

Linguistic Glottophagia in the Usage of Yoruba Proverbs: A Playful or Painful Blasphemy?

Taiwo Soneye

*Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University
Osun State, Nigeria*

Abstract

This paper examines the socio-cultural implications of the linguistic subversions of African proverbs especially Yoruba proverbs, by the upcoming Yoruba youths on the immediate recipients and the world in contemporary times. The main objective of this paper was to investigate the familiarity of the present generation of educated Yoruba indigenes with Yoruba proverbs. The study also sought to determine the familiarity of this set of speakers with their own language which is their mother tongue, as well as to confirm certain emerging phonological phenomenon. Fifty university students whose ages fall between 17 and 25 years constitute the respondents for data gathering. They were required to complete ten proverbs orally delivered to them or state their unfamiliarity with them where this is the case. Overall, the results indicated that an appreciable percentage of the respondents have become acquainted with the distorted versions of the proverbs than the original. Further findings from the study showed that the linguistic and semantic rearrangements of original proverbs coupled with code mixing and code switching could be an indication of the subtle erosion of the African cultural heritage and the moral degeneration borne out of the political and economic poverty in most African nations. The paper concluded that these phenomena constitute a painful rather than a playful blasphemy and highlighted measures that can be employed to save Yoruba language via its proverbs from atrophy especially in this twenty-first century.

Introduction

Our rich heritage, experience, custom, oral tradition and values carried down the ages in scores of African proverbs are often subjected to wanton but subtle lexical, grammatical and phonological subversions that undermine the import of the Yoruba language and by extension, culture. There is virtually no substantial controversy about the value of proverbs in culture, and the significance of proverbs in Yoruba traditional societies as repository and verbal effulgence of wisdom.

They are "culture markers" in the sense that they tell us, in rather brief and intense terms, so much about the history and psychology of the peoples and communities from which they emanate. This is one reason for their virtual indispensability in formal and informal verbal interactions in Yoruba society. They accordingly pervade all other (major) forms of verbal texts, in which their presence enhances the effectiveness of those texts. However, there has been a process of subtle linguistic colonization as observed from the empirical analysis undertaken in this study, which demands attention, if African languages and cultures will not atrophy. This paper therefore examines the inseparable link between language (in form of proverbs) and culture rather than as distinct variables

In attending to the linguistic basis for Yoruba identity, the elements of their oral tradition in which proverbs are an integral aspect cannot be ignored. In the Yoruba culture, proverbs are appreciated as the vehicle for words. "Proverbs are the horses for words, for when words are lost we use proverbs to seek them out." Abrahams (1972), for example, describes them as "the shortest forms of traditional expression that call attention to themselves as formal artistic entities." He goes on to cite their usefulness in the devices we commonly associate with poetry in English: meter, binary construction and ba-

lanced phrasing, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, conciseness, metaphor, and occasional inverted word order and unusual construction" (119).

Yoruba proverbs have their main features as prescriptive; (meaning the outlining of rules of conduct); a characteristic sentence form (which might be simple, complex, sequential, or parallel); a high incidence of lexical repetition and contrast; and terseness as well as tonal counterpoint," that is, contrast in the tones of lexical items which occur in identical locations in parallel sentences.

Linguistic Glottophagia in the use of Yoruba proverbs

The use of Yoruba proverbs which are an instance of the rich use of Yoruba language is subtly being devoured and supplanted by another tongue-English. Zabus (1991, p.17) refers to this process as "glottophagia". Glotto means "the formation in the sense of a language" and phagia means the "eating up", feeding or swallowing (Oxford Talking Dictionary: 1998). Our colonizers cannot be held responsible for this glottophagic experience that our language in form of proverbs seem to be undergoing, this is because there was really no brain washing of the average youth or native to abandon the use of his oral traditions, what was and still existing is a subtle gimmick: a colonial glottophagia which makes the upcoming generation to regard as crude, indigenous and outside the mainstream of sophisticated linguistic discourse the use of their indigenous language (in which proverbs constitute an integral part) in speech. According to Isola (2001, p.65):

There is now a cultural void because few Nigerians can sustain a reasonable length of conversation in the Mother Tongue without code switching or code mixing.

Ogbaa (1992, p.111), described the attitudes of the new generation of indigenous language speakers to local proverbs as not encouraging and Raji-oyelade (1999, p.74) confirms that a glottophagic process is under way when on the tongue of its users the traditional proverb loses the sanctity of its structural fixation and are replaced with modernist alternatives. This is what Raji-Oyelade regards as "playful blasphemy". However, when one considers the implication of this linguistic attitudinal anomaly as confirmed by the study carried out in the course of writing this paper, in which the young elite declare their ignorance of their local proverbs with pomp and pageantry, it becomes a "painful blasphemy" (Soneye 2003, p.9). Ngugi (1986), explains the importance of decolonizing the mind on issues relating to one's own language and positing further that "the first sure sign of self colonization is when one does not know enough of one's own language".

Research procedure and analysis of data

Procedure

Ten proverbs, seven of which are popular among the Yoruba (elderly) people were selected for the research. Respondents were mostly between age seventeen and age twenty-five, to ensure that they fall into the present generation of educated Yoruba indigenes assumed to have lost touch with their language. They were required to complete each of the proverbs, verbally given separately to each of them. They were also required to state their meanings if they do know their meanings or context of usage.

Table 1: List of proverbs and their English translations

S/N	Proverbs	English translation	Modernist alternative	RESULTS	
				C.C	M.A
1	Kira kita k'o mola; ka sise bi eru ko da nkankan	Strenuous laboring does not bring wealth; struggling like a slave does not eradicate poverty	Kraa kita 'o mola; <i>agbari lonja (cutting corners count)</i>	80	20
2	Eniti erin re ba ti po ju; ki ije ki a mo igba ti o ba n' binu	One who smiles a lot; makes it difficult to guess when they are angry	Eniti erin re ba ti po ju; <i>o likely lati ti mad. (one who smiles a lot; is likely to be mad)</i>	20	80
3	Ibi ti onile ba ti nfi irungbon dana; Alejo ko gbodo bere oguso	Where the house owner cooks with his beard; a guest mustn't ask for a fire lighter	(a) tenant wa ninu ewu <i>(the tenant is in danger)</i> (b) tenanti gbodo sa <i>(the tenant must run)</i>	5	95
4	Esin iwaju ni teyin nwo sare	The leading horse is a precept for others behind	Esin waju lo gba po kinni <i>(The leading horse takes the first position)</i>	10	90
5	Enito jin si koto o ko awon aara yoku logbon	He who falls into a pit is a lesson to others	Enito jin si koto o ju relo fo <i>(He who falls into a pit is blind)</i>	80	20
6	Ogede dudu o ya busan omo buruku o ya lupa	Unripe plantain cannot be speedily eaten; a bad child cannot be speedily beaten to death	Ogde dudu o ya busan eyi to pon <i>Lo se je (it is the ripe one that can be eaten)</i>	20	80
7	Obe ti bale ile ije, iyaale ile ise	The soup the husband does not eat, the wife does not cook.	a. The soup the husband doesn't eat, <i>no one can force him to eat</i> (b)The soup the husband doesn't eat, <i>poverty may make him eat</i>	10	90
8	Kekere lati peka iroko, to ba dagba tan, ebo ni yio ma gba lowo eni	Iroko branches are cut early; when it matures, it demands sacrifices continually	Kekre lati peka Iroko; <i>nitori o easy</i>	10	90
9	Ojo gbogbo nit ole, ojo kan ni tolohun	Everyday for the thief; one day for the owner	Everyday for the thief, one day, he will be caught	90	10
10	Aso o bo Omoye mo, omoye ti rin ihoho woja.	Its late to clothe Omoye Omoye has gone naked into the market	Its late to clothe Omoye; <i>may be she is too fat</i>	5	95

Percentages of correct completion (c.c) and modernist alternatives (m.a)

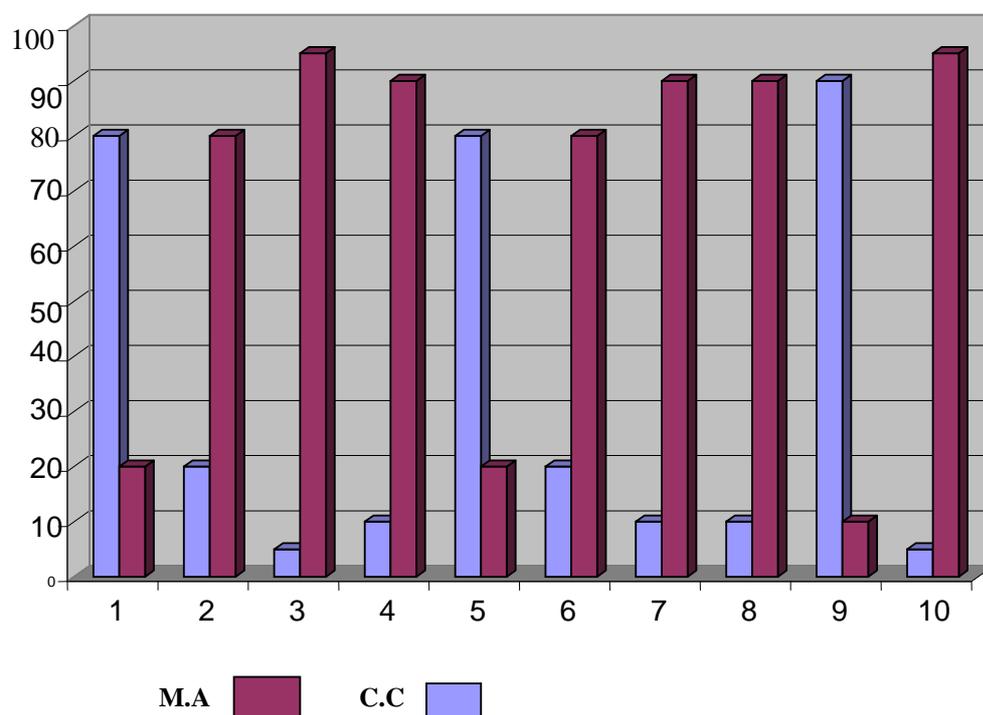


Table 2: Percentages of context of usage, code mixing and code switching

Proverbs	% of Actual Usage	% of Wrong Usage	% of code switching and code mixing
1	80	20	5
2	20	80	90
3	5	95	40
4	10	90	0
5	80	20	15
6	20	80	25
7	10	90	15
8	10	90	20
9	90	10	30
10	5	95	40

Discussion

Implications of the linguistic and semantic rearrangements of proverbs by respondents

Respondents' ideologies, moral dispositions and intentions are brought to the fore through this game-like task they were asked to perform. Noteworthy is the fact that proverbs in the African culture are often reliable expression of a society's mores and user's inclination; they are sensitive and responsive to the relativity of "truth" and ethics.

1. Proverb 1: Kira kita ko mola; Ka sise bi eru o da nkan (strenuous laboring does not bring wealth; working like a slave does not eradicate poverty). This proverb is often said to caution against greed and blind drive for monetary gains at the expense of one's wellbeing and also to enable one recognize that there are supernatural powers influencing affluence or prosperity. However, the modernist alternative given by 20% of respondents reveals their ignorance about this moral code and their semantic rearrangement shows their convictions about wealth acquisition; (strenuous laboring does not bring wealth; cutting corners does) Besides, the slang "agbari" is a common phenomenon in Nigeria for those regarded as 419, who are said to be using "agbari", that is their 'brains'. The drawing on this term could imply an acceptance of the philosophy of those involved in the act.
2. Proverb 2: Eniti erin re bati poju; ki ije ka mo igba ton' binu (one who smiles excessively; makes it difficult for one to know when they are angry). This proverb advocates moderation in putting forth a friendly disposition, so that one is not taken for granted when one decides to assert one's opinion. Surprisingly, 80% of the respondents did not have any idea about this proverb, neither were they able to complete it. They concluded the proverb by saying that "anyone who smiles excessively must be mad". Logical as it seems, it reveals their loss of touch with their culture. Besides, about 90% of them lapsed into English, code-switching with either the word 'crazy' or 'mad' Another factor that shows their gradual loss of their linguistic ability in their indigenous language.
3. Proverb 3: Ibi ton ile ba ti n'fi irungbon dana; alejo o gbodo bere oguso (Where the house owner cooks with his beard; a guest must not ask for a fire lighter) This proverb is used to advocate for discretionary behaviour and wisdom in relationships; also to wade off or discourage indulgence. Out of the 95% that gave the modernist alternative, 40% of them completed or inserted an English word; such as 'tenant' or 'danger' in the phrase-'tenant in danger'.
4. Proverb 4: Esin iwaju; ni teyin nwo sare (The leading horse; is a precept for others behind). This proverb is about the commonest of the ten in this study. However, it is most surprising that the modernist alternative has grown so popular, that 90% of the respondent (perhaps because they are in the city) completed it as thus- "the leading horse takes the first position". A key observation here is the literal translation that characterizes most of these modernist alternatives, thereby neutralizing the cultural implications of the proverbs and trivializing their moral import.
5. Proverb 5; Enito jin si koto; o ko awon ara yo ku logbon (One who falls into a pit; teaches others wisdom) This proverb is the most popular of the ten proverbs used in this study and quite an appreciable percentage completed it correctly. Only 20% gave a modernist alternative which is literal (one who falls into the pit; is blind)
6. Proverb 6: Ogede dudu o ya busan; omo buruku o ya lupa (Unripe plantain cannot be speedily eaten; a bad child cannot be speedily beaten to death) This proverb is often used to placate parents who have recalcitrant or naughty children to refrain from excessive scolding. Only 20% of the respondents were able to state the proverb correctly, the rest were of the feeling that "unripe plantain cannot be speedily eaten; only ripe ones can be speedily eaten
7. Proverb 7: Obe ti bale ile ije; iyaale ile ise The soup the husband does not eat, the wife does not cook. This proverb explains the type of submission required from the wife towards her husband. In the traditional African society, the wife is expected to obey the husband and do only the things that please him, even at her inconvenience. Therefore, it is used to admonish the wife to submit to the wishes of the man. Only 10% of the respondents were able to correctly complete the proverb and only 10% understood the context in which it is used.
8. Proverb 8: Kekere lati peka iroko; to ba dagba tan, ebo ni yio ma gba lowo eni (Iroko branches are cut early; when it matures, it demands sacrifices continually) This proverb is similar to the English proverb "a stitch in time saves nine" in terms of context of usage. It draws on the African traditional religion of the worship of the Iroko tree. The tree at its tender age is often not regarded, but when full fletched; its usually a mighty tree and often appeased with sacrifices, as its believed to possess some powers at that stage. Most respondents were apparently unaware of this. Also, most of the respondents who were able to complete showed forth another phenomenon that will be discussed in the next session. 80% who were not able to complete the proverb said " Iroko branches are cut early, because it is easy then. The English word 'easy' was inserted into the rendition.

9. Proverb 9; Ojo gbogbo nit' ole, ojo kan ni t'olohun (everyday for the thief, one day for the owner), is a well known proverb among the young and old, yet some of the respondents ended up completing the proverb with at least one English word; "one day or caught". The proverb is used to warn against continual evil-doings.
10. Proverb 10: Aso o bo Omoye mo, omoye ti rin ihoho woja. (Its late to clothe Omoye; Omoye has gone naked into the market) is synonymous with the English proverb "its late to cry over spoiled milk". There is a story behind the proverb and the name Omoye which none of the respondents knew.

Anglicism in Yoruba proverbs rendition: a phonological perspective

There is an emerging phenomenon in the renditions of young Yoruba English speakers employed for this game-like study. It could be described as the anglicizing of Yoruba syllable structure. Since it is not the emphasis of this paper, we will just examine about three instances and leave details for another context.

For decades, the tonal language, Yoruba, has been consistently defines as having the CVCV structure as against the English language where consonant clusters occur. However, perhaps because of the influence of the English language on the accents of these respondents, a rough estimate of about 30% rendered some of the Yoruba proverbs with syllable clustering pattern as is seen in table 1; proverbs 1,6 and 8. In proverb 6, the word "kekere" which means early in this context (but can also mean small in another context) has a CVCVCV structure in Yoruba language, but some of the respondents rendered as CVCCV structure, with a consonant clustering negating the long established structure of the Yoruba tone language pattern. Also in rendering proverb 6, the word 'ogede' which means plantain has VCVCV syllable structure, was pronounced as VCCV by a few of the respondents. There is an attitudinal dimension to this rendition, as we observed the efforts of some wanting to sound 'modern' or "English". However, the relevant issue here is the emerging syllable structure pattern. The process observed in proverb 1, is fairly gaining ground among Yoruba youths in Nigeria and this is why we have delayed the discussion of proverb 1 till now. The word 'kirakita', in proverb 1, which means 'strenuous labouring' has the syllable structure- CVCVCVCV in Yoruba language; the word therefore is a polysyllabic word of four syllables. However, about 15% out of the 20% with modernist alternative, rendered it as "kraakita" which has three syllables with a CVCVCV structure. The vowel "a" is lengthened and made to sound like the long sound representing the V in the British English word *car*. It is observed that such anglicized forms are gaining ground in the pronunciations of educated Yoruba English speakers in recent times. In especially the urban areas of Nigeria, such as Lagos; Words such as the following examples in the table below are common:

Words	Actual syllable structure	Anglicized forms	Anglicized syllable structure
Giragira (senseless moves)	CVCVCVCV (4)	graagraa	CCVCCV (2)
Biribiri (swiftly or seldom)	CVCVCVCV (4)	bribri	CCVCCV (2)

From the foregoing, it seems clear that various aspects of the oral tradition of the Yoruba are important for enriching the social and moral life of the people and ensuring the continuity of especially their linguistic culture. African proverbs are highly effective means of expressing the ideals and values of the communities, teaching young generations the history of their ancestors and helping them improve their self-awareness by giving them the information they need for understanding their identity through their which bears the full import of their culture and moral values.

But these are trying times for Yoruba culture and its oral tradition. In the first place, the old sages who accept the responsibility of transmitting the culture are transiting fast to the realm of the ancestors, the younger ones, who are expected to serve as the link between the past and the future, have greater economic problems to deal with. Little wonder, some of them completed proverb 1, as "cutting corners count". How many Nigerian (Yoruba) youths are roaming the streets with no visible means of livelihood even when they have successfully made the efforts to acquire education and the skills that come with it? In the light of the increase in corrupt practices, embezzlement and the loss of dignity for human labour which characterize most African states, it is difficult to condemn their indifference to cul-

tural values and language visible in their trivializing proverbs or not even knowing them, when their sense of self-esteem has been so badly brutalized.

Conclusion

Language is an important part of a society's culture. As a proponent of cultural diversity, I suggest the preservation of all 'mother-tongues'. However, in addition to one's mother tongue, I strongly advise the acquisition of an international language, whether it be English, French, Chinese or German. The ability to speak an international language provides better opportunities for work and life choices. The world is ailing from an illness: globalization. The give-and-take dynamics of globalization have seen African states give away more than they have received, including their rich linguistic base. African states are giving away their language, their culture, their identity. All parents in Africa, noted by Igboanusi (2000), should teach their children their native language to prevent it from being extinct. Our languages are dying because some parents think to be modern is to learn the English language and therefore do not speak the local language with their kids at home, talk less of using proverbs.

English is gradually becoming the first language in the homes of most working families in Nigeria and pupils are even being penalized in schools for speaking their indigenous languages. There could be no greater blasphemy! When one can not speak at least one local language and worse still if one is being punished for daring to preserve one's culture through language from atrophy it is shameful! But it is not all bad, as posited by Atanda (1996), some of the local radio stations such as Radio OYO and Osun Radio broadcast in local dialect and some people have made native languages their first choice of communication and we just hope for an attitudinal change to issues relating to our culture and language.

References

- Abrahams, R (1972). Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions. In Richard M.D. (ed), *Folklore and Folk life: An Introduction* pp. 117-27. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Atanda, J. A. (1996). The Yoruba People: Their Origin, Culture and Civilization. *Yoruba: History, Culture and Language*. J. F. Odunjo Memorial Lectures, Series 5. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, pp.3-34.
- Igboanusi, S.H. (2000) Ethnic Englishes in Nigeria: The role of Literature in the development of Igbo English. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 219-230.
- Isola, A (2000). *Cultural imperatives for Media Practitioners*. Unpublished paper presented at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1986). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinmann.
- Ogbaa, K. (1992). *Gods, Oracles and Divination*. Trenton; Africa World Press.
- Oyelade, R (1999) Post proverbs in Yoruba Culture: A playful or painful Blasphemy. *Research in African Literature*, 30(1), 38-39.
- Soneye, T, (2003). *The English language as culture transmitter: The African Experience, Occasional paper No, 16*. The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, South Africa.
- Zabus, C,(1991). *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: G.A. Rophi.