

THE PRAGMATICS OF CHILDREN'S REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED YORUBA PROVERBS

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Abstract

The study primarily investigates children's representation in Yoruba proverbs, verbal forms of handed-down traditions known for their archetypal knowledge accumulated by people. How children are portrayed in this discourse is significant to the situational usage of proverbs for character molding and cultural value sustainer in any society: an area less explored by scholars. Purposively, fifty English medium children-related Yoruba proverbs were selected from the corpus of Nigerian proverbs with Mey's Pragmeme adopted to track children's representation in the discourse. The study reveals that children are represented as a prototype of homes, malleable, sustainers, innocent and delinquent. These are framed within contexts of societal collectivism and parenting; with inference, reference, metaphor and voice as contextual features. These project pragmatic functions of behaviour-regulating and responsibility-motivating practs. Largely, the foregoing cumulatively portrays children as heirs whose upbringing rests on homes and society at large. The study therefore concludes that the awareness of the above, expectedly, should aid appropriate usage of proverbs sine-qua-non to the proper indoctrination of children into adulthood for sustaining cherished cultural values, shape their worldview and enhance a sanitized society.

Keywords: Yoruba proverbs, Children's representation, Pragmeme, Indoctrination and Cultural values

Introduction

Proverbs are largely forms of oral literature significant for routine usage reflecting specific people's worldview. They are a representational medium that often reveal specific cultural traditions pointing to customs and belief system of a group of people or speech community. Nigerian proverbs for

instance depict different cultural traditions delineated on the linguistic strands of the people. This study specifically investigates how children are portrayed in Yoruba proverbs, which is significant to the way they are treated, cared for and trained for cultural sustainability, value enhancement and the nation's socio-cultural development. Particularly, this is worthy of investigation because of the continuous outcry over the moral decadence in the Nigerian contemporary society.

Proverbs are commonly defined as memorable saying embodying some cultural facts of people. They metaphorically express a deep, well known archetypal knowledge accumulated by a nation and mankind in the process of exploring the universe and realities around us as humans (Rusieshvili, 2005). Proverbs are central to cultural values because they have the capacity to shape people's worldview and that is why their application largely depends on the situation at hand (Olasupo, Olugbemi and Adeniran, 2012). Proverbs serve as charters of social and ethical norms in human interactions, extol what the society considers to be virtues, and condemn anti-social patterns of behaviour (Fasiku, 2006 and Hayran, 2017). In other words, proverbs capture specific cultural traditions, stereotypes and customs reflecting a society's socio-cultural expectations. In this way, they configure values regulating family life, child-rearing, individual or group interpersonal relationships and behaviours.

Owomoyela (2012) argues that proverbs among Yoruba people are relics, preserved and transmitted over generations. Children are unarguably relevant in the transmission of proverbial expressions across all cultures, which of course Yoruba is no exception. Therefore, how children are portrayed in Yoruba proverbs is significant because such would serve as model towards achieving the expected core values in any society.

Other studies on oral traditions, like proverbs, and children have a similar view that cultural traditions are significant to inculcating and upbringing of children in cultural values. For example, Nwakaego (2016) examines oral literature as a spring-board for value inculcation to children. The study supports the return to cultural tradition which people of the past used in entertaining and educating children and youths as a way of curbing immoral behaviour in Nigeria. In the same vein, Akporobaro (2004) observes that proverbs are instruments for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of people from one generation to another.

On how to raise children in the family front through proverbs, Rusieshvili-Cartledge and Gozpinar (2014) carry out a similar study on how proverbs are

connected to the process of child-raising in Turkish and Georgian languages and cultures. In line with the present work, the study highlights how children are represented by showcasing the status of children in the family, the status of parents in the life of the children and values connected to the family concepts. The current study differs from the foregoing because it investigates how children are projected in the selected proverbs which determine people's perspective about them and how they should be trained in contemporary Nigerian society.

Theoretical framework

The study benefits significantly from the theoretical underpinnings of Mey's pragmatic act theory. Mey's pragmatic act theory accounts for the contextual analysis and pragmatic function inherent in the proverbial discourse. Mey (2001:43) argues that "context is more than just reference. Context is action. Context is about understanding what things are for; it is also what gives our utterances their true pragmatic meaning and allows them to be counted as true pragmatic acts". There are two parts to Mey's theory of a pragmeme: the activity and the textual parts as schematically presented below.

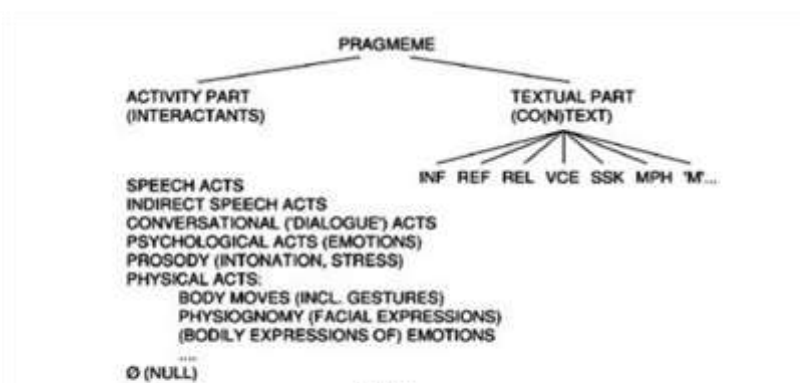


Figure 1: Mey Pragmatic Acts Model (2001:222)

It is deducible from the schema above that the activity part overlays speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational ('dialogue') acts, psychological acts, prosodic acts and physical acts. The textual part on the other hand entails the context elements. These are: INF which stands for 'inference'; REF represents 'reference', REL, refers to 'relevance'; VCE points to 'voice'; while SSK and MPH imply 'shared situation knowledge' and 'metaphor' respectively. The M is for 'metapragmatic joker'.

The hybrid of the activity and textual parts produces a *pract* or an *allopract* which is an instantiation of a pragmatic act. “Every *pract* is at the same time an *allopract*...” (Mey, 2001:221). Capone (2005) argues that understanding *pragmeme* is succinct on the “societal dimension of utterance interpretation”. He claims that utterance interpretation goes beyond the meaning of the literal context but onto how society construe such utterance in a generalized situation that is believed to be known or understood to the participants in the on-going interaction. He emphasises at the way context serves to transform meaning and not just to add further layers of meaning to utterance interpretation.

“In short, there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts, or instantiated pragmatic acts”. A pragmatic act therefore “is an instance of adapting oneself to a context, as well as adapting the context to oneself” (2001:217,218). He sees the interpretation of speech acts an individual and that of pragmatic acts as societal. He says that “a fortiori, there are, strictly speaking, no such ‘things’ as speech acts per se, only acts of speech in a situation (Mey, 2006).”

Capone’s opinion on the notion of *pragmeme* as proposed by Mey (2001) is that utterance meaning carries or bears a literal meaning (traditional view) which cannot be discarded. He further observes through vivid examples that meaning can be got in addition to the literal through the context or situation in which such utterances are made. The theory is therefore instrumental to investigate pragmatic functions of the selected proverbs thereby showcasing how children are represented in the discourse as Nigerian socio-cultural interpretations.

Methodology

Fifty (50) children-related Yoruba proverbs were selected from the corpus of Nigerian proverbs. Proverbs that contain relevant words like "child, children, son, daughter, childhood, mother, father, home" were drawn from library archives and Owomoyela’s (2005) corpus of Yoruba Proverbs. These lexemes configure situations where children-related proverbs are mostly used and individuals are framed. The data were grouped using the thematic discourse model to unpack children’s representation in the discourse. The descriptive research design was adopted in this study as the selected data were subjected to discourse-pragmatic analysis. Through the instrumentation of pragmatic act theory, the discourse forms of children representation were identified as well as the contextual configuration and projected pragmatic functions of the selected data.

Data analysis and findings

The analysis captures two levels, children's representation in Yoruba proverbs and pragmatic functions of the sampled proverbs. These are analysed in turn.

Children's representation in Yoruba proverbs

Data reveal that children are represented as prototype of homes, malleable, sustainers within the context of societal collectivism; innocent and delinquent configured in the context of parenting. The context of societal collectivism relates to the state of African communal life in the responsibility of training a child. Yoruba culture believes that a child's upbringing is everybody's collective responsibility not exclusively of his parents. This contextual frame aids our understanding of constructions of children as prototypes of homes and malleable. Expectedly, children's training is done in bit and pieces through repeated instructions, condemnation, correction, exemplary, and others by every individual who comes in contact with them through the use of proverbs. Context of parenting covers the duty of rearing of children by providing for the proper guidance, deserved love and other expected responsibilities until they are old enough to care for themselves. It is age-dependent that children rely heavily on their parents to be looked after, attended to, provided for, and supported (Olajimbiti, 2017). This context provides an understanding of how to perform parenting roles on children that have been constructed as innocent and delinquent for cultural sustainability and socio-cultural development.

Let us now consider the different representations of children in the selected data.

Children as prototype of homes

Children are constructed as the prototype of homes in Yoruba proverbs. The prototype of homes relates to how children are products of their background. They are portrayed as individuals that are shaped in character, actions, words, by whatever their parents, guardians or caregivers have put in them. In a relative term, children reflect their parents and their environment. Excerpt 1 exemplifies this.

Excerpt 1

Ilé l'omọ tí ñ k'ẹ̀şọ́ r'òde

(A child exhibits what he copies from home)

The excerpt above underscores the psychologists' view that the mind of a child is like a tabula rasa (blank slate) that the society writes (Duschinsky, 2012). A child is what the society made him including his identity, ideology, likes and

dislikes and possibly character traits. The home (**Ilé**) here represents both the immediate and larger environment of a child. Children are constructed as prototypes of their homes because they learn whatever they exhibit from what they see or hear from their environment. If this is true by extension, a child represents his parents, family, community, and nation. Inferentially, the proverb accentuates the view that children are socially constructed as home prototypes. Prominent in the Yoruba traditional society is the aphorism that charity begins at home, which implies that habits are formed at home. It suggests why high value is attached to family names thereby making parents conscious of moulding the character of their children within the context of parenting. Parents in traditional society arguably believe that children should be well trained before going into the larger society to represent them.

Children as malleable

Children are also socially constructed in this culture as malleable, which describes the flexible nature of children, how they can be easily influenced and controlled by adults. It is age-dependent for children to exhibit this trait relative to older people in society. This is exemplified below:

Excerpt 2

Ọmọdẹ kii gbọn ju bí a ẹ kọ ọ lọ.

(A child is what you put into him.)

Sequel to the notion of children as home prototypes, (2) corroborates the idea that a child only becomes whatever parents, a family, school, immediate and larger society have trained him to be. The understanding of children's flexible nature is a pointer for adults around them to be conscious of what they put in them, in line with the socio-cultural values and expectations of the society. The nub of the proverb within the context of parenting implicates that, in a scaffolding manner, the Yoruba culture encourages parents to train their children with both linguistic and extra-linguistic codes. This is particularly noticeable in the use of facial expressions, genuflecting, gesticulating, and meta-pragmatic joking means. Children are progressively introduced to these codes for many communicative and training purposes. This proverb enunciates the idea that a child understands a coded speech because of the previous instructions he has been given. By implication a child is not at fault if he does not understand a code; it only implies that he has not been so carefully trained. Contextually, the proverb constructs children as the prototype of instructions they are given.

Children as sustainers

The sampled data represent children as sustainers of family and societal values. In the African context and specifically in Yoruba culture, children are believed to be good or better substitutes to their parents and pillars to uphold not just the family culture or belief but also the cherished name in the society. This construction positions children in this culture as the hope and future to ensure the continuity of a community within the context of societal collectivism.

Excerpt 3

Òkú ọlọmọ kǐ sùn/Baba kú, baba kù.

(A person who bears children lives on.)

Literarily, this proverb indicates that children are constructed as replica of their parents such that if their parents die, they (children) have been trained to successfully succeed them not solely in the home front but in society at large. Contextually, children are portrayed as upholders of belief systems, legacy they must have inherited from their parents. By implications, this proverb lends credence to the fact that children are constructed as a symbol of continuity in Yoruba culture, continuity of family beliefs as value is hinged on children as heir apparent. Largely, they are portrayed as upholders of the cultural beliefs; being reason everyone must be involved in their upbringing.

Children as innocent

Yoruba proverbs represent children as innocent in the way they show immaturity, inexperience and ignorant qualities and the unpalatable consequences tailgating such juvenile actions. The naïve nature of an individual that shows them as inexperienced in the way they act or handle important matters of life is described as innocence unlike adults.

Excerpt 4

B'ọmọdé bá l'áşọ bi àgbà, kò lè l'ákísà bi àgbà.

(A child who boasts of material possession cannot equate that with the knowledge of an elder)

The foregoing configures children as inexperience, depicting that they have little knowledge which is age-dependent. The culture presumes that if children are exposed to many new things and ideas, they are still limited when compared to the adult because they have a serious deficiency of practical wisdom to engage in critical thinking. The proverb contextually underscores the fact that experience is a product of many exposures. The metaphoric

expression “material possession” connotatively means fashionables, modern knowledge, gadgets, and whatever children could display that seems to make them better than an adult. Conversely, the knowledge of an elder contextually refers to accumulation of experiences that brand an individual, mostly adult, an experienced. The culture portrays the adult as the residue of wisdom and children as individuals, no matter how precocious, that cannot ever outclass adults when it comes to experience, because knowledge in this sense is experiential.

Children as delinquent

Representing children as delinquent depicts them as individuals who are liable to put up unacceptable behaviour in the society such as repeatedly committing minor crimes that contravene the laydown rules. This form of representation depicts children as individuals to be consistently checked by adults when they exhibit this trait to curb their excesses.

Excerpt 5

Ọmọ t’ó ní iyá òun kò ní sùn, òun náà ò ní f’ojú ba oorun.

(A child who prevents his mother from having a sleep will equally lack peace of mind)

The foregoing reflects children’s delinquent acts which they exhibit in their relationship with their parents (mother) which could be in form of trouble. Troublesomeness could make a child deny his mother sleep. The culture believes that a delinquent child is only condoned by the mother. This aligns with the saying that a good child is of the father while the bad one belongs to the mother.

Pragmatic Functions of the sampled proverbs in relation to children

Two pragmatic functions identified here are behaviour-regulating and responsibility-motivating practs. These are analysed in turns.

Behaviour-regulating practs

This refers to the linguistic architecture that guides children’s misbehavior, given that language is a vital medium for character moulding. The strategic use of language in this direction as enshrined in the sampled data manifests in the form of warning and encouraging practs.

Warning pract

This captures the use of language which echoes a certain frame of understanding that there is a possible danger or unpleasant thing that might happen if a particular action is taken. Excerpt 6 below exemplifies this.

Excerpt 6

Ọmọ tí kò ní iyá; kùí gbé'gbò ẹ̀yí.

(A child who has no mother should know his limit)

(6) culturally connotes that a child with a humble background should thread gently. Ideologically, a mother in Yoruba context is seen as a backup and a priceless treasure (*iyá ni wura*) that every child needs to survive. Therefore, such understanding configures the mind of every child to be well behaved by regulating their actions, “will not have scars”, given their humble backgrounds, “has no mother”. Inferentially, the consequence of not heeding this warning is great in that the child would be helpless and suffer severely. In sum, Yoruba proverbs warn and regulate children's behaviours.

Encouraging pract

Encouraging act reflects the strategic use of language which stimulates an individual into actions or behaviours that are not only socially acceptable but rewarding also. In this way, the sampled culture regulates children's behaviours. The encouraging pract is exemplified below.

Excerpt 7

B'ọmọdẹ bá m' ọwọ wẹ, á bá àgbà jẹun.

(A child who washes his hands clean would dine with the elder)

The awareness that the good behaviour of a child would afford him a respectable position in society is enough to inspire a child to be well behaved. Washing of hands in this context depicts cultured behaviour and smartness of a child which will make him qualified to eat and dine with respectable people in the society. Therefore, Yoruba culture through proverbs encourages children to be of good morals.

Responsibility-motivating pract

Utterances evoking or constantly reminding a child of his or her responsibilities to his or her parents and the society at large are described as responsibility-motivating pract.

Excerpt 8

Tí òkété bá d'àgbà tán, ọmú ọmọ rẹ l'ó máa ń mu.

(A child well nurtured by his parents turns out to be their provider at old age)

Excerpt 8 above indicates that through proverbs children are advised to take care of their parents and that their intellectual capacity is needed to make the society better. The expression “well nurtured” summarises the parental responsibilities to their children when they (parents) are still agile. The contextual element here is the societal voice which echoes responsibility to the hearings of children as they grow up. The proverb, therefore, encourages a child who must have enjoyed good parental responsibilities to reciprocate such to his parents when they lose their agility. By implication, the proverb configures the mind of young children to be prepared of reciprocating good gestures such as responsibilities to the deserving. Relatedly, Yoruba proverbs motivate children to be aware of the significant responsibilities they have to their parents and their communities.

Conclusion

Thus far, this study has unpacked children's representation in Yoruba proverbs as prototype of homes, malleable, sustainers, innocence and delinquent. These are framed within contexts of societal collectivism, parenting. Largely, the foregoing cumulatively portrays children as heirs whose upbringing rests on homes and society at large. Consequently, the Yoruba culture through the sampled data pragmatically functions as behaviour-regulating and responsibility-motivating processes of transiting children to adulthood. The study, therefore, concludes that the awareness of the above, expectedly, should aid appropriate usage of proverbs sine-qua-non to the proper indoctrination of children into adulthood for sustaining cherished cultural values and morals, shape their worldview and enhance a sanitized society.

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