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Ibibio Proverbs: A Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

“Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”.

Proverbs are sayings in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt . . . They are short statements that portray the intellectual and communicative contents among the speakers in a speech community. These short, witty sayings are uttered in particular patterns and style. The article has shown the use of repetition, metaphor and juxtaposition of two different ideas/concepts to illustrate life among the Ibibio people. In addition, it has illustrated the connotative use of language.

Introduction

Style has different meanings to different individuals. It can be termed as the choices a speaker or writer makes from among the phonological, grammatical and lexical resources of his language. Crystal (1974: 66) defines stylistics as:

The application of linguistic techniques to the study of particular kinds of LANGUAGE current within a given speech community, such as the language of science, of law, of religion, of debate, or of literature or the

language of different social classes.

**In addition, Crystal (1993: 332) asserts that stylistics is
A branch of linguistics which
studies the features of
SITUATIONALLY distinctive uses of
LANGUAGE, and tries to establish
principles capable of accounting
for the particular choices made by
individual and social groups in their use
of language**

The keyword in the above quotations is language. It is therefore, pertinent to give a few definitions of language. Language has been defined in different ways by different scholars. It "is a structured system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which members of a speech community communicate". Furthermore, language is defined "as code whereby ideas about the world are represented through a conventional system of arbitrary signals for communication".

From these definitions, both of them agree on the structural pattern of language, as a means of communication not just mere phatic communication but as a means of illustrating ideas about the world. Proverbs are constructed through the use of language and the essence of the proverb is to explore as well as give meaning to the culture of the people is whose language, the proverb is asserted. This paper aims at showing the style in Ibibio proverbs. Language is the cultural embodiment of a particular group where that language is used to portray the ideas, emotions, desires and thought patterns of the people.

The art of using proverbs in speech is the characteristic of the African people and the Ibibios are no exception to this art. As observed by Ogbulogo (2002:112)

... proverbs provide a store house
of the people's beliefs, attitudes,
wisdom and reactions to a variety
of situations.

What is a proverb? Finnegan (1976:393) defines proverb thus:
a saying in more or less fixed,
form marked by shortness,

sense, and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it.

In addition, Ogbulogo (2002:110) who quotes Yusuf (1999) states that proverbs may be regarded on a universal bases as short, repeated, witty statements based on experience and which have social functions.

Based on the foregoing, proverbs have many characteristics and one of such characteristics is its acceptance within the locale in which it was created. The acceptance of any proverb is based not only on the use of the indigenous language but also on the critical evaluation by the people of that speech community. The critical evaluation is to test the suitability of that proverb within that environment. The suitability is shown in the understanding between the speaker and the hearer who appreciate not only the surface but the deeper meaning of the proverb. Ifemesia (1982:36) posits that the use of indigenous languages provide the community

a private world into which its members could withdraw, as occasion demands, to discuss matters. . . that affect them intimately as a people without, so to speak, being overheard by the other communities

From the above quotation the style of the language of proverb calls for a knowledge of the language of the people for one to interpret the proverb. Furthermore, it entails giving the different shades of meaning as well as the particular meaning for a particular situation. In agreement with Ifemesia, the "local languages are the media in which the majority of their [our] speakers still think".

The proverb is an art of words. The choice of words is used for both intellectual and emotional effects. The ability to choose words correctly is central to this art-proverb. The choice of words does not only show the wisdom of the speaker but also the rootedness of the speaker within that speech community. Like Achebe rightly states; "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten." It is relevant to analyse the

language of proverbs in order to appreciate the intellectual content in them

Proverbs among the Ibibios are classified into various forms. For instance, the one – sentence proverb and the proverb riddle. In the one – sentence proverb, the meaning is realized as soon as one says the proverb.

“Ówó òdó ìmô ódó úwéné”

This proverb expresses the meaning “no condition is permanent” whereas in the proverb – riddle, there are two parts to it. The first part starts a statement or makes a comment while the second part completes it. The deeper meaning of the proverb is realized only when the second part is uttered for example.

“ Òdùòk ntòñ ké ntóñ ákèèné
Àsuà éyin òwó iniéeghe eké ómò”

With this example, the meaning cannot be realized with saying only the first part of this proverb. Only a native speaker of Ibibio can understand the proverb as he/she completes the second part of this proverb. (More on this proverb later).

The study of the Ibibio proverb shows the virility and the richness of Ibibio language in its oral tradition. This statement agrees with Nwabara (1982: 62) that

The virility of the language is evidenced in PROVERBS, fables music, etc all of which build up the oral tradition.

Proverbs and their styles

Some Ibibio proverbs will be looked at, analysed and the style elicited.

Ówó òdó ìmô ódó úwéné.

When translated; this proverb in its prime translation means ‘No condition is permanent’. This proverb uses imagery which appeals to our different senses. It is the juxtaposition of ‘richness’ and ‘poverty’ as found in the words ‘ìmô’ – ‘rich’ and ‘úwéné’ ‘poverty’. The use of a series of high tone on *uwene* is for emphasis. The high tone raises the voice of the speaker as the contrast is shown. This pattern of juxtaposition shows the

concept of the two ideas, "richness and poverty" being the two extremes which exist in life. The language mirrors the different stages of life as non-permanent. The contradictory perspective comes up to make man reflect on his life style. The language or style also helps to illustrate the connotative rather than the denotative aspect of language.

Étó ídáhá ikpòñ íkàp-pá ákâi. With the prime level translation it means "No man is an island." This proverb uses language to explore the African poetic landscape with its flora and fauna. This is achieved through the use of words like 'étó' – tree and 'ákái' - forest. In interpreting this proverb, the image of the tree becomes man and this proverb brings to mind the concept of togetherness. As this proverb portends, it works on the intellectual and emotional sensitivity of man. The imagery is based on not only the nuclear family but on the extended family system which is the core of existence within the African society.

Ékóod eyín 'úkpôn Ékpè' èkà ènèm ésîd.

'If a child is called, "soul of a lion" the mother is happy. The imagery portrays strength and bravery in the choice of the word - 'Ékpè' – Lion. Metaphorically, the child is shown as reflecting the 'power' which a lion has and can make use of at any time. There is the use of alliteration through the repetition of /e/ in the words – 'ekood, èkpè, èkà, ènèm and ésîd. There is the use of the double vowel sound – 'oo' in 'èkóod' – 'to call' which lengthens the sound, as well as emphasize the act of calling. The creator has made use of three types of tones to illustrate his concept of strength and bravery. This is seen in the use of the high, low and the high/low tones as depicted in the proverb. Each type of tone shows the emphasis or the mellow aspect of the sounds.

Ówó òdó òkó ódó úsion.

The reference to African fauna is a common feature and it pertains to the creative formula which the Ibibio language uses in creating proverbs. This proverb explains through the mental-picture the cyclic process of life. This pattern is seen in how man like the earthen pot is moulded through the use of clay and like the pieces of pot, man on death will return to earth where he was created from. The use of series of high high tones on the words 'owo' 'man' and 'usion' 'earthen pot' illustrate the emphasis. This proverb also recalls the reinforcement and rebirth imagery in life. The

element of continuity is subtly implied. The creator uses assonance and onomatopoeia in which the word resembles or suggest the object as shown in the word union uwem odo ntuhube ubaha usen.

This proverb shows the illusive nature of life. It illustrates the transience of life. The imagery is on 'uwem' 'life'. Which is like morning dew. Like the dew, it is there and in a twinkle of an eye, it is no more. There is a series of low tones on 'ntuhube' – 'dew'. There is the use of /u/ in the words 'uwem', 'ubaha' and 'usen'. This repetition of phonological sound /u/ illustrates the use of alliteration.

'Ódó èdùè ukôd ákpá itón'

Be watchful lest you fall. This proverb brings language into the province of symbolism. The symbolism is that of forewarning. The forewarning calls for carefulness otherwise death will be the end-result. Man has to be cautious in whatever he does. It illustrate the imagery of harmony, peace, order, happiness and progress in the community.

'Nkpó amaanam enyin anam iwo'

This proverb calls for sympathy between the members of the community. There is the use of allusion in the images. The images illustrate suffering which affects all human beings. This proverb through the economy of language can be contracted into 'Nkponam isuokke owó'. The contracted form shows how 'sorrow' like the sun, shines on both the rich and the poor.

The Proverb - Riddle

Ófíon / ké enyoñ / ndèdèñ / ké ísòñ
Ówó / ósùk uma/ èdìdòk ké ínua.

This proverb with its double-line creation shows the rhythm embedded in the proverb. There is the linear ordering in the use of words. It also applies the paradigmatic dimension. This pattern is shown in the division of the proverb and the response into segments. The proverb illustrates the image of human nature in which man pretends to like his fellow man, yet goes about gossiping about his so-called loved one. The refrain in this proverb is a structural part of the proverb and it affects the

totality of this creation. This type of proverb calls for a high level power of reasoning to get the underlying meaning.

There is the use of rhythm in this proverb. This style focuses attention on the keywords on which the proverb hinges. The words are 'ófión' – moon and 'ówó' – man; with a series of high high tones. This set of high tones is followed by a series of low tones in the following words - úma - 'love', ndèdèn – 'coolness', èdídòk – 'gossip'. The two types of tones show the contrast of love and hate being the core part of man's existence on earth.

Òduòk / ntòn / ké ntóń / akeené
Àsua / eyìn'òwò / íníeeghé / ómò.

The arrangement of this proverb vividly illustrates the rhythmic effect in this proverb. It portrays how the act of hate can also result in hate from other people. The tone plays a vital role here to bring out the rhythm. The Ibibio language like most African languages thrives on tones. Furthermore, tone illustrates the quality of sound or vocal inflection. The modulation of one's voice when pronouncing the words has its peculiar effect. In effect, the use of voice, pitch and tonal contrast helps to identify the ideas.

The repetition of the word /nton/ - 'ash' in the first line shows the major idea as it emphasizes the idea in the proverb. It catches the attention of the audience and sets the proverb in its right perspective. Repetition has been described as the 'core' of proverb. The verbal repetition is a stylistic and a fundamental grammatical form in proverb creation.

Evidently, repetition is a basic and formal feature of the oral style to which the proverb belongs as an aspect of oral literature. At times, only the second sentence is used as the proverb. In this case this is a periodic sentence which creates suspense and it is applicable to the last two proverbs just discussed.

òbłk mbłk ídíok eyin ufok obłk idem.

This proverb illustrates an aspect of human weakness. Through the repetition of obłk, - 'complain', it tells the story of how the master who complains about his/her house-help is also telling a story about himself/herself. The language employed here is that of indirection.

There is the use of alliteration through the repetition of the following vowel sounds /i, ɛ, o/. This proverb shows the hum of words on which the structure and meaning are built. The use of word play is found in this proverb with the use of low-low in 'obłk' on the two vowel sounds initially and the tones change to high – high / low - obłk in the same word. This

pattern reflects an imperfect word play.

Conclusion

In sum, proverbs are a compendium of sayings in which people of maturity and experience express themselves in community affairs. In essence, proverb which is an aspect of poetry "is a rhythmical form of words which expresses imaginative, intellectual experience of the creator, and expresses in a way that it creates a similar experience in the mind of the reader or listener".

There is the effective use of stylistic and rhetorical figures of speech. This is shown in the noble diction and phrasing which is found in the skillful use of imagery and other figures of speech. The result is that it yields the most effective arrangement of words. The immediate medium of proverb is rhythm alone and the arrangement of the rhythm represents man's characters, feelings and actions. The language of proverb is enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to its topic.

A study of the style in Ibibio proverbs brings to bear on the words such categories as imagery, similes, metaphor and alliteration among others. This study enables a non-indigene to appreciate Ibibio proverbs. It also provides an insight into the life style of the Ibibios.

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