

MAXIMISING LITERACY DISCOURSE THROUGH “LOCAL” CONDITION

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Abstract

This paper foregrounds the importance of the fusion of sociolinguistics and pragmatics in maximising literacy efforts through the prevalent social knowledge transfer mechanism, inherent in a given literacy (social) or communicative context. Knowledge is fertilised by this social reality which forms the springboard for literacy. Literacy is the ability to interpret *squiggles* and assign meaning to them; create ideas within the experiential knowledge platform, identify and understand realities to infer and communicate effectively “using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.” This paper uses socio-pragmatic enactment to highlight how literacy can be achieved reasonably through a “local” condition strategy. That means achieving the maximal knowledge or information about the world around us which comes alive through the printed or written words, powerful images or sounds of multi-media culture. Thirty students were used for the assessment. It was observed that applying the “local” condition, strategy within a particular sociocultural milieu, helps the students achieve literacy at superlative level.

Keywords: literacy, socio-pragmatic, knowledge, social, discourse

Those who use literacy take it for granted, but those who use it are excluded from much communication in today's world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of “literacy as freedom”. UNESCO, Statement for the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2008-2012.

Introduction

Literacy has acquired what may termed “semantic extension” that is, developing an “edgeless meaning, by acquiring a broader meaning in social and elitist contexts. This

means that, it is not all about reading and writing, it is also about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. In truth, literacy has gone beyond reading and comprehension. It is now the ability to know for yourself, interpret your world in both immediate and extended perspectives. For every literacy skill to be maximal, it must assess the sociocultural and social-psychological spheres of society/community, by exploring and exploiting the communal reality, as with the community changes, literacy changes to accommodate those changes. So, for an individual to be literate he must have acquired or achieved optimally, sociocultural competence in his immediate sociocultural realities; by actively involving himself or participating in the local/cultural knowledge of the prevalent culture-specific philosophy. This does not only help in the development of the individual or increase his personal learning, but it also helps him to be successful in his Academic pursuit, and life in general.

The right of literacy has been in the front burner of UNESCO, which implicitly includes in 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to education. Besides, the other international declarations and conventions have reemphasized this fact. The language of literacy acquisition has been highlighted by many instruments or documents. These documents allow for several extended meanings or interpretations of literacy, beyond the traditional concept of acquiring the skills of reading and writing. For example, literacy is seen as gaining access to scientific and technical knowledge, legal information, culture and the media. Finally, and importantly, literacy has been recognized as a mechanism for the pursuit of other human rights (Literacy for life 22). In fact, literacy has been a topical issue since modern era, with several attendant human benefits. These benefits are seriously attached to an individual person, for example his self-esteem, confidence and personal development and empowerment. However, these help in an increase in civic consciousness or awareness by the engagement in politics, labour unions or/and community activities. All these gravitate towards collective responsibility and sustained development engendered by adult literacy programmes. In the same vein, Literacy For Life states that “cultural diversity is enhanced by literacy programmes in minority languages, improving people's ability to engage with their own culture” (22).

Evidently, the different definitions and understandings of literacy, which have considerably widened beyond the horizon, over the last six years, were influenced by academic research, international policy agendas and national priorities. These were done to develop different perspectives to literacy in order to find ways in which literacy would be used and practiced in varied social and cultural milieu. Meanwhile, several scholars view “literacy as an active process of learning involving social awareness and

critical reflection, which can empower individuals and groups to promote social change” (Literacy For Life 22).

Cultural *Concentricism* in Literacy

The social negotiation of knowledge engages cultural communicative contexts to drive deeply in the community, the social literacy skills among the people. Culture being a complex behavioural pattern and material achievement in the literacy development, it is therefore very important to invoke cultural consciousness, to achieving literacy in a mono-cultural discourse community. In fact, in every discourse community, culture is all about what the interactants in the cultural community know or, their belief systems which serve as the rallying point. These allow them to operate or cooperate favourably among the individual members in the community. So, culture being a learning behaviour in an environment or community is, therefore, quite distinct from the community's biological heritage, and it is apparently full of the end-product of learning which knowledge is in most general sense of the word (Hudson 2003).

Hudson observes that 'knowledge', in that general sense, involves both 'know how' and 'know that', that is, both the ability to tie the knots and the knowledge that one pound coin buys as much as ten ten-penny coins. One attraction in taking this view is that, it is widely accepted among anthropologists, “it will allow us to compare culture with language, which we are also taking to be a kind of knowledge” (71). So, literacy is an integral part of culture, and the knowledge of the community or environment implies being literate within the community cosmology or worldview. Therefore, literacy is not only about knowing how to read and write; it is beyond that- knowing the peculiarities of the inherent cultural diversities of one's physical environment and the knowledge therein.

Therefore, the detailed understanding of the ideational and experiential consciousness, values and attitudes within the immediate standing of the individual or society, enhances literacy development, because these stimulate the knowledge embedded within the confines of the social practices existing in the said community. So, literacy means to exploit and explore through the local condition, the behavioural habit of one's immediate community, by being literally immersed in the intellectualism of the group. This intellectual awareness makes one culturally literate and also a functional member of the community.

Similarly, Smith and Dechant state that the culture in which one lives has a major determinant influence in his understanding of his reality by shaping or chiseling his intellect within his micro-cosmic world. So, they demonstrate this through an analogue where a child has lived his whole life in the city or near a super-highway, his lines of poetry or songs are bound to be influence by the metropolitan culture therein, where he is literate in:

"... let me live in my house by the side of the road and be a friend to many numerous memories of the roar of speeding vehicles and the odours of gas fumes and speed-heated fires" (30).

This analogue shows that the writer exploits his sociopragmatic competence to foreground the state of reality of environmental decay, which denies him atmospheric peace or freedom. This environmental literacy or ecoliteracy means that one is being conscious of the environmental changes, and the super-sophistication of the society.

Ameh avers that our thoughts and everyday perceptions originated from our social practice, which is a textbook demonstration of the influence of culture on the meanings which form the local contents or conditions. These help an individual to take to oral or linguistic performance. He further states that socio-cultural **context** is the absolute destination of any reader who is seriously in search of ultimate comprehension of the art of human life (166).

Many scholars are of the view that language, culture and physical surroundings are separable. Besides, they state that language with which oral performance is used as an outcome of the environment and culture "as a whole and also a vehicle by which the two are shaped and communicated" (Ameh 167). So, Goldstone maintains that culture and environment are the intrinsic features in the literacy acquisition, while language patterns provide the linguistic choice for the meaningful transmission of specific sociocultural knowledge of a given group:

The universe is ordered in accordance with the way we name it. An Eskimo would think as extremely vague if we told him it was snowing. His language provides him with a universe that encompasses dozens of snowing. In the same way we would consider (him) vague if he made an appointment with us for some time later. To the North American, time is a real commodity. He can waste time, spend time, charge for time, kill time, pass time, and be on time or in time (114).

This explains that literacy resides in the people's thought and environment which are the components of the cultural expressions and also the features of literacy acquisition. Literacy is embedded in cognitive processes or developments which is part of maturational processes.

Language and Literacy

So far we have seen that literacy definitions have been broadened to accommodate the challenges of globalization, such as the effect of new technology and information media, and also the emergence of knowledge economics. As a result, greater attention has been given to the language or languages in which literacy was learned or practiced, in the last thirty years.

Language creates in the participants the ability to think, influence or construct the

environment. According to Jiboku, it is an important means in human development and no sustainable human development can be achieved in any given society without language. So, being the instrument of communication and cultural transfer of communal knowledge or literacy, it makes interactions and co-existence possible among the interactants, which paves way for continuity of society. Through the use of language man gets equipped for optimal self-realization and self-development. It is the only communicative channel of acquiring literacy in a meaningful way. Therefore, there is a close tie among literacy, language, knowledge and development. That means that, if an individual person in a community lacks the knowledge of the social reality or social prevalence, he is therefore not literate, because he is not aware of his environment. But, if he is aware, he is literate, and for the development of that society he must express it through language means. So, language is essential for meaningful human development and literacy.

Language is critical in the development of human life at every stage, especially in position, profession and every other life endeavours which usually attracts special form and style of language or effective operation. Each linguistic community structures its language accordingly to suit its specific communicative and information needs of its users. Language is at the centre of human existence, as a result, Crystal states that languages has magical and mystical powers with which to capture the breath of human thoughts and endeavours.

Similarly, Sapir's thesis on Linguistic Relativity captures this phenomenon, stating that human person does not live alone in this objective world of reality and even in the social world of activities, rather he is deeply immersed at the mercy of a given language which serves as the means of expression and communication in his world of reality (which is his society):

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts essentially without the use of language and that language is merely incidental means of solving specific problems of communication and reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent, unconsciously built upon the language habits of the people. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality (209).

Because language is centripetal or centrifugal force, it therefore shapes and fashions our experiences, in our sociocultural and sociolinguistically objective world. On that note, Whitehead philosophises that “the souls of men are the gift from language to mankind” (41). So the gift of language is the metaphysical essence of man's consciousness of himself and his world. In essence, he tries to expound the power of language in our world, as a complex and dynamic phenomenon which helps to enhance the intellectual enlightenment of our objective world. The intellectual world of humanity which is

literacy, finds expression "as the wheel that compels our communal involvement and responsibilities. That is to say that language is at the centre of creation of communal realities and, therefore, "captures the physical and metaphorical realities of life (Onuigbo 6). He states further that physical reality is expressed usually through literal projections while spiritual is usually expressed through metaphysical phenomenon. Moreover, that language is more than a cast if broken, must reveal the beauty and riches of its content, and that cast has to be examined to understand the changing realities of life captured in language (Onuigbo 6).

Language has the capacity to construct varying degrees of realities, so if anyone is not linguistically literate, he will not be able to adapt to the sociolinguistic demands of interactions in that sociocultural group. Therefore, he will be relegated to institutional world of misfit, because he is bereft of sociosemantic realities of the group. In fact, the compelling social forces which control interactions connive to force man to accept the prevailing conventional requirements within the language (discourse) community and if any member derails, by not aligning himself along with the institutionalized Co-operative Principles of effective communication may be abandoned in the marginal position of the deviants.

Language Practices

Language practices and policies have also played important role in the development of literacy, especially within the local conditions which have helped in transmitting literacy among communities. In contrast, some believe that literacy skills are applied or used in a specific language. But, popular definitions view it as a generic set of skills that are comparable across language. Moreover, this view highlights the fact, that whether an individual acquires or practices literacy skills in major languages of the world, such as Swahili, English, Portuguese, etc it makes little or no considerable difference.

Functionally, literacy in reality is not homogenous across all languages, also the properties of different languages are equally homogenous. On that note, language scholars chose to use the concept of language development, to discuss the level and status of a language. Therefore, their interest is not whether it was written or how popular it is used (that is, how widely used) or its official or non-official status. In Africa and Asia, the majority of the active languages are spoken but not written. Surprisingly, some languages survive in written form but dead in their spoken form. Some languages are written for specific purposes, especially for religious rituals, but not for others. Literacy for life maintains that, the oral and written form of a language (e.g. Arabic) sometimes serve different purposes, so that the skills commonly used in the oral form do not necessarily provide access to the language's written form (201). So being literate is not the ability to know how to write or read, it is the ability to know the appropriate language (discourse) to use in different communicative context or domain. Literacy is

culture-specific.

Discourse and Literacy

Recently, discourse has gained interdisciplinary focus especially in the use of language for communication in context of human social need for communication. It is multifaceted in the sense that, it accounts concentrically for all the diverse meaningful details in communication which form the knowledge base of social institutional knowledge, based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen or written before and which they utilize to do things in the word (Ezefeka 5). This entire discursal construct helps the interactants to be literate enough to exchange information, express their feelings, stimulate events, facilitate aesthetics in the arts, and invent entertainment for the pleasure and so on. In addition, Johnstone describes discourse as having two pronged source of knowledge (people's general actions about language are made on the basis of the discourse they participate in) and the result of it (people applying what they have already known in creating and interpreting new discourse) (3).

Ezefeka further states that discourse is about the conventional ways we conceptualize our world, that is, how we see it, our experiences and the way we express it, within a particular social settings. So, different discourses imply different ways we represent the world which is associated with several positions assumed by the participants at the different time and place. This therefore implies that every social cultural institution has its own peculiar “ways of constructing experiences, assigning roles and relationships circulating ideologies, exercising power and generally giving expression to the meanings and value of an institution” (6). Watson and Hill affirm to this view that, institutions and social groups have specific meanings and values which they articulate in language, through objective ways. So, discourse gives expression to the meaning and values of a particular institution (81).

Beyond that, according to Watson and Hill, discourse describes, defines and delimits that which is possible to say and that which is not possible to say and also, what is possible to do and what is not possible to do. These are applicable with regards to the areas of concern of that institution, either marginally or centrally. Discourse, therefore, provides a possible set of statement generated from a particular area. In addition, it helps to organize, form and give the appropriate framework on how a topic, object, process is to be discussed, “in that, it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual action” (81). In all, life is a constant flow of discourse and language functions in one of the many contexts that together form a culture. But most importantly, it is language that gives expression to that culture.

Data and Methodology

This paper is mainly a descriptive study which consists of fifty proverbs, collected from the books of three Nigerian writers, namely, Professor F.B.O. Akporobaro (*Introduction to Africa Oral Literature*), Professor J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada (*The Igbo Proverbs: A study of its Context, Performance and Functions*) and Professor Ikenga Metuh (*African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*). In these texts, there are over three hundred rich proverbs which cut across many ethnic groups in Nigeria, even Africa. The paper chose these proverbs to highlight the inherent sociocultural literacy and intellectualism found in our different traditional contexts and rhetoric. The proverbs were randomly selected from those ethnic groups. The selected proverbs were subjected to socio-semantic analysis from the standpoint of socio-pragmatic theory.

Theoretic Function

Culture and context are the springboard of the socio pragmatic model. It is a branch of pragmatics that studies culture-specific phenomena. It stimulates the language user's intellect unconsciously to decode the culture-specific background of learning, which involves social or sociolinguistic dimensions, such as the rules of speaking, social practice, etc. Socio-pragmatic skills equip the interactants with linguistic competence and communicative competence by exposing them to the social variable use of pragmatic principles and socio-pragmatic elements, like proverbs, idiom, traditions, etc. (Smith, 11-20; Gunduz, 132). It is the social use of language that conditions the language users to draw their language repertoire from the social norms and situation. Therefore, it captures the social cognition of language by paying conscious attention to the littlest detail of the functions and forms of language, through the observation of the social and cultural conventions (Ekwelibe 88-89). These conventions are what drive the interactants to use language appropriately and politely in a culture-specific discourse. It is clear that socio pragmatics adopts Co-operative Principle and the Politeness Principle which operate variably in different cultures or language (discourse) communities in different social situations. So, different social groupings interpret their word differently, this is an indication that "pragmatic descriptions ultimately have to be specific social condition. In other words sociopragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics" (Leech 11). Similarly, Adetugbo affirms thus:

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

humbly (171).

Analysis and Discussion

An anthology of the proverbs of a given social group is, in essence, the ethnography of the group of which if systematized, it can create a penetrating clear picture of the group's life style, its philosophy (that is, its *cosmogonic* consciousness), its criticism of life, moral truths and social values. The literacy of the people, such as wit, genius and spirit of a people are engraved in their proverbs. *Agbogbo jiri aka ya kebe onwe di na eji abali ebe akwa* (**Igbo Proverb**). (A woman who singlehandedly gives herself out in marriage cries in the night).

This proverb discourages individualism, as one is bound to regret every action he takes, which is against the cultural rules or norms. It is an un-cultural practice to do things alone in Igbo society. Everybody is a unit of a social group therefore one should learn to be part of the group, and do things accordingly. *Obo imien enegbere* (**Benin Proverb**). (A physician hardly perceives his own ailment)

It calls to mind that one does not see oneself and therefore his mirror is another. So, it implicates that we should be conscious of what we do at all times, and learn to know the social conventions which guide the social practice and knowledge. Always learn from others, because learning is in state of perpetuity. In fact, what guides an individual in any sociocultural context is the philosophy of his immediate social environment.

No gha fian omwan onisan re, elele ghe isan o. (**Benin Proverbs**)

(He who would bite at the buttocks of another person, would do so even at the risk of excrement.)

Agha ye vbane ghe ya toto omwan toloe, O ghi bolo.

(If one scratches the body the way it itches, there will be sore).

Emwen ma ke unun re, o imwen.

(A word already uttered cannot be withdrawn.)

Ovbie ne aikan ven, ei ka ven onwan.

(What is good for the goose is good for the gander.)

(Omo-Ojug & Uhunmangbo, 151-152).

We are aware that proverbs are an integral part of the ethnography of any sociocultural group therefore, discussing any ethnic group, we should be guided on the contextual and institutional setting of the group. The import of these proverbs above encapsulates direct attack on the individual person being directed to. The attacker or the user employs rhetorical strategy to drive his perceived attack at his determined target, no matter the implication. However, this rhetorical strategy helps the user to still highlight his

extreme reaction to the situation, which engenders a negative attribute. The user further admonished the hearer, in the next proverbs, by advising him to be cautious about the way he craves for everything, thus, there is a limit to everything. Or else, he will learn by falling into a deep ditch.

Okwu na atota okwu. (**Igbo Proverbs**)
(A speech act gives rise to another speech act)

Okwu na-aka olu e si aka ya.
(A speech topic reveals how it is to be discussed.)

E Okwu e mee okwu.
(Discourse is made out of discourse)

These proverbs provide the speech or verbal cue that gives rise to the structural pattern of the discourse, the images they evoked during the process of communication and/or the surrounding logic of the argument. However, these verbal prompts (cues) are relatively determinate as a result of the fact that they are often attached to the universalized reflections and assumptions the users usually have, because of their inherent sociocultural and communicative competence. These speech cues found in these proverbs, either verbal or non-verbal, emanate from a convergence of physiological, cultural, social, psychological and processual contemplation.

Igbo Proverbs

Onyekwe chi ye ekwe
(When a man says yes, his 'chi' will also yes)

Oka onyeka chi ya
(Who is stronger than a person, is stronger than his (God) 'chi'.)

Ebe onye dara ka 'chi' ya kwaturu ya.
(Where a man falls, there his 'chi' pushed him down)

In Igbo sociogeographical and sociocultural experiences, 'chi' is referred to as personal god or destiny, sometimes, Supreme Being. It is believed that Chukwu (chi-ukwu), that is, the Supreme Being allocates "chi" the destiny or personal god, which may be seen as an angel in Christendom, to every person. God does this at the moment of conception, He does it as an emanation of himself. This personal god serves as guardian angel to the individual person in whom he was assigned to. So, the designation of 'personal god' to this being, that is God, does not adequately captures its essence (Metuh, 27). Most importantly, these proverbs implicate progressiveness that a man's life is

determined by his willingness to control his destiny, rather than being fatalistic to life. Moreover, there is possibility too that man can influence any condition for better, if he properly applies common sense, self-discipline and adherence to natural wisdom handed down by our forebears, through the proverbs as the living wisdom of the group. More so, people fail not only because of cultural fatalism and also superstition but they are bereft of natural wisdom as a result of giving deaf ear to the wisdom and advice of the old (Akporobaro, 82-83).

Igbo Proverbs

Ma afo ime enweghi ike ime ikpu ihe, ya ewia ya aji

(If a pregnancy can do nothing to the vagina wound it can at least wear off its hair).

Ike abughi ihe, kama o na aka efe.

(The buttocks are nothing but they tear shorts).

The use of obscene proverbs is subject to both appropriateness and the age of the user. Because certain proverbs are used to mediate, to realize or recognize the presence of certain audience. But quite differently, a young user of proverbs should be cautious in the choice of proverbs before an elderly audience, before he would be accused of being vulgar despite being rhetorical and eloquent. So, these kinds of proverbs are not supposed to be used by the young performer, because he would likely be accused of being profane or dirty in his use of proverbs, “for after all elders are the custodians of communal morality” (NwachukwuAgbada, 74-75).

Hausa Proverbs (in English)

God does not create the expert in dewing grains.

The plant which God favours will grow even in the absence of rain.

Going slowly does not prevent arrival.

Every glad night has its sign.

A hare is not caught by sitting down.

These proverbs depict a wide range of *cosmological* realities of Hausa worldviews. They are topical areas of human life which represent meta-organized society. The aspect of religion spirit in these proverbs reflects the philosophic observance of the natural lives of Hausa people. They also portray everyday truths, which display amazing themes, such as moral perspicuity, consciousness of their existence.

Yoruba Proverbs (In English)

Ashes always fly back in the face of him that throws them.

We do not carry a king's load and perspire.

The belly is the foremost of the gods.

He who has patience has all things.

He who is complete in all the members of his body, cannot appreciate the value of that body.

Yoruba Proverbs have great rhetorical devices which help in shaping their moral consciousness, belief system and opinions. As one experiences new communities, he equally experiences new conception, a startling array of proverbial imagery and philosophic views of the nature of man, the world of nature and the modes of human conduct" (Akporobaro,108). These proverbs provide moralistic and philosophic formulations of man's objective world of realities, by reflecting most times the sociocultural and socio-geographical conception of Yoruba, such as folklore, religions belief (divinity), forms of natural life, social institutions, etc. They are oral custodians of Yoruba religious beliefs, rich culture and moral wisdom, which are reflective of their general imaginative creativity and traditional wisdom.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the need for local conditions in literacy acquisition, observing that literacy is beyond reading and writing. Therefore, to be literate one has to be schooled in the sociocultural nuances of one's socio-geographical milieu. He must therefore learn the traditional or natural wisdom of his social grouping to operate efficiently and effectively according to the norms, conventions, social practices, etc. A sociopragmatic theory was used to capture the implicature of the culture- specific experiences to interpret the sociosemantic reality of the individual or the group. To conceptualize these experiences, realities and observations, Nigerian proverbs were used as an inventory of "knowledge, social practice, existential truths, intuitions, natural wisdom and genres of traditional society". So, the knowledge of proverbs enables the performer to recover his original creativity, spontaneity and wholeness of perception. The performer therefore forages into a world that precedes him in proverbialisation (Udoiem 135). In the discussion, proverbs provide cognitive dimension by being educative in function, thus formulating intellectual and cognitive exercise. In fact, proverb is an epistemic phenomenon which engages intellectual synthesis and meanings, to produce a functional understanding or a conscious comprehension of context of situation of events, in microscopic world.

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