Proverbs and Linguistic Meta-Criticism: Towards a Re-reading of Proverbs as Narrative Sublimation in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

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This paper is a counter-discourse that hopes to subvert the critical mediations that deify the ‘mid-wifery’ role of proverbs in narrative communication, especially in Achebe’s fiction. Although, it recognizes the place of historical and philosophical truth, archetypal wisdom, and rhetorical ‘force’ in proverbs, it argues that this numeric density of figurative residents of proverbs is a burden of semantic ambiguity and narrative sublimation. Annexing the resources of critical theory, logic and linguistic analysis, the paper takes intrinsic look at Things Fall Apart, and diagnoses the relations of proverbs to the narrative in terms of their categories of sublimation devices of Exclusive/Diacritical, Inclusive/Taxonomic and Intersectional/Semantic values. Thus, proverbs have overt aesthetic and affective functions; but they are never the less meta-narrative/meta-poetic discourses on the borderline of nonsense and grammar, and as such their nuggets of wisdom and logic may blinker us from the reality of their ‘states’ as neuro-psychic specimens requiring the services of neuro-linguists to decipher. The paper, however, insulates itself from value judgment by not being prescriptive or legislative about the negative or positive values of proverb usage in discourse and necessity for proverbial listing in narratives and other communication. Rather, it is descriptive, stressing that proverbs are strategic instruments of semantic deflection, diffusion, and distraction from the pseudo-temporal nature of language. And to the speaker of proverbs, they are verbal, nuclear weapons of rhetoric, style and communicative ‘force’ with telepathic functions. They are a meta-force that disarms the hearers from resisting the verbal order (and pragmatic authority) and internal ‘law’ of reason that govern discourse or communication. Proverbs compel psychic and philosophical obedience from their hearers; for the latter is seemingly bound by their mega discursive power to succumb to the speaker’s ideational proposition, logic and the otherwise prescriptive rules encapsulated in the proverbs.

Key words: Proverbs, sublimation, verbal order, Things Fall Apart, neuro-psychic specimens, rhetoric, semantic diffusion.

Introduction

Achebe – Grand Master in Proverbial Listing: Entering the Sublime

Achebe’s literary works are woven in subtly simple but attractive linguistic and cultural flavor which affords the average alien and African as well the opportunity to smell the onions, the aroma and the elegance of African “horses” of speech. Glimpses of values of African culture and philosophy are resident in Achebe’s fascinating proverbs, idioms, and imagistic expressions. Sometimes they are anecdotal, allusive, illustrative and narratorial. Some proverbs encode the history and culture of the people
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(Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1993). Thus, for example, to understand the cultural resistance of the Igbo people to early colonial encroachment, one can search out the proverbs in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993) attempted to account for the sources of Igbo proverbs as creative functions of various eventful moments in the history of the Igbo people.

In *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) Achebe observes that “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (p. 5) in Igbo discourse. This singular statement of value has, for decades, fired up the interest of researchers investigating the poetics of African discourse and style of conversation. These include Obiechina (1993), Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993), Oha (1998). Proverbs like “When a man says yes, his chi says yes also” (TFA p. 19); “The outsider who wept more than the bereaved” “the proverbial antelope who danced himself lame before the real dance began”, “the lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did” (TFA, p. 16), “He who brings kolanut brings life” (TFA, p. 5) etc., are a valuable store-house for understanding Igbo culture and philosophy. Due to Achebe use of these proverbs as beautiful garments for decorating speeches, we can make preliminary remarks without consideration to the linguistic inappropriateness of the proverb that indeed in Africa, “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten”.

This paper examines the dynamic process in which proverbs systematically complexify meaning but aesthetically hypnotize the hearer by suspending his/her consciousness of their ambiguity, semantic inappropriateness and ungrammatically. Proverbs thus impose affective discourse meaning; and strategically, they persuade the hearer to succumb to their meta-functional logic. Indeed, proverbs are verbal nuclear disarmament. They detonate the inner conviction of the hearer. They psychically mesmerize him/her thereby making the proverb speaker to earn some kind of compelling respect for his seeming inviolate wisdom and psychic energy of archetypal nature. Proverbs are indices of immersion in cultural civilization and oral/loric versification. Sometimes, the use of proverbs may also imply the speaker’s knowledge of human and natural organic history; even though the speaker has no right of authorship and authority over the proverbs as communal intellectual property. Even in Biblical history, one of the pragmatic evidences of King Solomon’s wisdom is his ability for profuse use of proverbs. The discourse of Christ’s teachings is also adorned with grandeur proverbial, anecdotal, and allegorical fiber of speeches.

In the African contextual communication theory, proverbs are needed to manage discourse. Although in Fashina (1994), I claimed that proverbs “help to neutralize the destructive and reductive impact of language on meaning” (105), I now reason differently. More advanced exposure to the science and semantic philosophy of proverbs now reveals that proverbs are strategies of discourse complication, which takes discourse to the level of the sublime. Agreeably, they function in the same way as gestural kinesis complements meaning in every day communication and reception process as well as in literature. Proverbs help to reinforce the direction of epistemic fulfillment in every verbal discourse in Africa, using the ‘force’ of rhetoric. In 1865, Richard Burton commented on the abundance of Yoruba proverbs, describing them as “at once the ethics and the poetics of the people” (cited in Karin Barber, 1990:166). In the context of the genre of Yoruba proverbs, Barber (1990) in his review of Oyekan
Owomoyela’s work, *a Kii: Yoruba Prospective and Prescriptive Proverbs* (1988), states that “situations vary and circumstances change; Owomoyela rightly stresses the plasticity of the proverb, which can be made to say different things in different contexts” (167-68). This assertion underscores the semantic versatility, and hence ambiguity of proverbs. In the book, Owomoyela suggests that proverbs are diplomatic ways of wrapping up the truth; they are also, as another proverb describes it, the “horses to find” truth (108).

**Proverbs and Logic: Negotiating the Semantic Space**

A great percentage of African proverbs cannot convey effective meaning and sense if translated into a European language. This is because proverbs carry a density of cultural signification system that can be meaningful only within the context of a shared lexico-semantic and contextual field. Even when there are similar forms and ideational components between an African proverb and an English one, the contrastive range of cultural, contextual, and lexico-semantic field will direct them toward adjacent meanings. For if Anglo-Saxons claim that “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but calling will not hurt me”, the Yoruba, according to Owomoyela, (1988:235) more subtly, say the opposite: “The mark of a wound might heal, but the mark of the voice never heals. We need no rigorous semantic analysis and a Speech Act Theory to recognize the marked current of lexical, ideational and contextual difference between the Anglo-Saxon proverb and its pseudo-equivalent Yoruba version.

We may further demonstrate that proverbs in indigenous languages will miss their semantic target if translated into a European language if we ask some African scholars to translate the same African language proverb into English individually. The result will be that the translators would use different words and thus make the proverbs mean differently to some extent. For as in M.A.K. Halliday’s semantic theory, no two lexical items however lexically, semantically or phonologically contiguous and synonymous can produce the same meaning. A practical example will suffice here. In his book, *A Kii*, Owomoyela (1988) translates the same proverbs into English, while, I.O. Delano (1973:77) attempted his own translation of the same proverbs. The difference between the three translations of the same proverb explains my point.

1. The proverb in Yoruba language: *Owe l’esin oro, oro l’esin Owe, bi oro ba so nu, owe la fi n waa.*

   **Example of lexico-semantic difference through translation:**
   
   A) Owomoyela (1988): “proverbs are the horses of *truth*, if an *idea* is lost, we use a proverb to find it”
   
   B) Abiola Irele (1990): “proverbs are the horse of *discourse*, if a *context* is lost it is proverb we use to find it”.

   \[
   \begin{align*}
   \text{truth} & \quad \downarrow \\
   \text{idea} & \quad \downarrow \\
   \text{discourse} & \quad \downarrow \\
   \text{context} & 
   \end{align*}
   \]
C) I.O. Delano (1973): “A proverb is a horse which can carry one swiftly to the idea sought”

Instead of this systematic animation of speech as done in the proverb above, one could simply express the same idea about the symbiotic relations of “words” and “proverbs” by saying ‘Proverbs and words are inseparable allies in the task of speech making and communication’. In fact, the main message in that proverb about proverbs is that proverbs need words and words need proverbs. And this is a statement with paradoxical structure i.e. $X = Y$, and $Y = X$. But, logic breaks down since any inversion of order in the first structure and meaning would invariably result in inversion of context and meaning. If (a) $X = Y$, $Y$ may not be equal to $X$, therefore the logical equation can be re-written as (b) $Y = X$, where $X$ and $Y$ are constant, but $Y \neq X$, because in (a) $X$ precedes $Y$, while in (b) $Y$ precedes $X$. Thus, $Y \pm X$ can be re-written as $Y$ is equal or not equal to $X$ in (b) or $Y$ is equal to $X$ with a variant.

In these two different translations of the same proverb, the dense semantic forest of denotative and connotative meanings of the repeated Yoruba word “oro” in the Yoruba language version is substituted with Owomoyela’s lexical items such as “truth” and “idea” as against Irele’s “discourse” and “context”. Either form of translations is right or wrong depending on the translators’ conception and imagined semantic frame of the Yoruba word “oro”, which translates literally as “word”. Literally, “truth” in English is a lexical equivalent of the word “ooto”. At the same time “oro” means a word, speech, idea or “discourse”. But this meaning depends on the context of situation. This problem of cultural determinism and semantic elasticity of proverbs goes to cement our stance in Fashina (1992) that Ola Rotimi’s character, Kurunmi’s misapplication of the “gaboon viper” proverb and others is a consequence of translation from African indigenous language into English.

De-ambiguating the Literary Space
Proverb is a genre of literature – the poetic discourse. And literary discourse, by its very nature, is an ambiguous strategy of communication. It is a bizarre face-threatening act that compounds and ‘complexifies’ the process of transferring and sharing the meanings, images and desires in us with others. Although, what is meant by literary discourse captures a broad spectrum of marked and unmarked specification of language use, our radius of meaning in the present exegesis covers any usage of language that pretends to flavor the naturally occurring spoken and written language with spices of imagistic ornaments that function as “dress of thought”. (E.L. Epstein, 1999, Alexander Pope). While the foregoing is a short-circuit of the range of literary discourse, we regard the main-bowl of literary discourse as the canonized works of intellectual novelists, playwrights and poets. It includes the meta-discourse of literary interpreters, theorists and critics who participate in the negotiation of literary meaning: middle agents, wholesalers, retailers and distributors of the creative, literary community. The business of these middle agents of meta-communication is made relevant because of the need to ‘de-ambiguate’ the flux of meanings encoded in the primary text. But, often-times, they compound the ambiguity and complexity inherent the meanings that are resident in the primary text. This post-creative strategy has indeed become a problem, a deluding problem in the process of literary
communication to the extent that a simple narrative is forced to ‘wear the mask’ of sublimation thus raising the ordinary to extra–ordinary and the secular to mystical heights.

To many branches of linguistics, the pattern of communication in literary discourse is a problem, a serious riddle to be resolved via a multiplicity of linguistic, paralinguistic and extra–linguistic methods of inquiry. And this is because the domain of literature is signified by language uses that oscillate on the borderline of “nonsense and grammar: a besetting problem which has encouraged Noam Chomsky’s syntactic theories to update its approaches to the study of linguistic structures. Similarly, M.A.K. Halliday had to redefine his semantic studies by devising context sensitive rules that could account for non-resident but implied extensions of meaning beyond the visible linguistic realization of sentence or discourse.

These advances in the study of language are necessary tools for enhancing our understanding of the complexity of the human mind, thoughts, self-culture and behaviour in relation to environment and the imperative consequences of human interaction or ‘sociation’. And it is in literature that the interactive consequences of human behaviour could be ably captured and studied. This is because man is the centre and circumference of the universe and, as such, man becomes the main subject of humanism (Jim Henrick, 2003). Therefore, s/he is the actor in the dynamics of universal knowledge. Since man is a speech producing animal, a study of his language as a repository of the totality of his constituents and constitution of knowledge, emotions, biases, creative initiatives and ingenuities is highly desirable. And since man has no universal language courtesy of the diversification of human language at the historic “tower of Babel” (Genesis 11:1–9), we can say the human differ from one another in as many ways as their languages differ. This diversification of language among humans underlines the lack of homology of structures, mental image, environmental influences and other conditions of variegation. Thus, there is no one specific universally agreed language for exchanging meaning. This, invariably, accounts for the ambiguity of linguistic signs and their referents; for as in Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a signified and its signifier. This imperative makes language itself an ambiguous instrument of communication. For, without a shared landscape of meaning or mutual intelligibility between interlocutors from different speech communities, they could make reference to the same object without really knowing it. Thus I concur that language is itself an ambiguous instrument for signifying meaning (Emile Benveniste). Each word has a meaning only if there is shared tacit understanding between communicators. And because each word refers meaning, it cannot on its own mean anything except as a referent. All these point at the inherent ambiguities of human language in itself. Thus, if language itself has inherent ambiguity, because of its metaphoric nature – that is, its power to use a referent to mean more than one thing, then any language or word, however simple, has a carriage of both denotative and connotative meanings, since each lexical item is non-self referential but cross-referential: referring to something outside itself. “Stone” does not have meaning except as a reference to the hard rocky object in nature. So is the word “tree” non-meaningful except as a reference to one denizen of the plant family (Eagleton, 1987). From this standpoint of language as being inherently ambiguous, one can begin to appreciate the inevitability of ambiguity.
in imaginative communication itself. Thus, as we have stated at the beginning, literature as a specialized language is ambiguous: though the levels of ambiguity are relative to specific tenor of language use in a literary discourse.

Problem of Narrative Sublimation through Achebe’s Proverbs on Okonkwo

In Achebe’s timeless novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the imagistic representation of Okonkwo’s personality is captured in the simile: “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like bush fire the harmattan” (p. 3). The first problem in this sentence is with the problematic verb ‘grown’ which, componentially, is [+ past + participle + lexical verb] and can only collocate with [+animate, +concrete nouns] as “Head” of the “Subject NP”. In its [+present + active] form, ‘grow’ is a [+to infinite + transitive] verb, which ordinarily, belongs to the field or register of biological or agricultural sciences. It denotatively means to ‘increase’ or to add up to the living cells (of plant or animal, or any animate) of a concrete noun in width and length. But, in Achebe’s novel, growth is associated with “fame”. Componentially, the noun, “fame”, is [± animate – concrete]. Thus, to say Okonkwo’s “fame had grown like bush fire ....” (italicised mine) is to force otherwise semantically unrelated noun and verb to collocate. But, ironically, while core-linguistic rules would discount this type of construction as inappropriate, literary language celebrates it. If Achebe had used the verb *increased* instead of *grown* the scale of semantic anomaly would have been less. The verb *grown* itself has been so problematic to semanticians because of context usages like ‘tomato grows’ and ‘I grow tomato’ whereby it is delicate to determine if it is correct to say ‘I grow tomato’ or that ‘tomato grows’ since the act of growing is not what a person does. It is natural. One can plant tomato. But, it grows by itself. Thus, Achebe’s use of the verb “grown” in the context of Okonkwo’s increasing fame has made this otherwise proverbial idiom to suffer some semantic query.

This is a marker of dis-collocation whereby a non-animate, abstract noun [*fame*] is made co-referential to a +concrete, +transitive verb [grow] with asymmetric componential meaning. Also, the adverbial ‘like’ which serves as ‘linker’ between the main clause and the subordinate clause in the figurative speech under analysis has a comparative function. It compares the semantically ambiguous main clause with a realistic image picture of a “bush fire” whose intensity is high when it is aided by the dry tinder wind called “harmattan” in the tropics. Harmattan intensifies combustion. The ambiguity of this literary language stems from linguistic inappropriateness and imagistic fallacy to intentional exaggeration, which hallmarks the ironic and hyperbolic overstatement of Okonkwo’s fame. It is ironic in the sense that if Achebe meant to paint a positive picture of Okokwo’s greatness, the metaphors of “bush fire in the harmattan” which he employs in aid of this literary intension is ironically a negative value that means the opposite of his intension. But, Achebe, the great literary master of Anglophone English hardly wishes Okonkwo well in the latter’s excesses. Thus, this kind of sublimation of language that underlies Achebe’s surface linguistic simplicity is a function – an intentional device to signify the complexity of the social issues involved in Igbo national history amidst the struggle against colonialism. The logical semantic co-reference would be that Okonkwo is destructive, fierce, aggressive, untameable and wicked. These negative qualities would be anti-thetical to
the qualities of ancient wisdom and ancestral dignity that an African anti-colonial leader like Okonkwo should possess.

If Achebe’s Igbo classic character and anti-colonial leader could thus be negatively presented, one wonders why the literary giant would engage Joseph Conrad in a dross of intellectual ‘fight’ over the latter’s so-called “negative presentation of Africa” and Africans in *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe, Postcolonial Criticism). Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, receives no less negative portraiture by Achebe whose creative subjectivities erect the poet–musician character as a weakling while Ikemefuna is helplessly wasted as a ritual scapegoat. And the wives of Okonkwo are trenchant examples of “alterity” in African feminine discourse. The foregoing skepticism about the African personality is but a trifle when compared to the novelist’s seemingly ‘conspiracy’ with the white colonial District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* who intends to write back home to Europe a book about the “Pacification of the Primitive People’s of the Lower Niger”. Surprisingly, the word ‘primitive’ is an offensive critical vocabulary in Achebe’s anti-colonial ideology. Achebe has castigated and accused Conrad of racism because of the latter’s character, Marlowe’s equation of Africa to the “primitive” psyche of human region. Now, if Conrad is to blame for his fictional character’s racist thoughts, and if Salman Rushdie is to blame for his fictional character’s decapitation of a religious sect, then Achebe is obviously to blame for his colonial district Commissioner’s devaluation of an Igbo people as primitive. If Joseph Conrad were alive this century, he would definitely have a winning literary suit against Achebe for his psychic denigration of his own African peoples in his novels. For example, images painted of Okonkwo include “wide nose”, “bushy eyebrows”, “severe look”, “Roaring Flame” failure-phobia, bestiality, murderer, impatience, morbid anger, aggression, wild fire, inner weakness and feigning or manliness, etc. But, perhaps, Achebe would have blamed his de-creations of the African personalities on narrative sublimation as an inevitable trap of literary contradiction on the ambiguous nature of literary discourse.

### Narrative Sublimation through Achebe’s Proverbs on Unoka

Proverbs as narrative sublimation and discourse poeticization is readily manifested in the discourse between Okoye and Unoka, which went in plain language, until Okoye broke the narrative flow and discourse lucidity by spicing up the discourse with proverbs. According to the author/narrator,

> “Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs” (p. 5).

The foregoing authorial commentary suggests that Achebe himself is conscious of the problem of meaning that arises from using “proverbs” instead of speaking “plainly”. The narrator, presumably Achebe himself, now extols the cultural significance of proverb in Igbo discourse: “…proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (p.5). This proverb about proverbs presents semantically impossible and illogical context. The idea that a [+ human] noun uses “proverbs” as “palm-oil” to “eat” “word” appears to be a statement with neuro-linguistic problem. Hence, “proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” sounds like a discourse on the borderline of
nonsense and grammar. It is nonsense because of its semantic anomaly relating an impossible condition, and it is grammatical because of its syntactic appropriateness. And also in terms of lexical co-occurrence, co-reference and collocation, the construction shows lexical dis-collocation. Thus, it is loaded with ideational fallacy when viewed with the linguistic lens. This can be made more explicit as follows:

i) Clause structure: one principal clause = one subordinate clause: SPC//SP. Thus, the sentence is syntactically in order.

**Lexico–semantic structure:** This proverb is a complex sentence with one alpha (α) and beta (β) clause apiece:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Proverbs/} & \quad \text{are/ the palm-oil with/} \quad \text{which words/} \quad \text{are eaten}
\end{align*}
\]

**α clause:**

Subject: Proverbs = 

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{Noun} \\
+ \text{Count} \\
+ \text{Plural} \\
- \text{Concrete} \\
+ \text{Animate}
\end{array}\]

Predicate: are = 

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{Verb} \\
+ \text{Present} \\
+ \text{Plural} \\
+ \text{Copula}
\end{array}\]

Complement: the palm-oil

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{Noun} \\
+ \text{Concrete} \\
- \text{Count}
\end{array}\]

Conjunction: with =

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{conjunction} \\
+ \text{Subordinating}
\end{array}\]

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{Relative} \\
+ \text{Adjectival} \\
+ \text{Embedding} \\
+ \text{Subordinate}
\end{array}\]

\[\begin{array}{c}
+ \text{Relative} \\
+ \text{Adjectival} \\
+ \text{Embedding} \\
+ \text{Subordinate}
\end{array}\]
Explaination: In the above componental charts, A and C are not co-referential. They exhibit dis-collocation; and hence they are semantically anomalous.

The main grammatical problem is that the subject of the Alpha clause cannot co-occur with its complement because of componental (or lexical) disagreement. Thus, the predicate that introduces the subject (that performs the action) of the complement is also inappropriate in its function: The predicate is an existential verb, and hence a copula. A copula equates two nouns and relates them in the same semantic category of co-existence. In other words, “proverbs” cannot mean or be equal to “palm-oil”. It is impossible because the componental meaning of the pluralized noun –‘proverbs’ is as follows:

A: proverbs
- Concrete Noun
- Food

While Palm-oil =
+ concrete Noun
+ Food

Thus in the above componental chat, A is not the same or equal to B. Hence, A = C, where the sign ± means not equal to.

In the beta clause, the subject, that is chart F, is [-Food] while the lexical verb of the predicate is [+ Food]. Thus, there is lexico-semantic problem of lexical choice and lack of co-reference, at the paradigmatic relations level. The statement thus escalates on the borderlines of nonsense and grammar. In fact, to be more explicit, the determiner of the complement in the alpha clause worsens the anomaly. It is restrictive and thus makes the clause to have more fallacious emphasis that “proverbs are the palm-oil”. If it had used the adverbials of simile such as ‘like’ and ‘as’, the scale of anomaly would have been low. But, the definite article there intensifies the semantic
anomaly, i.e. bringing the interpretation to the metaphorical level in order to do a sensible analysis. Thus, for the proverb to be sensible, one has to recognize that it is a special kind of language – a literary or figurative language that requires contextual, extra-textual and exophoric considerations in order to decipher its meaning. And this is the function of the Halliday’s Systematic Functional Grammar (SFG). Otherwise, without the help of a meta-grammar, the discourse is lost to anomaly.

And within the unfolding narrative continuum, Achebe reveals the influence of proverbs on speech as a complication of discourse, a somewhat deluding process of epistemological distraction from access to meaning through the quintessential lucidity of language in verbal communication. In negotiating the discourse of possible repayment of his debts by Unoka, Okoye enlists a trainload of proverbs in an attempt to persuade his debtor-friend to pay up his debt:

Okoye was a great talker and the spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally (p.5).

The foregoing evidence from Achebe’s authorial narrative stream of consciousness provides a confluence of reasons to consider proverbs as a negation of effective communication. By definition, communication is the ability to represent meaning to the hearer in as clear as possible language without the pitfalls of neuro-psychic, audiophbic, grapho-linguistic and other elemental forms of obstruction of the channels. But, in this case, the reliance on proverbs as a vehicle of semantic realization creates a problem of deflection arising from the pseudo-temporal nature of proverbial figures, figurations and imagery. Another effect of proverbs is the problem of indirectness of communication, whereby the use of proverbs as meta-language of epistemological significance produces acts of rigmarole, tautology and illogical complications of discourse. Although, this act of proverbial rhetoricization is a poetic principle of African verbal communication, it is, however, a systematic process of discourse ‘patriarchy’, whereby proverbs provide a discourse with redolent language and rhetorical superstructure that alienates aspects of meanings by pushing it to the margins of obscurity. Thus a meaning that could be relayed in simple prosaic and “short” form suffers ideational extensions that often make the material and phenomenon of meaning to vacillate. Achebe himself is conscious of his character’s rhetorical distention as he writes of Okoye:

“In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries be had borrowed for more than two years before (p. 6).

But Unoka was lost in a labyrinth of rhetorical vituperations and could not define the meaning of Okoye’s proverbs until the latter is able to descend from the Olympian heights of semantic sublimation:

As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed long and long and his voice rang out clear as ogene; and tears stood in his eyes... At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer between fresh outbursts and of mirth. (p. 6).
By every stretch of imagination, it is obvious that Achebe’s literary mind recognizes the negative and distracting influence of proverbial listing on the semantic targets of a discourse. Thus the imposition of proverbs as a beautiful “dress of thought” (E.L. Epstein, 1978:32) is, at best, a mitigation of success in communication endeavor.

However, I concur that the psycho-linguistic and pragmatic functions of proverbs as a ‘force’, a strategy of ‘persuasion’, a systematic method of linguistic telepathy and semantic hypnotism directed at the hearer or listener is an aspect of materialist imperative. And every participant in that Igbo linguistic and cultural space understands the function and use of proverbs as ideational space filler used in stead of a group of words. It is an indirect, subtle and surreptitious instrument used to ‘enforce’ consensus of hearer to the speaker’s ideational proposition. Thus, Unoka, himself a sharer of the linguistic act and rhetorical impulse of Igbo discourse sublimation strategy, employs the vehicle of a proverb to convince Okoye that by his debt repayment schedule, Okoye has to wait and allow him to first settle his longer and bigger debts. The proverbs make Unoka’s proposition incontrovertible, even though they are contextually illogical:

“Our elders says that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them”. (p. 6)

The image evoked in this proverb has no lexical and semantic matching with the idea and context of loan repayment transaction. It would therefore require a “second order level” (Crystal and Davy, 1976) of contextual semantic analysis to understand the extensive connotation of that two otherwise disparate categories of discourse. The relations of meaning to discourse, and of discourse to meaning, are intricate. The social issue in the conversation involves debt repayment. And that is a discourse. The proverb is used as allegory. As an ‘extended metaphor’ that adds literary spices to the main discourse, the proverb is itself another discourse. However, while the social discourse is the main discourse, the other one which is figurative is a meta-discourse. Sometimes, the meta-discourse does not have inclusive and semantic referential function. That is, it does not have the necessary unit of grammatical meaning and relevance to the main discourse. What it has is an exclusive and signifying neo-referential function, whereby their function is meta- logical and often makes an otherwise simple discourse to become sublime. The foregoing underlines the linguistic and narrative processes by which Achebe’s proverbs ironically makes his otherwise simple discourse to become sublime.
References


