

Evocation of Culinary Imagery in Some Yoruba-Nigerian Proverbs

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Abstract

In Yoruba proverbs, culinary imagery is called up in food as well as in non-food-related conversations. This paper reviewed culinary imagery in some proverbs used by the Yoruba speaking tribe of Nigeria. The major objective of the paper was to proffer an understanding of the import of the message conveyed by culinary imagery in some Yoruba proverbs through the lenses of Relevance Theory of communication with emphasis on cognitive effects and low processing costs in comprehensibility of texts and talks. Also, the study reviewed concepts and ideas in culinary discipline conveyed in Yoruba proverbs with a view to situate the importance of food in Yoruba conversations and the role of analogy in inter and multi-disciplinary discourses inherent in Yoruba culinary proverbs. A hundred and twenty Yoruba culinary proverbs were considered from which ten were purposively selected for this study. Discussion of the selected proverbs revealed that Yoruba culinary proverbs can be called up in indirect references to topics of conversations in any discourse with the aim(s) of aptly synthesizing ideas in better and clearer ways. Therefore, hearers in communicative events can apply RT in their processes of interpretation of talks filled with Yoruba proverbs. The paper concluded that the propositions in Yoruba proverbs are surreptitious in dual role functionality between speaker and hearer.

Introduction

Cognitive processes and utilization of human-bodily parts producing language (Peng, 2005) are indicative of language as human and social attitude. Weiten (2007) defines “a language” as consisting “of symbols that convey meaning, plus rules for combining those symbols, that can be used to generate an infinite variety of messages”. Collins English Dictionary and other dictionaries define a language as a system of communication. Communication is the act and product of sharing interactional tokens such as instruction, persuasion, felicitation, etc., among humans through language.

Harper (2103) traces origin of communication from the Latin’s “*communicare*”, meaning “to share”. The term ‘communication’ is conceived of as the act of conveying meanings from an individual or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs, symbols and semiotic rules. Womack (2005) views symbols as means of complex communication that can have multiple levels of meaning. McGrath and Frank (2014) employing philosophical perspective, assert that a proposition is the meaning of a declarative sentence, where meaning is understood to be a non-linguistic entity which is shared by all sentences with the same meaning. In other words, linguistic expressions are the paths through which concrete entities and abstractions are represented and presented in discourses.

For communication to be effective words have to be chosen carefully with the aim of drawing the listeners’ attention to the topics of transaction and interaction. Effective communication is delivered through wits and means with the intent and purpose of moving the listeners to the thought-line of the speaker. “‘Rhetoric’ . . . refers to ‘the use of language in such a way as to produce a desired impression upon the hearer or reader (Burke, 1952). Rhetoric is a tool in the hands of the speaker through which listening audience are moved to reasoning along the speaker’s line of thought on the discourse subject. Therefore,

rhetoric is the art of ornament and the art of persuasion (Covino, 1988) as Aune (1994) states that rhetoric pervades all manners of conversation. In the postulation of (Baldwin, 1924) rhetoric is trajectory in course and cause.

Food is the substance consisting of protein, carbohydrate, fat and other nutrients used in the body of an organism to sustain growth and vital process and to furnish energy (www.britanica.com). Thus food takes a prominent position on the list of human basic needs (Denton, 1990). Cavanaugh, *et al.* (2014) state that culinary linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics, which studies food and language across interdisciplinary fields. Such interdisciplinary fields, according to the authors include linguistics, anthropology, sociolinguistics and consumption politics and globalisation.

Linguistics in respects to food discourse describes language used to refer to concepts contained in the discourse. Concepts are abstract and concrete ideas or general notions that occur in the mind, in speech, or in thought. Concepts are understood to be the fundamental building blocks of thoughts and belief. Concepts play an important role in all aspects of cognition (Carey, 1991, pp. 257-291). Concepts are encoded and presented for onward transmission through language. According to the Oxford Dictionary (6th edition) cognition refers to the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and the senses.

Reasoning and Yoruba Proverbs

Deductive reasoning is the process of reasoning from one or more premises to reach a logical conclusion (Sternberg, 2009). In deductive reasoning, premises are linked with conclusions in such a manner that if all premises are true, the terms are clear, and the rules of deductive reasoning are adhered to, then the conclusion reached is inevitably true. On the other hand, inductive reasoning is a method of reasoning in which premises are viewed as

supplying some evidence, but not full assurance, for the truth of the conclusion (Rainbolt & Dwyer, 2014) Inductive reasoning is also a method where one's experiences and observations, including what are learned from others, are synthesized to come up with a general truth. Thus deductive reasoning trails the path of argument from the general propositions to specific conclusion while inductive reasoning follows its argument from specific proposition to general conclusions.

Both inductive and deductive reasoning could be contained in Yoruba proverbs though there is a latent problem in inductive reasoning in which case that there are many arguments which do not follow the path of specific propositions to general conclusion, e.g.

Eni ti o ja ole ni eekan, ti o ba da aron bo ori, aso ole ni o da bo ara

This can translate to mean “*once a thief, always a thief*”. According to Copi, Cohen and Flage (2006) inductive reasoning is distinct from deductive reasoning in that the conclusion of a deductive argument is certain, while the truth of the conclusion of an inductive argument is probable, “based upon the evidence given”.

Chakravorty (2018) traces the origin of the term ‘image’ from the Latin’s word ‘imago’ and defines it as an artifact that depicts visual perception. He cites “photograph or other two-dimensional picture that resembles a subject- usually a physical object-and thus provides a depiction of it. The poetics of Robert Frost examples called up March 12, 2013 states that a pictorial script is a writing system that employs images as symbols for various semantic entities, rather than the abstract signs used by alphabets. Imagery is enacted in deduction and induction in bipartite conversations. According to the treatise a writer attempts to describe something in a manner such attempt “appeals

to our sense of smell, sight, taste, touch, or hearing is directly linked to imagery. Writing is the product of spoken language. Therefore, writers speak through writing.

Origin of Yoruba Language

Yoruba /'jɒrɒbə/ (Bauer, 2007) (Yor. *Èdè Yorùbá*) is a West African language mostly spoken in Southwestern Nigeria. Yoruba speakers were put at an estimate of 27 million in 2007 (Parkvall, 2007). Metzler (2010) sets the population at 30 million speakers having drawn the postulation from earlier estimates and population growth figures. Yoruba is principally spoken by the indigenous Yoruba people of Nigeria with communities of speakers in Sierra Leone, Liberia, other parts of Africa, Americas and Europe. According to Rumide (2013) the Yoruba believe strongly in the tradition of proverbs since they use them in their day-to-day activities. This study opines that Yoruba proverbs are thought and communication-based in the Yoruba language and therefore not separate from the language. This work studied concepts and ideas in culinary discipline conveyed in Yoruba proverbs with a view to situating the importance of food in Yoruba conversations and the role of analogy in inter- and multi-disciplinary discourses inherent in Yoruba culinary proverbs.

Significance of Study

From the conversations in the previous sections revealed the significance of this study as follows.

- i. Yoruba language is spoken by about 30 million speakers (Parkvall, 2007; Metzler, 2010), across three continents. Any aspect of a language with such huge number of speakers should be considered as worthy of studying

- ii. Yoruba proverbs are not just decorations that the language can ill-afford but a composite device engrained in oratory resources of the language.
- iii. Food alongside shelter and light forms human needs but Yoruba cultural expressions place food above all hence, the folk-saying '*oun ti a je ni agba oun ti a o se*' translated as "what we are going to eat is greater than what we are going to be". Importance of food in the hierarchical needs of the Yoruba culture underscores the worthiness of studying Yoruba culinary proverbs
- iv. Available works on Yoruba proverbs (see Adesina, 2015; Adebayo, 1979; Rumide, 2013) only offer exploratory cum linguistic studies of proverbs, mainly from syntactic and translational perspectives

Literature Review

Proverbs form part of the codes of behavior in languages and cultures (Ajayi & Raji, 1997). Lord John Russell is reported to have observed that a "proverb is the wit of one, and the wisdom of many" (cited by Mieder, 1993, p. 25). Nevertheless, Mieder (1993, p. 5) defines a proverb as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation." Zolfaghari and Ameri (2012) define a proverb as a

...short sentence, which is well-known and at times rhythmic, including advice, sage and ethnic experiences, comprising simile, metaphor or irony, well-known among people for its fluent wording, clarity of expression, simplicity, expansiveness and generality, and used either with or without change.

In other languages and cultures, writes Hansford (2003), proverb differs from English version, adding that "In the Chumburung language of Ghana, *ajase* are literal proverbs and *akpare* are metaphoric ones" (p. 64).

Proverbs are drawn from and refer to all activities of societies, natural objects and phenomena (Mbiti, 1995). Language of proverbs has a rich vocabulary, combination of words, symbols, pictures, allusions, and comparison (Mbiti, 1995). Proverbs are used for dissemination of indigenous educational system; they serve as veritable tool for enhancing and promoting the values, culture and social attitudes (Mara, 2006). Proverbs in the opinion of Taylor (2013) are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral and sociological value of a society. The author further adds that apart from aesthetic and figurative value, proverbs present a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. This underscores the fact that proverbs are societal based. Proverbs are a means of interaction, mainly in spoken conversations.

In many African languages, proverbs act as catalyst of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals that provoke further reflection and call for deeper thinking and consideration of issues (Adeyemi, 2008; Salawudeen, 2001). Adesina (2015) asserts exclusive preserve of elders to use proverbs to drive some serious points to the younger ones. In objectifying analogy, (Ober, 2001) concepts and ideas in culinary discourses are called up in other discourses. By this token, ideas and concepts are transferred from food discourse to specify, analyse and present talks in other vocation, avocation and occupation. Yoruba music practitioners employ proverbs in their lyrics and other genres of music native to Yoruba anthropology to draw on experiences and teach one lesson or the other. Of great notes, are Haruna Ishola (1919-1983) Yusuf Olatunji (1905-1978), etc. whose genres of music employed an avalanche of proverbs as means to call up imageries and ideas

to register their oratory skills in the minds of their fans and general audience alike.

Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (RT) is a framework for understanding utterance interpretation. In RT, Sperber and Wilson (1995) aim to explain the fact that speaker/hearer usually convey much more information with their utterances than what is contained in their literal sense. Thus, it is argued that acts of human verbal communication are ostensive in that they draw their addressees' attention to the fact that the communicator wants to convey some information. In this way they automatically assert that they are "relevant" to their addressees. A relevant utterance in this technical sense is one from which many conclusions can be drawn at a low processing cost for the addressee. An ostension is a behaviour that signals the intention to communicate something such as pointing, or shifting position to draw an addressee's attention to something (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Verbal communication is an ostensive behaviour, as it draws the addressee's attention to the fact that the communicator intends to convey some information. This is called the communicative intention. By contrast, the informative intention is the intention to convey said information that is the actual content of the message. The addressee uses the information contained in the utterance together with his expectations about its relevance, his real-world knowledge, as well as sensory input, to infer conclusions about what the communicator would want to convey. Typically, more conclusions can be drawn if the utterance contains information that is related to what the addressee already knows or believes. In this inference process, the "literal meaning" of the utterance is just one piece of evidence among others (Wilson & Sperber, 2002 p. 255) Sperber and Wilson sum up these properties of verbal communication by calling it ostensive-inferential communication. Ostensive inferential communication

is characterised by two layers of intention on part of the communicator. Wilson & Sperber (2002) propose that

- i. the informative intention is the intention to communicate certain content.
- ii. Whereas, the communicative intention is to draw the audience's attention to one's informative intention.

Methodology

From one hundred and twenty proverbs gathered and studied, ten got purposively selected for this work. The proverbs were drawn from natural conversations transcribed and translated into English. The selected proverbs were each transliterated into English based on the researcher's knowledge of English and Yoruba Languages. The studied proverbs were not selected based on religious or civil ideologies among Yoruba sub-tribal divisions. The RT (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) was used in the main to construe the ideas thrown up in the culinary proverbs of the Yoruba. Discussion of each proverb was offered with the aim of application of the proverb out of culinary contexts.

Presentation and discussion of the selected Yoruba culinary proverbs

In this section ten culinary proverbs selected for this work were presented and discussed with their contexts of usage followed by the implication of the propositional contents of the proverb.

1. *Olorun ti o da enu ni ibu-n-bu ti mo nkan ti enu yi o je*

[God that shaped the mouth horizontally knew what would suit it].

Some key terms are briefly explained in the following discussions. *Olorun*, in Yoruba Language is construed as God, the supreme-being, believed in monotheistic religions such as Judaism,

Christianity, believed to be the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe and worshipped as the only God. The equivalent term for God in the Yoruba language is *Olorun* which seemingly is a single word but with a deep realization as *Olu-orun*, which herein translates as *King of Heavens*. *Olu* represents king while *orun* represents heavens. In the Yoruba cosmology; *Olorun* has other names such as *Alamo*, *Mori-Mori*, *Ade'da*, *Aseda*, etc., whose arguments revolve around the term '*mo*' implying *to cast, to mold or to model*, all of which imply the lexicons of sculpture.

The term '*da*' translates as '*to mold or to cast*'; its arguments call up senses in the wordings such as '*to sculpt, carve, model, or cast*'; *enu* (*mouth*) as object cast in the proverb, is the food and speech organ in human beings, the opening in the head and its surrounding lips, gums, tongue, and teeth, through which food is taken in and through which sounds come out. *Enu* is described as *ibu-n-bu*, which translates to width by width in English. *Ibu-n-bu* represents dimension describing the shape in terms of width of *enu* (*mouth*). Width is used to describe the mouth (*enu*) in the listed proverb. *Nkan* means something but in regards to the proverb, *it* means food; *je* means (*to*) eat. The term '*je*' translates as the wording '*to eat*' which is invested with arguments to consume something as substance or to take something into the mouth as food and swallow it.

Lexicons of sculpture are used to describe mouth. The God the maker of the heaven and earth and all things including man that live on earth is by the proposition construed as sculptor who sculpted the mouth. With the way God did mold mouth, it is suited to the things especially food that pass through it. The proverb serves to encourage people not to fret about what to eat mainly and extensively on how to get other basic human needs.

2. *Iyan ni onje, oka ni oogun, a-i-ri rara ni a nje eko*

[pounded yam is a dish; processed yam flour is medicine; it is when we have nothing to eat that we eat congealed pap].

The key elements in this proverb are *iyán, onje, oka, oogun, je eko*, and in that order they are briefly explained as follows: the term *iyán* is a meal processed from yam tuber, peeled, boiled, pounded inside a wooden mortar and turned into soft jell, served with soup preferably melon-seed laden vegetables; *onje* translates as food; while *oka* (also known as *amala*), is a type of food made from cassava flour. *Oogun* translates as medicine; *je* translates as 'to eat; while *eko* translates as congealed pap. The proverb obviously is talking about the premium status of *iyán* when with other prominent dishes. The study revealed elements of logical positivism as extractable through deductive ordering of things. Therefore, proverb can apply when there is a need for a metaphorical ordering of things in real conversations outside culinary discourse.

3. *Kokoro to nje efo, ara efo lo wa*

[the pests that feed on vegetables live inside vegetables].

Kokoro translates as insect; *je* translates as feed; *ara* in the context of the proverb implies *inside*; *efo* means vegetable. Though propositionally, destruction of *efo* (vegetable) by *kokoro* (pest) which must have grown with it, is what the proverb all about. The proverb is a wake-up call to individuals to search for the origin of their problems from their closest allies before anything else. This is so because as closely attached as insects are to vegetables, they often cause their ultimate decapitation.

4. *Kokoro ti o nje efo jare efo. Iwon ni eweko ndara mo*

[the insects that eat vegetables are blameless; vegetables should be moderately beautiful].

Kokoro, je, efo, iwón, ewe-oko, ndara are the key terms in the proverb. In the proverb, *kokoro* is motivated to eat *efo* by the beauty of the vegetable; hence the insect should be blameless. This

proverb calls blame shifting as means of argument to pontificate that the victim's immodesty must have warranted their ordeals in the hands of their predators. The proverb appears as indicating that the victim is served right; it calls for restraints in the ways people display their affluence, hence the reference to *iwon* which translates as 'modesty'. The proverb uses the agro-culinary terms to warn on the need to be modest in the display of affluence. It further warns the vulnerable to be circumspect and mind the companies the keep.

5. *Obe ti baale ile kii je, iyale ile kii se e*

[The soup which the family patriarch does not savour, the matriarch does not cook it].

Obe translates as soup; *baale*, male-head; *iyale*, the wife; *se*, cook. The family head prescribes what is good, including types of soup, to be eaten in his home. The wife is required to carry out the demands of the family head. In an event that the family head forbids anything, the wife is mandated to make such a thing forbidden in the home. Soup represents practices or preferences. The proverb stipulates strict adherence to rules of engagement between management and staff in any organisation.

6. *Iya nii je mo kundun ponmo, eran ki lo mbe lara awo?*

[Poverty makes one to say they savour cowhide; of what value is cowhide?]

Iya translates as poverty; *kundun* means savour; while *ponmo* roughly translates as processed cow-hide. *Eran* translates as meat in the context of the proverb. Meat is usually not affordable for low income earners; hence their preference for *ponmo* which is reputed for being inexpensive. *Ponmo* or cowhide contains little or no protein; hence the Yoruba associate little or no value to it. Therefore, for anybody to boast that they savour *ponmo* is

believed to be a mark of poverty. The proverb is talking about pretentious life some people exhibit in talks, when the obvious is self-evident. It is about incongruous match between words and deeds.

7. *Omode o kii mo eko o je ko ma ra lowo*

[a toddler's skill in eating congealed pap can never be mess-free].

Omode, *eko*, and *ra owo* are the key terms in the proverbs as discussed below: *Omode* means toddler; *eko* means congealed pap; while the very near equivalent of the term *ra* in English is 'smear'. The term *omode* denotatively refers to toddler or child, but in the context of the proverb, *omode's* meaning is not limited to the age factor. Rather it is about any inexperienced person, especially borne out of ignorance. The expression '*mo*' has to do with skills and dexterity acquired in a performance. With the explanation of the key words and others like *kii* (never) *-n-* (*habitually*), *ni* (spot), the proverb serves an excuse for improper behavior by a novice or a young person. More often than not, the arguments in the proverb can be called up to support leniency in law and adjudication.

8. *Bi isu eni ba ta, a maa nfi owo bo o je ni*

[If one's yam-tuber sprouts sumptuously, one needs to cover it when eating].

Isu, *eni*, *ta*, and *bo je* are the key terms in the proverb. *Isu* refers to a yam tuber that sprouts extraordinarily in the earth mound. *Eni* is a short form of *eniyan*; *ta* is 'to sprout' extraordinarily. *Owo* means 'hands'. In the context of the proverb, the term '*bo*' is construed as 'to cover'. *Je* means to eat. Though the proverb contains farming terms, it represents conditional attitudes that should be watched while celebrating remarkable feats. The

proverb advises interactants to be circumspect when celebrating success because envious or malevolent neighbours may contemplate harming the person.

9. *Iyawo ti a fe l'osu aga ti o nfi iyan mo'le, 'yi o ba ni'be' ni omo on re yi o je*

[The bride wedded during the season of harvest who uses pounded yam to mold a house will have her child named 's/he shall meet it there'].

In this proverb, the terms *osu* (month), *iyana*, *mo* (mold), *ile* (building), *je* (eat) are the key terms in the proposition. The items contribute substantially to a full disclosure of the arguments in the proposition, though other words in the proposition are no less important. The terms are discussed below. We have observed that the term '*osu*' has a direct equivalent in English 'month'. However, the expression '*osu aga*' (month of '*aga*') is the period of time falling between December and March, the harvest season in the Yoruba agrarian calendar. The term '*aga*', therefore would not have meant any particular month but a whole period spanning through harvest time up to three or four months in the ordinary calendar.

The term '*iyana*' refers to 'pounded yam', while '*mo*' refers to 'mold'. In the Yoruba tradition of building, mud is dug, mixed with water, turned over several times into mash and repeatedly with hoes and eventually used to erect a homestead. The proverb implies that eating more than necessary is wasteful. This proverb initiates caution or modesty in using opportunities as they come so that one may not regret when such opportunities expire. One should be modest during the time of plenty, otherwise they may regret their recklessness when the table turns.

10. *Didun lo dun, ni a nba ore je eko, ti ile oge to oge e je*

[it is because it is sweet that we are eating ‘eko’ with friend(s), everyone has enough to eat in their homes].

The expression *didun*, *eko*, *oge* and *eko* are the key words in the proverbs. *Didun* translates as *sweetness* in English; while *oge* refers to any hypothetical or folk character/hero. ‘Sweet’ in the preceding clause does not necessarily refer to the taste of *eko* but to the amicability or love shared between individuals. The term ‘*oge*’ underscores the sanctity of individuals to be on their own and if need be eat on their own. However, ‘*je*’, though carries the central information in the proverb, goes beyond mere eating in the context of the proverb. The proverb calls up cognitions in culinary discourse to synthesise social relationship. It emphasizes the benefits of sharing and communal living. Therefore, sharing is a demonstration of the spirit of love and unity in the community.

Conclusion

Proverbs are used to condense ideas as the discernible ones are expected to get the hints to the meaning of the proverbs being used in conversation. Conversations in Yoruba language takes into cognizance, the cognitive environment (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) of production of texts and talks in full realisations of meanings of conversations. Yoruba proverbs are construed in the same way. Thus, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, not forgetting, kinesthetic organic and phenomenological imagery, are employed in Yoruba proverbs.

Relevance Theory (RT) is suited for the explanation of communicative purposes of Yoruba proverbs. RT posits that the speaker purposefully offers a hint to the respondent (*ostensifies*) a hint to their intention. The hearer draws the speaker’s intention from the hint and the context-mediated information. The hearer is required to interpret the hint, taking into account the context, and surmise what the speaker intends to communicate. This bipartite maxim is captured in the Yoruba proverb ‘*Aabo oro ni a*

nso fun omoluabi; ti o ba de inu e a di odidi' [half a statement is all you tell a gentleman; on hearing it, it becomes whole]. By this token, Yoruba proverbs enable speakers not to say it all before they could make their point. Therefore, Yoruba proverbs are characteristic of condensations inherent in the language generally.

The analysis of culinary proverbs in this work has revealed that the proverbs can call up any of the imageries mentioned above. Apart from this, the Yoruba culinary proverbs being wisdom-filled like other Yoruba proverbs are not just about food but are useful interdisciplinary references in functions. This paper revealed that the Yoruba culinary proverbs employ terms from other disciplines. Therefore, the Yoruba culinary proverbs are rich and resourceful instantiation of ideas and analogies that can be employed in decision making and policy formulation in private and corporate organisations.

Culinary proverbs no doubt, are cuisine-based and food related but they can be called up to situate conversational implicatures for the 'learned' in Yoruba rhetoric to process with the goal of drawing cognitive effects. It would be obvious from the purposively selected data that Yoruba culinary proverbs are not just about food only but that the proverbs can aid in conversations that can yield purposeful decisions in private and organisational communication. This observation further debunks one of the claims in formal linguistics that proverbs, like other language metaphors, are not worthy of studying because they are mere decorations in language studies. This study reveals that Yoruba proverbs are not only thought-based, but that they constitute deep thought.

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