

Uncooperative Acts in the Deployment of Proverbs in Chijioke Ugwu's *Two to Tango*

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Abstract

Constatives of elders are spiced with proverbs in Nigeria. This is because proverbs are of significant value in the language use of members of the community, particularly, amongst rural people. The deployment of proverbs in conversation has often been considered from the vantage point of the speaker; not much consideration is given to the hearer of proverbs. The essence of this investigation is that it places premium on the hearer of proverbs. This paper examines how the deployment of proverbs hinders cooperative behaviours amongst interlocutors, it verifies the extent to which proverbs are face- threatening, and their contributions to communication. The pragmatic concepts of illocutionary act, perlocutionary act and politeness are adopted for the investigation. By a simple random sampling of thirty-seven proverbs sourced from the play *Two to Tango*, eight are examined. The research reveals that proverbs are politeness-encoded and they could perform face- threatening acts which could hinder cooperative behaviour in communication.

Introduction

The human community is language- driven as language is the efficient means of communication in human relations. Language is a common denominator of the human society everywhere. A significant feature of human language activity is the use of proverbs. The

Nigerian society is multilingual and one benefit of this is that proverbs in one language are accurately translated into another. The dexterity of Nigerian scholars at translating proverbs from a Nigerian language into other languages is exemplified particularly in literary texts. Some proverbs in Nigerian languages have been translated into English; the language of formal education in the country.

The Nigerian proverbs that are examined in this study are sourced from the short play: *Two to Tango* by Chijioke Ugwu. The play as a work of art seeks to educate, inform as well as entertain. The subject matter of the play focuses on poverty and its consequences, the exploitation of the under-privileged and moral laxity in the society.

The setting of the play is a fictional Umuasa Kingdom whose paramount ruler is Igwe Mgachi. The characters bear Igbo names. The language of the play is simple, direct and expressive, with proverbs not only as its embellishments but also as veritable means of communication. Typical Nigerians employ proverbs to communicate, and express views and attitudes. Proverbs play a significant role in the speech acts of Nigerians. One may wonder why proverb is central to typical Nigerian speech acts. An understanding of proverb with its function is instructive. A corpus of thirty-seven proverbs is observed in the play and this high occurrence of proverbs in a short play of seventy-one pages allures one's attention. Proverbs are used in the play such that the ratio is about one proverb to two pages. The decision to investigate the proverbs is driven by the desire to understand their contributions to communication and

human relations. The pragmatic concepts of this investigation are the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of Austin (1962) and the politeness principles (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Literature Review

Proverb, according to the *Concise Encyclopedia*, is succinct and pithy saying that is in general use and expresses commonly held ideas and beliefs. Communal beliefs and ideas are couched in proverbs. Furthermore, Mieder (1985) enunciates that a proverb is a short, generally known sentence that expresses common, traditional and didactic views in a metaphorical and fixed form and which is easily remembered and repeated (p.118). Mbiti (1988, p.69) states that, 'Proverbs are expressions of wisdom acquired through reflections, experience, observation and general knowledge. They are intimately related to the culture of a given society.' Proverbs portray cultural ethos and they invoke communal patriotism as well as kindred solidarity. Proverbial constatives are not only considered effective means of communication but also as a formidable weapon, when used in a speech act, to allude to traditional authority and to authenticate illocutionary force. Proverbs therefore lend traditional or communal support to the speaker's illocutionary act as well. This is the reason the Igbo and Yoruba people usually deploy proverbs with: 'Our elders say...' This is affirmed by Ojo (2015) who states that, 'Proverbs are reflections and expressions of wisdom, ethics, philosophy and beliefs of a given society.' (p. 1). It is generally believed that wisdom resides with the elders who are therefore regarded as the custodians of proverbs.

Furthermore, Grigas (2003) declares that:

The content of all proverbs is homocentric. Their address is a human being despite the fact that in many cases that is not indicated by name, and imperative forms are not used. Even when objectively existing natural bodies, phenomena and objects of material culture are characterized, the pragmatic mission of such proverbs is obvious--they sound as hints for the people. (p. 152)

Every proverb communicates certain messages to human beings. Ajiboye (2012) strengthens this assertion when she writes that proverbs are meant to perform some social functions. This is true because the act which interlocutors perform is domesticated in their social world view through proverbs. Furthermore, she asserts that proverbs are spiritual in that they are taken from the deep recesses of the sender and go deep into the innermost being of the receiver (p.313). This is noteworthy and significant to this study. The assertion above by Ajiboye (2012) portends that proverbs are not mere embellishments but also a potent means of communication. According to her, proverbs are used in such a way, as to say things gently in a veiled way at the level of interpersonal communication. This is to say that a speaker deploys tact through the use of proverbs to communicate a certain message to his or her hearers. *Mieder opines that proverbs are used:*

to strengthen our arguments, express generalizations, influence or manipulate other people, rationalize our shortcomings, question certain behavioural patterns, satirise social ills, poke fun at ridiculous situations.’ (Meider, 1993, p. 11).

Also, Odebunmi (2008, p. 3) argues that in terms of function, proverbs in Africa have been observed to occur on all occasion when language is used for communicating either as art or as tool. This paper concurs that proverbs are employed as tools of communication because they perform pragmatic functions. Proverbs are used to authenticate the view, knowledge or attitude which a speaker seeks to communicate to his or her hearer. In Nigeria and particularly among the elderly, language use and proverbs are inextricably intertwined. Achebe (1957) says that among the Igbos, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. This requires one to acknowledge that proverbs do not only flavour language use but are necessary for communication. Equally, the saying among the Yorubas is that proverbs are the horses of speech; such that when speech is lost, proverbs are deployed to find it. In the same vein, speech ride on proverbs just as proverbs also ride on speech. (Owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe. Boro ba sonu, Owe laa fi nwa.) This Yoruba proverb implies that proverbs are the horses of speech; speech are the horses of proverbs. When speech is lost, proverbs are deployed to find it.

Some people think that constatives which are devoid of proverbs are ineffective to convey their view and attitude concisely to their hearer(s). Proverbial constatives evoke thought provoking and soul-searching messages.

Proverbs are context dependent for their illocutionary act and illocutionary force to be relevantly functional and appropriate. The effective deployment of a proverb rests on the fulfilment of the felicity condition (A) of Austin which states that:

- (i) 'There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect'.
- (ii) 'The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure' (Levinson, 1985, p. 229).

Proverbs are not deployed arbitrarily and aimlessly; rather they suit the context, the object or the hearer and are appropriate for the purpose. In this instance, the speaker who deploys a proverb inherently invokes certain traditional authority to do so and to execute the illocutionary force of the proverb as appropriate upon the hearer or the prevailing circumstances.

Proverbs are used to perform certain illocutionary acts as well as to elicit some perlocutionary acts. Austin (1962) states that the illocutionary act is the making of a statement, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it. Saeed (2003) sees the illocutionary act as the act intended by the speaker. Illocutionary acts are said to have illocutionary force. The illocutionary force of a proverb is a matter of pragmatic assumption among the interlocutors. Mey (2001, p. 96) observes that 'perlocutionary acts are acts which produce effects on the hearer.' Illocutionary act and perlocutionary act are pragmatic concepts employed to examine the proverbs in this study.

Solomon (2012, p. 4) posits that pragmatics is the linguistic investigation of a linguistic utterance, its meaning and effect. In addition, he affirms that the eclectic view of pragmatics by Crystal (1987, p.120) and the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (1994) is worth embracing. Both Crystal (1987) and the

Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Linguistics assert that pragmatics is the field of study which investigates a speaker's language use, what the speaker does by his utterance as well as the effect of the utterance on the hearer.

Proverbs could be deployed to inject politeness into communication. Lauhakangas (2007) (as cited in Alagbe, 2017, p. 90) lends credence to this when he states that 'the use of proverbs can be means to save face in violation of social hierarchy.'

The concept of politeness in this study accounts for the contribution of proverbs to human relation and communication. Politeness as a pragmatic concept could be seen as being tactful, modest and nice to other people, (Yule, 2001, p. 134). Mills (2003, p. 6) views politeness as 'the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face-threats carried by certain face- threatening acts toward one another'. Foley (1997) enunciates that politeness is a battery of social skill whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction. Politeness is the human strategy which is deployed, during linguistic interaction among the participants, for the purpose of achieving the desired cooperative behaviour. But this is not so in the current study.

In literature, two components of politeness are positive face and negative face. Foley (1997) presents positive face as a person's self-esteem and negative face as one's freedom to act. Brown, & Levinson (1987) affirm that positive face exists universally in human culture. They characterise positive face by the desires to be liked, admired, ratified and related to positively while negative face is characterised by the desire not to be imposed

upon. According to them, negative face is the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others. It is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction---i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

Furthermore, they declare that in social interactions, face- threatening acts are at times inevitable based on the terms of the conversation. According to them, a face- threatening act is an act that inherently damages the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. They also assert that face- threatening acts, in most cases, are verbal and could be expressed by tone, inflection and the characteristics of speech or by some non -verbal forms of communication. In agreeing with this opinion expressed by these scholars, this study avers that proverbs are verbal and are capable of face-threatening. Face- threatening could be negative or positive. Negative face is threatened when an interlocutor does not avoid the obstruction of his or her addressee's freedom of action. Negative face- threatening acts are said to seek to force one of the interlocutors submit his or her will to the other. They impede freedom of action and choice. The data for this study and the analysis corroborate the assertion that proverbs could be face-threatening.

The proverbs which are the data for this investigation are 'a type of characteristics of speech' and are verbal. This research is interested in verifying: whether proverbs are face- threatening, to what extent they are, what their contributions are to linguistic communication and human relations.

According to Redmond (2015), Kim & Bowers (1991) have suggested labels for types of face. 'Fellowship face is the want to be included'; 'competence face is a want to have one's abilities respected by others', and 'autonomy face is a want to not be imposed on' (p. 7). The current study agrees with these labels as the data analysis affirms. However, the labels fall into the two broad categories of face: negative and positive. Fellowship face and competence face are kinds of positive face while autonomy face is the same as negative face.

The politeness of Brown & Levinson (1987) is employed for this investigation because of the foremost categorisations of face they present. Redmond (2015, p. 4) lends credence to this when he affirms that 'Much of the application of face by communication scholars is based upon the scholarship of Brown and Levinson.' In addition, Kitamura (2000, p. 1) applied Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to investigate non-goal oriented interaction and reported that "politeness" phenomena can be identified utilizing Brown & Levinson's theory not only in goal-oriented interaction, but also non- goal- oriented interaction.' The current study is a goal- oriented interaction and it corroborates Kitamura's (2000) assertion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this investigation is a combination of pragmatic models of the illocutionary act, the perlocutionary act and politeness. The theoretical discussions in **2** above provide the pragmatic pillars for the study. Proverbial constatives are speech acts. As speech acts, they are performed to execute certain functions that could have effects. Politeness as a model is

employed to determine the resultant impact of the deployment of proverbs by a speaker on the hearer.

Methodology

The source of data collection is a secondary source: *Two to tango: A Play*. Excerpts of the proverbs are provided and displayed in a table. The categorisations of negative face and positive face by Brown & Levinson (1987) are adopted to analyse the politeness of each proverb.

As stated earlier, the ratio of thirty-seven proverbs to seventy-one pages is approximately 1: 2. The proverbs are divided into nine groups of four each. Proverb number thirty-seven is the first, the last and only member of the possible tenth group, as a result, it is not considered for selection; so the first and the last proverb in each group are not selected also. The selection is randomly done on the basis of alternate one even number in a group and one odd number in the next group. The eight proverbs selected are listed in the following order:

S/N	Proverb no.	Page no.
1	2	10
2	7	19
3	10	35
4	15	48
5	18	51
6	23	58
7	26	63
8	35	69

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this investigation are deployed in dialogue between the speakers and their respective hearers. Communication takes place between interlocutors in the

form of dialogue which is a form of talk- exchange. This talk- exchange exhibits the features of conversation, specifically, turns and turn-taking as observed among the various interlocutors in the play.

The proverbs are presented below:

1. '...the stream whose water I shall drink would not pass me by.'
2. '...a man must dance the dance relevant at his time...'
3. '...if your mother in-law does not know how to sit properly, you should learn how to restrain your eyes...'
4. '...regrets are like grandchildren; they come many years after the event...'
5. '...if a person bites me on the head without minding my hairs, I would not mind when I bite him at the buttocks.'
6. '...The sleep that lasts one native week is death...'
7. '...a mother of twins should have impartial breasts.'
8. '...no bird, no matter how strong, wins praises for smashing itself on a rock during flight...'

The data is analysed in a table showing the proverbs, the context, the illocutionary act of each proverb, its perlocutionary act and the encoded politeness. According to the speech acts theory of Austin, every locution produces its illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. The illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of each data in the table are generated from their corresponding locutions. As stated in 1 above, the concept of politeness as explicated by Brown & Levinson (1987) is employed to arrive at the entries in the row indicating politeness. The context of each locution as stated sheds more light on the

illocutionary act and perlocutionary act of the data. The table is presented below:

Proverbs S/N	Context	Illocutionary act	Perlocutionary act	Politeness.
1. The stream whose water I shall drink would not pass me by	A report of the encounter between him and the Igwe at which he proposed to marry Ifedinjo's daughter	Persuasion	The hearer is convinced to marry off his daughter to Igwe	Negative face threat
2. A man must dance the dance relevant at his time	Igwe's speech to party members	Expression of interest	Party members pleased	Positive face threat
3. If your mother in-law does not know how to sit properly, you should learn how to restrain your eyes	Discourse of Heavensgate Church Women about their immoral pastor	Condemnation/ disapproval	The women hearers were convinced of the unbecoming acts of their pastor	Negative face threat
4. Regrets are like grandchildren; they come many years after the event	At the consultation of Isiada the priestess	Informing	Inyama recalls her past immoral lifestyle	Negative face threat
5. If a person bites	Ikeogu's threat to	Threat of revenge	Hearer is scared	Positive face

me on the head without minding my hairs, I would not mind when I bite him at the buttocks	the adulterer of his father's wife			threat
6. The sleep that lasts one native week is death	Expression of displeasure with late arrival of Umuasa's Council messengers	Complaint	Listeners concur	Neutral face threat
7. A mother of twins should have impartial breasts	Third Elder's uptake to Ikeogu's proposal of fine for Okewu alone, leaving out Inyama	Caution, differing	Third Elder's point of order to counter Ikeogu's position	Negative face threat
8. No bird, no matter how strong, wins praises for smashing itself on a rock during flight	Fourth Elder's response to Ikeogu's threat to the Umuasa Council	Advising / scolding	The Council agrees with Fourth Elder's opinion	Negative face threat

Source: *Two to Tango, A Play* by Chijioke Ugwu

Data Discussion and Interpretation

The data analysis indicates that proverbs as tools of communication perform diverse illocutionary acts. Proverbs can advise, scold, pontificate, caution, counter, condemn, threaten, retaliate or inform. Some of these are observed as the intentions that are communicated by the speakers. The illocutionary act of each of the proverbs examined is found to be politeness encoded and in most cases, negative and face threatening. Each act elicits a different perlocutionary act that has either negative face, positive face or neutral face (which is neither positive nor negative).

There are five instances of negative threats to the hearer's face, two cases of positive face threats to the speaker; proverbs number 7 and 18 are instances, and one neutral face threat. The illocutionary acts of proverb numbers 2, 10, 15, 26, and 35 threaten the face of the addressees. For instance, proverb number 2 impedes Ifedinjo's freedom of action to decide, without undue pressure or interference, to give his consent to whoever his daughter wishes to marry. Similarly, proverb number 26 obstructs Ikeogu's desire to have only the male adulterer sanctioned by the Council. Proverb number 10 condemns the unbecoming loose life of the pastor rather than blame the female folks for his immorality. Effectively, it disagrees with the insinuation of any wrong on the part of the female worshipers as the hearer suggested. It is observed that the illocutionary act of proverb 23 conveys a neutral politeness while those of numbers 7 and 18 affirm their addressees / the hearers, the speaker, or both. Proverb number 18 affirms

Ikeogu's positive face to justify his vengeful desire that only the male adulterer of his father's wife be severely sanctioned. The neutral face threat is observed to affirm both the speaker and the addressee and when this happens; a proverb evokes kindred solidarity among the interlocutors, thus resulting in positive face for both.

Findings

Proverbs as tool of communication evoke kindred solidarity when they affirm both the speaker and the addressee as exemplified in the use of proverb number 2. Igwe Mgachi deployed it to affirm both himself and the party members for their loyalty to the party.

Certain proverbs function to affirm only the speaker without frontally threatening the addressee's face. Data numbers 5 and 6 affirm the speakers (Second Elder and Ikeogwu).

A proverb that threatens the hearer's face seeks to dissuade the addressee from a course of action or convey the attitude of the speaker to the hearer on the matter at hand. The speaker who deployed proverb number 10 did so to convey her displeasure with the immoral acts of the subject of the discussion while proverb number 26, which is an uptake to the call on the Council to sanction only the male adulterer, is deployed to dissuade both the proponent of the idea and the Council from taking such unjust decision.

A speaker who uses proverbs to assert positive face for himself or herself deliberately does so to justify his or her disposition. This is the case in the deployment of proverbs 7 and 18 as stated in the discussion of the data.

Proverbs are found to be politeness- encoded as the analysis reveals and this has been stated in the discussion of the data.

Some proverbs may neither have negative nor positive face threat. This study discovers such to have neutral face threat. Proverb number 6 illustrates this finding.

A discourse in which proverbs are copiously used to threaten the addressee's face could hamper cordial, peaceful and cooperative human relations. The data reveal that much use of face threatening proverbs made cordial interaction impossible between Ikeogu and members of the Council. In the sampled data, the Elders threatened Ikeogu's face twice negatively. The speaker in such a discourse frizzles away the possibility of winning over the hearer as the relentless threats to the hearer's face infuriate the hearer, aggravate the frosty relationship between the interlocutors and deepen the animosity among them. This ultimately, hinders communication. Ikeogwu walked out on the Council declaring that '...Umuasa will cease to exist as a single entity.'

Conclusion

The Speech acts theory and the concept of politeness have been employed to investigate; how the deployment of proverbs hinders cooperation among interlocutors, whether proverbs are face- threatening, to what extent they are, and what their contributions are to communication in *Two to Tango a Play*. The Speech acts theory explicates that certain acts are performed in verbal communication as they have been indicated in the table above and proverb is a tool of verbal communication. The concept of politeness in communication identifies positive face threat and

negative face threat, although this study has just discovered that, in addition, few proverbs carry neutral face threat which threaten no one.

In this study, it is discovered that the incessant use of face- threatening proverbs by a speaker damages relationship with his or her hearer to the extent that further communication is negatively affected. Also, the deployment of face-threatening proverbs fails to secure cooperative behaviour in communication. Proverbs are found to be face-threatening and they could do so to worsen adversely, relationship among interlocutors in communication. The contributions of proverbs to communication may enhance or hinder further communication among interlocutors.

It is suggested that a proverb which does not pose any threat to the hearer's face but rather affirms both the speaker and the hearer, or proverbs that function to affirm only the speaker without frontally threatening the addressee's face be employed to secure cooperative behaviour among interlocutors in communication.

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