-type descriptive research design was adopted in this study. The Relevance theory of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) is the pragmatic framework applied to analyse how effective communication and meaning-making is achieved in the use of proverbs in the typical Hausa community. The study revealed that Hausa proverbs could be interpreted within the context of their usage. The transparent proverbs are direct, easy to understand, and have clear meanings. This study, which is an addition to the studies on Hausa language, people, and culture contributes to aspects of the pragmatics of Hausa language towards a better understanding of Hausa proverbs and their usage in communication.

KEYWORDS: context, Hausa, pragmatics, and proverb.

INTRODUCTION

Hausa is a member of the West Chadic cluster of the Afroasiatic phylum with sister languages such as Bade, Warji, and Kamwe. There abound in literature several works on the creativity, aesthetics, and pragmatic value of Hausa proverbs, including Maimako (2007), Liman (2015), Adamu (2019), and a host of others, but not much attention has been paid to the pragmatics of Hausa proverbs.

Proverb is a Latin word, *proverbium*, a saying supporting a point, from *pro-*, on behalf of *verbium*, word. It is a short traditional saying of a didactic or advisory nature, in which a generalization is given a specific, often metaphorical expression. Meider (1993) defines a proverb as a short, generally known sentence of morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, or memorable form that is handed down

from generation to generation. Nwadike (2009:16) sees it as 'a form of speech pregnant with meaning.' According to Sotunde (2009:21), proverbs are products of observation of human behaviour and environment". A proverb by its nature is a microscopic part of human experience reenacted repeatedly. Onyemelukwe (2004) describes it as a popular expression that conveys the truth to teach, praise, reprimand, or condemn an undesirable act or behaviour. It is also used to embellish speeches and conversations. It can also be defined as words of wisdom that lead people right.

Pragmatics derives from the Greek word *pragma*, meaning deed or action. Crystal (1997:301) defines pragmatics as "the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they encounter in using language in social interaction." Adegbite (2000) looks at pragmatics in terms of the investigation into the aspect of meaning which is not derived from the properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which they are uttered. To Adegbite, pragmatics looks at language not as an abstract entity but as a means of communication that is being used by people interacting in specific situations with specific intentions and goals within specific contexts. Context is a situation that may include any imaginable extra-linguistic factor, including discourse, social, environmental, and psychological factors. Finegan (2008) sees context as the environment in which a sentence is produced, especially what precedes the sentence. This implies that the central issue in pragmatics is context, as pragmatics is all about the study of the contribution of context to meaning. Context could be 'physical' (location of a given word, the situation in which it is used as well as the timing, all of which aid proper understanding of the word); Epistemic (mutual background knowledge speakers of a language have of the world, mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs); linguistic(co-text, the set of words that surround the lexical items in question in the same phrase or sentence) and social(social relationship between speakers and hearers(interlocutors) which determines the culture and situation bound roles of interlocutors in the context of communication (Zakariyah 2016).

Agu (2010) observes that it is perhaps unimaginable that a speech event involving competent Igbo adults will be conducted and concluded without the use of proverbs, which must be deemed contextually suitable and appropriate if they are to achieve the purpose for which they are being used.

Upah (2006) analysed the pragmatic contexts in which Jukun proverbs are used and the communicative competence demonstrated by the interlocutors in the use of the language traceable to fifteen sources: talking instruments, songs and chants, individuals, natural phenomena, riddles, names, oral poetry, historical experiences, folktales, mourning the dead, traditional attires, exclamatory remarks, divination, obscenity, and proverbs from neighbouring villages. He also noted that the use of proverbs in the Jukun society was exclusively restricted to adult males. Women and children were barred from speaking in proverbs.

METHODOLOGY

The survey type of descriptive research design was adopted in this study. Twenty (20) proverbs were collected from interviews and Focus Group Discussions

involving students, who are native speakers of Hausa from the study area in Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Relevance theory of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) is the pragmatic framework applied to analyse how effective communication and meaning – making is achieved in the use of proverbs in the typical Hausa community. According to Sperber & Wilson (1986), pragmatics needs only one principle, which is ‘relevance’. To them, the principle or assumption underlying relevance theory is that in any given context, what people say is relevant. The principle of relevance is seen as a further specification of the Gricean notion of cooperation and a variant of the communicative principle. The relevance theory posits that speakers communicate intending to maximize relevance, which is achieved by considering the cognitive effort required and the cognitive effects gained from processing information.

Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice’s central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice, 1989). In developing this claim, Grice laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model. According to the code model, a communicator encodes her intended message into a signal, which is decoded by the audience using an identical copy of the code. According to the inferential model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience based on the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that verbal comprehension involves an element of decoding. However, the linguistic meaning recovered by decoding is just one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative inference process which yields an interpretation of the speaker's meaning (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

DATA ANALYSIS

The pragmatic analysis of proverbs would involve how context shapes the meanings of these expressions in real-life situations in the attainment of communicative goals. The situational context of use and the speaker’s intent, to a large extent, influence the interpretation of proverbs.

The data were analysed within the framework of the Relevance theory to explain how the hearers infer the intended meaning of Hausa proverbs by identifying the cognitive effects achieved in the process of interpretation of the proverbs. In other words, the hearer is required to make inferences, connecting them to contextual cues and shared knowledge in order to derive intended meanings. The proverb’s relevance is determined by the cognitive effort invested in processing it and the cognitive effects gained from understanding its intended wisdom. The twenty proverbs analysed were grouped into two categories: the transparent and the opaque proverbs.

The transparent proverbs are the proverbs that are direct, easy to understand, and have clear meanings. While the opaque proverbs, on the other hand, are difficult to understand and may be obscure or ambiguous; therefore, they are not considered in this analysis. The twenty (20) transparent proverbs are analysed thus:

Table 1: Transparent Hausa proverbs

S/ no	Proverb	Gloss	Element of cultural background knowledge	Context of usage and situation
1	Bayan wuya sai dadi Transliteration: after difficulty, enjoyment comes	After the storm comes calm	Hardworking pays	Advice
2	Kowa ya ci zomo ya ci gudu Transliteration: Whoever eats rabbit meat will be good at running	Comfort is the end result of hard work	Hardworking pays	Advice
3	Komai dadin talala saki ya fi shi Transliteration: no matter how one enjoys untethering, freedom is better	Independence is preferable to the most benevolent subjugation	Freedom	Advice
4	Idan mutum ya ce zai ha diye gatari rike masa kota. Transliteration: if a one says he can swallow a pickaxe, hold the handle for him	If someone says he can do which you suspect to be beyond his ability, do not discourage him; take him at his words	Pickaxe/hand le	Observation
5	Rashin sani kan sa makafo ya taka sarki Transliteration: not knowing made the blind man step on the King's foot	Ignorance causes people to commit grievous offence	Blind man /King	Observation/ enlightenment
6	Marasa gaskiya ko a cikin ruwa za ya yi gumi Transliteration: The guilty man sweats even inside water	A guilty conscience needs no accuser	Guilty	Encouragement /consolation

7	Komai gudun barewa ta rage daji Transliteration: no matter how good the deer is at running it will never cover the whole bush	One should realize the limits of one's capabilities	Limitation	Observation
8	Mai daki shi ya san inda yake masa zuba Transliteration: The owner of the house knows where the roof leaks	Everyone knows his own business best	House/ roof	Advice
9	Babba juji ne, kowa ya zo da shara ya zuba Transliteration: The elder is like the rubbish bin, everyone is free to dump his garbage	Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown	Patience	Advice
10	Duniya juyi-juyi, kwado ya fadi a ruwan zafi Transliteration: Life is changing, frog falls inside hot water	Life is full of ups and downs	Life/ change	observation
11	Zuma sai da harbi Transliteration: The bee has both sweetness and a sting	No matter how sweet, humble, calm and simple an individual might appear, he or she is still capable of biting	Sweetness/ sting	Caution/warning
12	Da haka muka fara, kuturu ya ga mai kyasbi Transliteration: We started this way, a leper saw someone infected by skin eczema	A small misfortune can have disastrous consequences	misfortune/ disastrous	Caution/warning
13	Da yayyafi kogi kan cika Transliteration: Small showers fill the stream	Perseverance gets the work fully done	Little showers/stream	Advice/encouragement

14	Taura biyu ba ta haɗuwa a baka Transliteration: Two mangoes cannot be in the mouth	You cannot do two things at the same time	Combining two things	Advice
15	Zama da maɗaukin kanwa shi yake kawo farin kai Transliteration: Living with a potash carrier whitens one's hair	Avoid any close relationship with those whose bad character can affect you negatively	Potash/white head	Caution/warning / advice
16	Wuta ta ci danye balle busasshe Transliteration: If fire would catch fresh firewood the dry firewood is more at risk	A plague affects the rich as well as the poor	Fresh stick/dry stick	Observation
17	Dan uwa rabin jiki ne Transliteration: Brother is half of the body	Blood is thicker than water	Bonding in relationships	Observation
18	Sara ɗaya ba ya kada itace Transliteration: A single blows cannot cut down	Rome was not built in a day	Tree felling	Advice
19	Labarin zuciya a tambayi fuska Transliteration: The face should be asked about the story of the mind	one's thought is portrayed by the expression on one's face	Facial appearance/tought	Observation
20	Ba a shan zuma sai an sha harbi Transliteration: One cannot take honey without being stung	Success comes after tears	Honey/comb /harvest	Observation

The proverbs analysed here are transparent or surface-level proverbs because they are easy to understand. Even though some of them are characterised by synecdoche and metonymy, which are elements that could cause difficulties in comprehension, they could be easily understood by the average speaker of Hausa or an English speaker who does not have a deep knowledge of the Hausa worldview when translated.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study investigated the pragmatics of selected Hausa proverbs with a view to uncovering the underlying considerations that help to determine the interpretation and understanding of Hausa proverbs by an audience. The Relevance theory proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) was adopted for the analysis.

The category of Hausa proverbs analysed here is transparent and easy to comprehend. For instance, the proverb *Bayan wahala sai dadi*, which literally means, 'After hardship comes enjoyment,' is an observation that confirms the belief that in life, difficulty precedes comfort. And this is what normally happens in real life, as most people find life very difficult before things become easy. This may not require additional explanation for the message to be understood.

Similarly, *Kowa ya ci zomo ya ci gudu* literally means 'whoever eats rabbit meat will be good at running or will be a good runner.' This suggests that hard work pays, as it brings about comfort. In other words, comfort does not come without hard work. This requires no additional explanation to be understood in the context of 'observation /enlightenment' because it is straightforward to understand.

Another transparent proverb is *Komai dadin talala saki ya fi shi*, which literally means independence is better than any untethering'', any benevolent subjugation will not be equated with freedom. This proverb is also understood in the context of advice.

'*Idan mutum ya ce zai hadiye gatari rike masa kota*' is also a very clear proverb. Literally, it means "If someone says he can do what is considered impossible, do not discourage him, take him by his words' in the context of an 'observation,' this may not require additional explanation for the message to be understood.

Similarly, *Rashin sani ya kan sa makafo ya taka sarki* literally means 'Ignorance makes the blind man step on the King's foot (the highest authority in the land).' This proverb is also comprehensible, as blindness is equated with ignorance; if not because of ignorance or blindness, an ordinary man cannot go close to the Emir (king), let alone trample on his foot. This suggests that ignorance can lead one to do anything, including committing the highest offence of trampling on the Emir's foot.

Marasa gaskiya ko a cikin ruwa za ya yi gumi is also a transparent proverb which precisely means 'The guilty person sweats even inside water''. That is to say, a guilty conscience needs no accuser, as he incriminates himself. So, it is easily understood in the context of observation.

Another proverb that is understandable is *Komai gudun barewa ta rage daji*, which means 'No matter how good the deer is at running, it will never cover the whole bush'. This is clear and straight to the point as it denotes the fact that, no matter how good one is at something, he or she must have limitations.

Mai daki shi ya san inda yake masa zuba is also easily understood, as it literally means 'the owner of the room knows where the roof leaks.' It suggests that everyone knows their own problem best. No matter how close one is to another, he or she can never know his problem more than him.

Babba juji ne, kowa ya zo da shara ya zuba is also comprehensible as the deep meaning denotes that, 'An elder is like the rubbish bin, everyone is free to dump his garbage.' This implies that, once one is wearing any crown or is an elder in the family, he or she should be ready to take any rubbish; in other words, he or she needs to be patient.

Duniya juyi-juyi, kwado ya fadi a ruwan zafi is another proverb that has a straightforward meaning. The literal meaning is that 'Life is unstable, the frog falls into hot water.' This is clear, and it means life is full of ups and downs, as the frog that is used to live in cold water may find itself in hot water. This suggests that no condition is permanent. What is obtainable today may not be available tomorrow.

Zuma sai da harbi which means 'The bee has both sweetness and a sting' is as clear as it indicates that, no matter how sweet, humble, calm, and simple an individual might appear, he or she is still capable of biting. That is to say, no matter how good one is, he or she has a bad side.

The proverb *Da haka muka fara, kuturu ya ga mai kyasbi*, as its literal meaning denotes 'That's how we started; a leper saw someone who was infected by eczema. It implies that a small misfortune can lead to disastrous consequences.

Another very clear proverb is the one that says '*Da yayyafi kogi kan cika*', which literally means small showers fill the stream.' It encourages one to have a sense of perseverance and determination, as this leads to success in life.

Zama da ma daukin kanwa shi yake kawo farin kai' is also clear at the surface level. It literally means, 'Living with a carrier of potash makes your hair white'. It discourages any close relationship with those whose bad character can affect one negatively. This message is very clear as it provides relevant information that needs less effort to understand.

Wuta ta ci danye balle busasshe literally means 'Fire catches fresh wood, let alone the dry one' is lucid, as it draws attention to the fact that calamity or disease can affect the rich person, let alone the poor, who is very weak. Calamity or disease is likened to fire, which, if it catches fresh wood, one wonders what to the dry one? The message is clear and is therefore easily understood.

The literal meaning of *Dan uwa rabin jiki ne* implies that 'brother is the half of one's body. This is an observation that, due to the bond that exists between brothers, they are like half of each other. Therefore, the message here is clear.

Sara daya ba ya kada itace is an advice which literally means, 'One blow cannot cut down a tree.' It means, 'Rome was not built in a day'. Therefore, it suggests that things do not happen overnight; there is always a starting point. The message is also easy to comprehend.

Labarin zuciya a tambayi fuska literally means, 'The face could tell a lot about the mind.' It suggests that the mind can be read on the face. In other words, one's thought is portrayed by the expression on one's face. This is also clear at the surface level, and the message is comprehensible.

Ba a shan zuma sai an sha harbi is also an observation that draws attention to the fact that nothing comes easy. Literally, it means that no one can extract from a

honeycomb without being stung. Here, the stings are likened to tears, while honey signifies success. This message is also clear at the surface level.

CONCLUSION

The study, which adopted the Relevance theory proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) to analyse the pragmatics of selected Hausa proverbs, concludes that transparent proverbs are easy to understand and interpret. The use of proverbs in communication is as old as the creation of man. The use of proverbs in communication demonstrates man's capacity to skillfully play with words in expressing himself in different ways to effectively communicate his intentions. The study of the use of proverbs no doubt provides an interesting aspect of the study of man's endowment in the use of language in expression.

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