



Figurative Expressions, a Spice of Literary Creativity: Echoes From Nigerian Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

There is no gainsaying the fact that figurative expressions are important in creative works of art. It is little wonder that literary writers employ these very significant expressions to articulate their ideas in special ways to give particular emphasis or sentiments which they use to communicate so as to beautify and spice up a piece of literary work such as poetry and proverbs. In Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, these figures occupy a very prominent position in proverbs. They carry out functions that make the proverbs what they are, that is spicy and metaphorical. Figurative language is employed by both creative writers and proverb coiners in their speeches or writings to make them colourful, picturesque and their message lucid, clearer and more effective. This paper examines some figures of speech that are prevalent in Nigerian cultures using examples from Ondo, Hausa and Tiv cultures. The relevant proverbs are documented in their original form, translated, and analyzed pointing out the various figures of speech and how they enhance creativity.

INTRODUCTION

Poetic devices are popular phenomena which paremiographers come across in almost all proverbs in their collections. They are those linguistic, creative and structural techniques that constitute the ingredients of intellectual pleasure, thereby giving some reinforcement to expressiveness in literary art. These are the designs used consciously or unconsciously by writers to embellish literary expressions. The figurative elements in proverbs explain their striking quality and thereby separate them from other maxims. Ruth Finnegan (1970) notes that a proverb is “a saying in more or less fixed forms, marked by ‘shortness, sense and salt’ and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it” (393). This definition captures the effort that a proverb has on any creative literary piece. Salt as we all know, gives taste to food. In the same way, proverbs give beauty and enhancement to speeches and writings. Even though proverbs do not exist as

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independent literary product, they have literary qualities in terms of structure and style. Since they are aspects of language, they are necessary ingredients of literature in terms of both expressiveness and content. As Welleck and Warren noted in their *Theory of Literature*:

Language is the material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of picture, or sounds of music. But one should realize that language is not mere inert matter like stone but itself a creation of man and thus charged with the cultural heritage of a linguistic group (22).

This means that language, as the substance of literature is able to express ideas and feelings as well as reflect the realities of a particular cultural group creatively. As a linguistic expression, proverbs are rich in aesthetic values. Amali (2000), lending his voice affirms that: "Indeed, proverbial expressions within the context of the African oral literary expression are the basis of fine artistic communication (v)". It is no wonder that Nigerian artists explore them successfully in their works. It is important to emphasise that in the whole of Africa and particularly Nigeria, aesthetics is interpreted in terms of beauty and utility. This is why writers make maximum use of proverbial expressions to achieve appropriate creative techniques and ideas. They provide the unique and aesthetic values which many Nigerian writers have successfully explored to enrich their thematic creativity. In Africa, and Nigeria in particular, literary aesthetics demands that a literary piece should delight, inform, educate as well as nourish the reader/hearer. These functions are performed by proverbs. Hence, literary artists such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Irene Agunloye and many others deploy proverbial expressions to achieve on appropriate language which enhances these functions, not only to bring out the poetic qualities and charm of the Nigerian culture but also to add local colour, sound, relate themes and to focus on the values of the society they are depicting. Buttressing the above, Bernth Lindfors affirms:

That Achebe, a skilful artist, achieves an appropriate language for each of his novels largely through the use of proverbs. Indeed, Achebe's proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local colour but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying. Proverbs thus provide "a grammar of values" by which the deeds of a hero can be measured and evaluated (50-51). Charles Nnolim (2010) agrees with the above when he observes that:

Proverbs enter into the realm of literature because of the imaginative possibilities they are capable of evoking. A proverb is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition. Proverbs are generally

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accepted as truths ascertained through experience and are marked by the epigrammatic and figurative turn in their expression (2).

The above shows how important proverbs are to the creative writer because of “the imaginative possibilities they are capable of evoking” and “the figurative turn in their expression”.

In this paper, our focus shall be on the use of figurative expressions in proverbs as a spice and building blocks to literary creativity, which Anita Woolfolk (2007) defines as ‘the ability to produce work that is original, but still appropriate and useful’ (Berk, 2005).

Figurative Expressions

Many scholars have rightly pointed out that poetry may say one thing while in reality mean another. (50). According to Baldick, a figurative expression: departs from the accepted literal sense or from the normal order of words, or in which an emphasis is produced by patterns of sound. Such figurative language is an especially important resource of poetry, although not every poem will use it: it is also constantly present in all other kinds of speech and writing, even though it usually passes unnoticed (83).

This observation by Baldick is very true of proverbs. Like poetry, there is a wide-range of employment of figurative expressions used by proverb coiners to pass their message across in a picturesque and memorable way. Akinmade observes that: These rich varieties of poetic devices enhance the flavour that makes proverbs vital spicing ingredients in a conversation. Consequently, there exists in proverbs a creative interplay of figures of speech in its different forms (121). Buttressing the above, Akporobaro (2006) declares: Proverbs belong to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms. ... Its beauty and source of delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in the proverb is not a logical, a priori or intuitive truth; it is an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people’s experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature (71).

Consequently, Akporobaro believes that proverbs are employed because of their poetic character, allusive power, figurative vigour and delightful tropes as very effective building blocks used by some traditional forms and indeed by contemporary literary artists. Thompson agrees with the above view, when he reiterates that proverbs have a similar power over the human mind just as a poem. And that this power is manifested by its use of figurative expressions. This paper aims at investigating some figures of speech as displayed in Ondo proverbs.

Procedures

Our procedures shall be, first to identify the particular figure of speech; secondly, render the appropriate proverbs in their original and then follow up with the literal translation, after which we shall give the contextual application of the proverb and finally point out the elements that constitute the devices in the text. The literary devices discernible in proverbs are inspired by Nigerian culture generally and Ondo culture in particular. Indeed, this remarkable medium of figurative expression bears witness to the rich culture of the folks. It presents the deep portrayal of the weltanschauung of the Ondo people. Let us start with anaphora.

Anaphora

Anaphora which is usually associated more with poetry than proverbs is the repetition of the same word(s) at the beginning of two or more lines of a poem (proverb). Ondo proverbs have examples of this figurative expression:

Example 1

Mo pe n' son

Mo pe n' ale

Mo pe n'owuo, oro oma l'oma e yen, oro omanen ke a to titi ale a le ei.

I call him in the afternoon, call him at night and I call him in the morning, that somebody else child but one keeps calling (correcting) one's child ceaselessly.

This proverb emphasises the difficulties faced in bringing up somebody else's child but if the child is your biological child, you do all you can to mould him/her. In the proverb, the phrase "mo pe" repeated at the beginning of the three consecutive lines, functions as an anaphoric element in the proverb..

Example 2

The second example, which is also a numerical proverb, is similar to the English proverb "once beaten twice shy", and admonishes that one should learn from past experiences: and apply wisdom to things:

A 'okan gbon, o gbon oghon soso o

A 'eji gbon, o gbon oghan omoluwabi

oA 'eta gban, iyen o somugo i.

Ke e p'onen bi s'ego?

He who learns from first experience bases his knowledge inadequately (as one's experience is very limited)

He who learns from the second experience is the wise one but

He who learns on the third experience is not only careless but he is also stupid and what kills one other than stupidity?

In this proverb, there is a display of anaphora in the repetition of the word "A" at the beginning of the three consecutive lines. Furthermore, the proverb ends with a rhetorical question. This poetic device adds weight and emphasis to the proverb by calling special attention to the words.

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Chiasmus

This figure of speech comes from the Greek word *chiasmos* or *chaiston* and it is borne out of its likeness in form to the letter chi X, which indicates a “criss-cross” arrangement. It is a figure of speech in which the order of the terms in the second of two parallel clauses is reversed. It may require a reduplication of the same words or just a reversed parallel between two corresponding pairs of idea. Chiasmus is very prominent in Ondo proverbs. A few examples will suffice here.

Example 1

Di oton gwe osi, di osi gwe oton, oun owo mu fen i.

If the right washes the left and the left washes the right, both hands will become clean.

This proverb stresses the need for cooperativeness and it also buttresses the fact of life. The practicality expressed in this proverb emphasizes its truthfulness. And indeed, truthfulness is one of the characteristics of a proverb. The device is expressed here in the crossing of the right hand over to the left to wash it and vice versa.

Example 2

De ba a to i epo j'usu, a to i usu j'epo

If one does not eat oil because of yam, one will eat yam because of oil.

Again, one does one thing because of the other. The reversal order in these proverbs is very glaring. Just as Abrams (2005) explained, the sequence of the two phrases is parallel in syntax, but reverses the order of the corresponding words (281).

Climax

Just as we have in drama, there are proverbs in Ondo community whose ideas, events and items are arranged in an ascending order, starting from the least to the most. Two examples will be used to illustrate this figure of speech. Ekutele bi ole po, olubaje kuo aiye.

The mouse procreates, thieves multiply and evil doers remain on earth. We are all aware that rats are very destructive. They “steal valuable possessions such as books, paper, food, and furniture by eating and destroying them.” Therefore if a rat procreates, the extent of damage/destructions that will be perpetrated is better imagined than experienced. Hence, the procreation of the rat increases the extent of destruction/ “stealing” that would be carried out. In the proverb, the delivery by the rat increases the number of the rats and hence leads to an increase in the damages that will be done.

The next proverb illustrates this figure of speech further.

A gbe iyawo e yege, o bi tan ei da ma ghinon, a yaso, uun ye san e e san, ibaje t'uli ibaje ja de.

A new bride is discovered to have been unchaste, in an attempt to massage her stomach after delivery, she pollutes the air; what is bad will always remain bad, rubbish begets rubbish! In this proverb, three important aspects

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of Ondo culture are reflected. The first, the fact that a girl is expected to be a virgin before marriage, the second is the care being given to a woman who delivers. It is cultural that her stomach be massaged with hot water so that there would be no clotted blood in her womb as this is medically hazardous to health. The third is to help the woman's expanded abdominal muscles to return to normal so that she looks trim and fit soon after delivery. In the proverb, the events are arranged in the ascending order, beginning with the least unpleasant to the most offensive. The proverb is very expressive and attracts the attention of the hearer to the importance of the ideas expressed in it and to the culture of the people. The proverb is used to ridicule infidelity before marriage.

Euphemism

Abrams (2005) defines euphemism as: An inoffensive expression used in place of a blunt one that is felt to be disagreeable or embarrassing. Euphemism occurs frequently with reference to such subjects as religion ("Gosh darn!" for "God darn!"), death ("pass away" instead of "die"), bodily functions ("comfort station" instead of "toilet") and sex ("to sleep with" instead of "to have sexual intercourse with") (88).

Euphemistic expressions are also found in Ondo proverbs. A few examples will suffice here:

Example 1

E ma uun sisun ye sun de to uli

One does not know the type of sleep one sleeps that one would wet one's bed. That is, one cannot predict when one would sleep and never wake up. The word "sleeps" in the proverb is an inoffensive expression for "die".

Example 2: *Iwin ajie ma gha'le*

Chicken drops are on the floor.

This proverb draws attention to the presence of a tale bearer. The chicken drops in the proverb are a mild and inoffensive way of saying a tale-bearer is listening to a discussion and may likely spread the information. Hence, unguarded utterances must be avoided.

Example 3: *Ogii o n'eti*

Walls have ears.

This proverb is similar in meaning to example two above. It cautions against unguarded utterances in a discussion.

Hyperbole

This figure of speech or trope also called "overshooting" in Greek is described as a bold overstatement or a deliberate exaggeration of a fact or a possibility. It is also prevalent in Ondo proverbs. It is a figure of speech used for emphasis or serious comic effect. The following are some examples.

Di aiye ba a ro ti ifon, a yon ara k'ogungun.

If one considers the irritation experienced from crawl-crawl, one will scratch the body up to the bones.

Li suu e fon wara keneun i.

It is only the patient person that can milk a lion.

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In the proverbs above, the goal of the coiners is to use proverbs, like a poet, to heighten effect.

It is a deliberate exaggeration for no one can be so irritated as to scratch the body until he/she gets to the bone. It is a description of the intensity of and seriousness of the irritation. In the second proverb, a lion, as we all know, is a dreaded animal and milking it alive is what no one would want to dare. However, if any one succeeds in milking it, that person must have performed a great feat. He must have been patient and must have taken time to study the lion. These proverbs are hyperbolic expressions to enlarge them more than they really meant in actual fact.

Metonymy

Abrams (2005) notes that:

[In] Metonymy (Greek for “change of name) the literal term for one thing is applied to another with which it has become closely associated because of a recurrent relation in common experience. Thus “the crown” or “the sceptre” can be used to stand for a king and “Hollywood” for the film industry... (103).

This figure of speech is available in Ondo proverbs. The following are a few examples:

Example 1.

E e mu oiho ade gwo’le

One does not drag the crown on the ground

Example 2

Ibi ori e e mu te’le

One does not tread on the head.

These proverbs which are similar to the biblical injunction “honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12), teach respect for elders. Even though, nowadays, people stand on their heads in the name of acrobatic dancing, it is not possible to walk with the head. Hence elders are held in an esteemed position in Ondo culture, and must be recognized and respected by all who aspire to grow old.

Paradox:

A paradox is described “as statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense” (Abrams, 209).

In Ondo proverbs, paradoxical statements are very prominent. A few examples will suffice here:

Uli oba yo jo egwa ghon bu si un i

The house (palace) of the oba (king) that is burnt, adds beauty to it.

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The expression above is surprisingly contradictory. The “burning” and “beauty” contradict each other. But, on closer scrutiny and reflection, the statement is true. For when the burnt palace is rebuilt, it comes out in a better and more beautiful design.

Eghen e da akiko means it is an egg that becomes a cock.

This proverb, which is similar to William Wordsworth’s line “The child is father of the man,” is self contradictory. It sounds stupid and unbelievable but on closer attention, it makes a strong sense. Indeed, when an egg is hatched, it becomes a cock just as the child grows to become a man and in turn the father of man. This device has the effect of “bringing surprises, pleasure and beauty of a new awareness” (13). The two proverbs can be used to encourage an individual.

Pun/ Paronomasia

Pun plays on words that are either identical in sound or very similar in sound, but are sharply diverse in significance. This trope is another prominent figure of speech in Ondo proverbs. It is employed to provide sharp, surprising but nevertheless genuine semblances. Below are some examples:

Example 1

Uun yi e fe lo si Sokoto, a ri un ni apo sokoto.

What we are going to look for in Sokoto is found in the pocket of sokoto (trousers)

The next one

Toi ti da ma s’use oun e da s’use i

In order not to suffer, one works

In these proverbs the words “sokoto” and ‘s’use’ are played upon. In the first proverb the word “Sokoto” is the name of a city in Nigeria, while “sokoto” means trousers. In the second proverb, “s’use” means suffer, while “s’use” means work. These words are played upon in the sense that the device employs in each case, a word whose meaning conveys two different senses simultaneously. Pun is made possible by the tonality of any language. Like many African languages, the tonality of the words makes it possible to have polysemic words and this gives the words their polysemous richness. Many words in the Yoruba language are polysemous. For example the word “Ojo”, which depending on the intonation can give four semantic entities. The word could be the “name of a person”; it could mean “a fearful person”, “rain” or “burnt” depending on the tonal signs on the word. Similarly, words like “ole” could mean either “a thief”, “hard/difficult” or “remainder” depending on the tonal signs on them.

Repetition/Reduplication

Very pre-eminent among the devices in Ondo proverbs is repetition, otherwise known as reduplication. Before we continue, it is necessary to distinguish between the repetition in alliteration, assonance and consonance. The repetition in these figures is of letters, while, in repetition itself, we deal

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with the reoccurrence of some words, phrases or even sentences. Repetition provides musicality to the proverb and makes it more memorable. The following are a few examples from Ondo proverbial expressions:

i. *Eja yo ju eja oun o gb'eja win i*

It is the fish that is bigger than another, smaller fish that swallows the smaller fish.

ii. *E e ri oju ekon te ekon m'ale, eyio ekon oun emu aho e bata i*

No one dares a live tiger (but) one can use its skin to manufacture shoes after its death.

iii. *E i di l'okuon se po; i in ghen le se po po po n'e e meta*

The invalid is requested to say (repeat) "po" (but) he says he cannot repeat the word "po" "po" "po" three times.

In each of the proverbs above, the words "eja", "ekon" and "po" are repeated three times each. The repetition of the words in the proverbs makes them very melodious to the hearer. It provides emphasis and memorability.

Synecdoche

According to Dasylyva and Jegede (2005), synecdoche is a form of metaphor in which the poet uses a part to represent the whole of the referent. The choice of the referent must be the most important part if the synecdoche is to be effective". For example "all hands are on deck", "we shall need more hands as the work progresses" (11-12). Synecdoche is another discernible figurative expression in Ondo proverbs. It is a figure of speech where a part represents the whole or vice versa.

i. *D'owo ma f'oko iro, d'eyin ma deen bee m'ale, do deen fi ghan an j'iyin ni g'ogun d'ola i?*

The hand does not want to hoe, the back does not want to bend, yet says that it would eat pounded yam at the eve of ogun festival?

In other words, it is not possible for someone who does not want to work to expect to eat. The proverb is similar to the biblical saying "He who does not work must not eat."

This means that if a person does not bend down and work, it is not possible for him to eat. You may observe that two very important parts of the body are chosen, that is the "owo" (hand) is used to do the work while the "eyin" (back) bends to enable the hand to use the implement to till the soil. "Owo" and "eyin" stand for the whole human being.

ii. *Uka owo onen o s'ayo i*

It is one's finger that feeds or satisfies one.

Here "uka owo" is a part of the body. We are all aware that "uka owo" cannot feed one. The "uka owo" signifies self-effort, one's work. It is when

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you make an effort; work hard that you can take care of your needs. In the proverbs above, the figures of speech provide vividness, clarity and vigour and at the same time, present a picturesque image of the need to put some effort in one's work.

CONCLUSION

The fact that figurative expressions are very vital ingredients for creative writing cannot be disputed. They are the building blocks used by creative artists to embellish and spice up their writing, the salt that gives taste to their work. Hence, the values incarnated in the use of these figurative expressions by writers cannot be over-emphasized. It is important to observe that writers use them to enliven their work. In this paper, we have established that literary writers use these very important expressions to articulate their ideas in exceptional ways, to give specific emphasis in communication, to beautify and revitalize a piece of art. We have also established that these figures occupy a prominent position in proverbs. The study examined some of these figurative expressions that are prevalent in Nigerian proverbs to the effect that literary artists deploy them successfully to further garnish their works, buttressing the fact that figurative expressions are employed by writers for creativity. Considering that proverbs deploy many of these figures of speech, writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Irene Agunloye, to mention just a few, use them effectively for creativity and expressiveness.

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