



Cultural Linguistic Study of Postproverbials of Taboo Expressions of Selected Plateau Languages and Their Implications

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Abstract

This research is a study of how some selected languages and their cultures name and view certain concepts or ideas usually considered as ‘abominations’ or ‘taboos’, why they name them so and how the constant teachings of such taboo concepts could enhance good morals in the society. In every society, there are things believed to be inappropriate if spoken in public which are considered as taboos. A taboo is an activity that is forbidden or sacred based on religious beliefs or morals. An act may be a taboo in one culture and not in another. This paper investigates some aspects of the major varieties of taboos. The study uses the analytical tool of cultural conceptualisations which is a framework of cultural linguistics to investigate the different ways some selected plateau languages, (Mwaghavul, Tarok and Afizere) from Plateau central, south and east respectively portray these taboo concepts. Fifteen purposively selected taboo related proverbial expressions, as well as their post proverbial constructions were subjected to critical analysis. The study reveals that the concept of taboo is a universal concept which cuts across cultures and traditions. There are more similarities than differences in the way these selected languages portray taboos. There is a general hedging of taboo concepts as most cultures do. The study also reveals that hedging such taboo concepts will only make them sound “light” but also not reveal their true ‘destructive’ nature. Many cultures criticize the use of explicit terms to name taboo issues but rather prefer to use euphemisms or cultural substitution or even paraphrasing (which could be quite inappropriate) as against the view of this study that recommends the norm of explicitness. Since language and culture play vital roles in the lives of people in the society, efforts must be made to state such taboo concepts explicitly with the aim of teaching morals and instructing people which will go a long way in shaping their mind sets and actions towards involving themselves in such taboos, thereby ensuring a better society to live in. The world has changed, there are things we do and talk about today that would never be done or discussed years ago. There are still a lot of subjects not talked about that we really need to start talking about and name them explicitly to portray the depth of their ‘badness’ so that people will learn to see evil as evil and avoid getting involved in such moral decadence.

Keywords: Index terms-cultural conceptualisations; Cultural linguistics; Euphemisms; Hedging; Post-proverbial; Taboo

Introduction

According to Penfield, the common language, any fool can go about it; but the use of proverbs displays your intelligence and maturity. It is a general believe that people who use proverbs, are mature. They are highly integrated into daily conversation and speech making and can be found in every interactional setting in

African society, be it urban, peri-urban or rural. Proverbs are social modes of communication which have a dominant role in most African societies. They are cultural tools for transferring the traditions of a speech community in terms of their values, beliefs and collective knowledge from one generation to another. They are folkloric metaphors but unlike other oral folklore they are not set apart or restricted to certain domains of usage. Proverbs are

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“culture markers” that tell us brief and so much about history and psychology of the peoples and communities in brief and intense terms. According to Finnegan, the traditional proverb is a verbal, concrete realization of “a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology...” (390). Meider defines proverbs as “short, traditional statements used to further some social end”. It is vital to note that the ‘social end’ is what makes the use of proverbs striking and meaningful. Proverbs are contextualized metaphors’ which implies that they are more literary and contextual than linguistic. Boadi contends that the general conception of proverbs in preliterate societies as having the distinctive and main function of teaching is “too pragmatic and limiting”, he suggests that the artistic, literary features of such proverbs, which include “the sharp wit, the sarcasm, the humour, the rhetoric, and ...all the aesthetic and poetic values of language use”, cannot be ignored (183).

Postproverbials are statements or sayings which are extensions of traditional proverbs. Postproverbials have now become special and popular sayings in the society. Postproverbials are usually created by individuals as a reaction to the original ideas of traditional proverbs. One of their major characteristics is that they make mockery of the serious ideas that are contained in traditional proverbs. More postproverbials are being created and invented by speakers in different languages day by day. Anyone who has heard or used a proverb before is a potential creator or user of the postproverbial. Raji-Oyelade defines Postproverbials radical speech acts which are alternate creations derived from and which stand against traditional proverbs which are produced either in jest or ignorance of conventional and generally accepted and anonymous proverbs in a given culture. Postproverbials are found in numerous formations in contemporary poetry, novels, drama, film, music, sermons, speeches etc. Raji-Oyelade says postproverbials are considered to be playful blasphemies inherently supplementary or subversive, a discursive strategy of mimicry, in which received wisdoms are queried, tested and subjected to textual rupture. Taboo words and expressions in public discourse in both Western and African cultures are severely censored. Britain, for example, has heavy censorship of obscenity, legally coded as “obscene libel” or “matter tending to deprave or corrupt” [1]. The free expression of taboo matters exercised in postproverbials has elicited disapproval and disdain from a large section of the public. One of the major factors is because the public’s taste has been fostered so much by religious experiences and by the traditional culture. Such taboos include sex, blood products, obscenity and vulgarity, suicide, defecation, menstruation, among many others. This research is a study of how some selected languages and their cultures name and view certain concepts or ideas usually considered as ‘abominations’ or ‘taboos’,

why they name them so and how the constant teachings of such taboo concepts could enhance good morals in the society.

Literature Review

Ademowo and Balogun wrote an article entitled, “Postproverbial Constructions and Selected Sex-Related Yoruba Proverbs/Proverbial Expressions” [2]. Their paper examines postproverbial constructions involving sex-related Yoruba proverbs and proverbial expressions, and their effects on the original meanings of these proverbs. Fifteen randomly selected sex-related proverbs and proverbial expressions, as well as their postproverbial constructions were selected as data. After subjecting the data to critical analysis, their study reveals that while sex-related Yoruba proverbs are essentially meant for communicating frank, stark and direct situations, postproverbial constructions of the proverbs have distorted the use of sex-related proverbs and proverbial expressions in communication most especially because of the sex-image that were made more emphasized and given increased visibility in the sex-related postproverbials. The study observes that, other than for visual symbolism, the mention of sex organs in sex-related Yoruba proverbs have no implications on original meaning of proverbs. They discover that this is not the case with postproverbials as the sex image and sexual performance become the main focus. The paper therefore concludes that Yoruba language speakers should be conscious of the influence of these postproverbials on the use of the sex-related Yoruba proverbs and their distorted meanings which are quite different from the original, intended philosophical, meanings.

Raji-Oyelade in his article entitled “Postproverbials in Yoruba Culture: A Playful Blasphemy” says there is virtually no substantial controversy about the value of proverbs in cultures, and the significance of proverbs in Yoruba traditional societies as repository and verbal effulgence of wisdom is indeed proverbial [3]. He sees proverbs as “culture markers”. According to him, the “relative fixity” or rigidity, of the typical traditional proverb is apparently dictated by conventional usage, especially by the need to transmit the verbal properties of the proverb, if not its conventional cultural meaning, with absolute consistency and fidelity to its original structure. This implies that there is an assumed quality of stasis in the traditional proverb as conventional verbal genre; situated in the dynamic space of informal speech and modern African culture, that relative fixity of proverbials dissolves and ultimately are deconstructed as postproverbials. The present research is however different from those reviewed above. It concentrates on how some Plateau languages (Mwaghavul, Tarok and Afizire) and their cultures name and view certain concepts usually considered as ‘abominations’ or ‘taboos’. It also focuses on why they name them so and how the constant teachings of such

taboo concepts could enhance good morals in the society. This study seems to be the first of its kind, to the best of the researchers' knowledge in these Plateau languages.

Methodology

Fifteen purposively selected taboo related proverbs and proverbial expressions, as well as their postproverbial constructions (five from each of the three languages) were selected. These were recited by three elderly men; one from each of the languages and transcribed by the researchers. The original sources of these proverbs are anonymous since they are still in their oral forms. The data were then subjected to critical analysis, thereafter, discussions are made and conclusions drawn.

Framework

The framework used for this analysis is that of Cultural Linguistics. Cultural linguistics is a multidisciplinary area of research that explores the relationship between language, culture and conceptualisations. Cultural linguistics brings to light a wide array of cultural conceptualisations, drawn from many different languages and language varieties. It can produce an indepth and insightful investigations into the cultural grounding of language in several domains and sub-disciplines including religion, World Englishes, Pragmatics, Inter-cultural communication and a host of others. Cultural linguistics is rich and relevant in demonstrating the relevance of the cultural conceptualisations of emotion, body, humour, religion, gender, kinship, politics etc.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Below are some of the taboo-related proverbs, their philosophical meanings and their postproverbial constructions.

Mwaghavul data

Text 1

Traditional proverb: ko we shwa am tulukiri
Philosophical meaning: everyone should drink water from his house
Postproverbial: ko we shwa wur ki nighin kiri
Meaning: everyone should suck from his mother's breasts
Implication: this proverb is used to teach contentment

Text 2

Traditional proverb: jirgurum mu put mbutki mat
Philosophical meaning: All men come from the womb of a woman
Postproverbial: jirgurum mu put nner ki mat
Meaning: All men come from the vagina of a woman
Implication: this proverb is used to show respect to womanhood or motherhood

Text 3

Traditional proverb: kaji a na bon ki mat maigurumkas
Philosophical meaning: do not look at the behind of another man's wife

Postproverbial: kaji a na bider ki mat maigurum kas

Meaning: do not look at the buttocks of another man's wife

Implication: this proverb teaches fidelity, especially in marriage

Text 4

Traditional proverb: ba membi ki du mbu kas

Philosophical meaning: nothing smells without a cause

Postproverbial: ba dyes kidu mbu kas

Meaning: excreta does not smell without a cause

Implication: this proverb is used to draw attention to the fact that in life, nothing happens without a cause.

Text 5

Traditional proverb: ba pe khizing ki mat des mbu kas

Philosophical meaning: the woman's private part does not widen for nothing

Postproverbial: ba ner ki mat des mbu kas

Meaning: the woman's vagina does not widen for nothing

Implication: this proverb teaches the principle of cause and effect.

Tarok data

Text 6

Traditional proverb: awar abongbong I mar iwan wona

Philosophical meaning: A bad seed produces its kind

Postproverbial: Ace a bongbong I mar iwan won a

Meaning: A bad penis or vagina produces its kind.

Implication: this proverb is used to teach the fact that a tree produces its kind; either good or bad, and so also humans.

Text 7

Traditional proverb: iyem I nong kam wang kat

Philosophical meaning: something doesn't smell without a cause

Postproverbial: among I nong kam wang kat

Meaning: Faeces does not just smell without a cause

Implication: like two Mwaghavul proverbs discussed above (4 and 5), this proverb teaches the principle of cause and effect.

Text 8

Traditional proverb: onung gwang I nim inok inenen ki zwamte I nak u cha I yilka taka tan tan

Philosophical meaning: If a man does his night duty well, the wife smiles at day light

Postproverbial: Uchava ma ce pa watkizwante I yil kaa takatan tan

Meaning: A woman that was really fucked at night smiles at day light.

Implication: this proverb is used to draw the attention of men on the need to make their wives happy.

Text 9

Traditional proverb: ma tat na cit

Philosophical meaning: She has been shot

Postproverbial: Ma naaya mana cit



Meaning: The woman has been impregnated

Implication: this proverb is used to caution young girls about the need for a chaste life

Text 10

Traditional proverb: u cha u dakdak inənəng

Philosophical meaning: A dirty woman smells

Postproverbial: u cha v ace ace bet teinəngizirənəng

Meaning: A woman who fucks too much often smells

Implication: this proverb teaches hygiene

Afizere data

Text 11

Traditional proverb: Anera binin gata se be kafa kaarnatuk ba

Philosophical meaning: A pregnant woman does not go out in the night

Postproverbial: Anera binin gata se be kafa kaarnatuk ba, abufe ye anyiin yaka gwom

Meaning: A pregnant woman does not go out in the night, it is prostitution

Implication: this proverb is used to teach faithfulness, especially in marriages

Text 12

Traditional proverb: Ashon yanaro be nanyisi ba

Philosophical meaning: Elders do not eat their portion in a house of mourning

Postproverbial: Ashon yanaro be nanyisi ba, itato nong ye ashon bi iwahi

Meaning: Elders do not eat their portion in a house of mourning, it belittles them

Implication: this proverb is used to caution elders on the need to avoid anything that would earn them disrespect in the community

Text 13

Traditional proverb: Itsitsing tisonong natoon kama amaara merwu ba

Philosophical meaning: A fly does not sit on a bad person's property

Postproverbial: tsitsing tisonong natoon abingama ara merwu ba

Meaning: A fly does not sit on a bad person's feaces

Implication: this proverb is used to teach uprightness as a virtue

Text 14

Traditional proverb: A shosh are satin kiiska shoon wu

Philosophical meaning: To burn the thing that covers your nakedness

Postproverbial: A shosh nasha I k pangwu

Meaning: To burn the thing that covers your buttocks

Implication: this proverbs teaches gratefulness and appreciation

Text 15

Traditional proverb: A nook naya be kubok rimen ba

Philosophical meaning: you do not give someone food with the left hand

Postproverbial: A nook naya be kubok rimen ba, atafeye wan nook bi riye rizining ba

Meaning: you do not give someone food with the left hand, it shows you did not give it wholeheartedly.

Implication: this proverb draws attention to the need for respect

Discussion of Findings

Essentially, some of the selected postproverbials meanings and interpretations show lack of wisdom which their original proverbs intend to promote. These postproverbials designate lack of guiding values embedded in them. It is in this light that Raji-Oyelade is of the opinion that postproverbials are consequences of new consciousness of African modernity, resulting from the vanishing of the real village or community square tradition and decline in the deployment of the standard resources of these languages. However, some of them reflect explicitness which is vital for effective understanding of such issues messages they try to pass across. It is obvious from our analysis that there is a wide gap between the intended philosophical meaning of the proverbs and the meaning that the postproverbial constructions convey. According to Raji-Oyelade, certain views are that postproverbials are signs and evidence of a new consciousness of African modernities. While we must admit that there is modernization, we must also be careful that modernization does not take us to the extreme; culture must not be bastardised. Also, drawing from the implications of the explicated taboo proverbs and postproverbial expressions, it is important to ask why the Mwaghavul, Tarok and Afizere people engage in such verbal expressions of taboo, despite their disdain for vulgarity. Most of these postproverbial constructions are distortions of verbal art which result to alterations in the intended meaning and interpretations. However, some of the postproverbial expressions bring out the actual meanings, thereby avoiding ambiguities. It is obvious from the analysis that traditional proverbs use a lot of hedges for taboo words and expressions. Postproverbials on the other hand are explicit and exact in their choice of words [4-11].

Implications

It is vital to note that, having established that postproverbials are capable of giving distorted values and orientations to the native wisdom, and relating such postproverbial construction to taboo-related proverbs, this study discovers how it has distorted the meanings of taboo-related proverbs. However, the study also reveals that hedging some of such taboo concepts will not only make them sound 'light' but also not reveal their true 'destructive' nature. Many cultures criticize the use of explicit terms to name taboo issues but rather prefer to use euphemisms or cultural substitution or even paraphrasing (which could be quite

inappropriate, ambiguous and unclear) as against the view of this study that recommends the norm of explicitness.

Summary and Conclusion

Like any other proverbs, taboo-related proverbs should be used in context and appropriately. It should be used modestly and with conventional wisdom. This study recommends a deliberate introduction of postproverbial versions of the proverbs into Mwaghavul, Tarok and Afizere proverbs teaching (in each of the languages). This is so that the distorted version would be learnt alongside the original. Since language and culture play vital roles in the lives of people in the society, efforts must be made to state such taboo concepts explicitly with the aim of teaching morals and instructing people which will go a long way in shaping their mind sets and actions towards involving themselves in such taboos, thereby ensuring a better society to live in. The world has changed, there are things we do and talk about today that would never have been done or discussed years ago. There are still a lot of subjects not talked about that we really need to start talking about and name them explicitly to portray the depth of their 'badness'. This will go a long way in making people learn to see evil as evil and avoid getting involved in such moral decadence.

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