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A SEMIOTICS OF ASPECTS OF ENGLISH AND YORUBA PROVERBS

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Abstract

If semiotics is often described by semioticians as the study of all significant sign systems, language becomes, as it were, the most significant semiotic of semiological systems because of its unique, innumerable, human, interactive and functional potential. On the one hand, proverbs, as a result of their metaphorical essence, become a very significant aspect of the use of language. On the other hand, they are universal and have specific cultural tools of ethnic signification. In this paper, an attempt of the analysis of the semiotics of proverbs in English and Yoruba is provided. Using Eco's concept of semiotics of Metaphor' from the semiotics perspective, the result of the analysis is an exploratory categorization of aspects of the semiotic systems of the two languages.

Keywords: Semiotics, English, Yoruba, Global Semantic Field, Metonymy, Sememe, Metaphor, Semantic Meaning.

Introduction

In the text dedicated to de Saussure (1857-1913), Course in General Linguistics, "semiology" is presented as a science in which "the study of the life of signs within society" is effected (Innis 1985:viii; Culler (1981). Innis expressed further the fact that language is the analytical paradigm for all other sign systems. One may see every language, therefore, as a system of signs because the sounds of any language are encoded by the speaker as signs. Its receiver or hearer decodes it as signs. Thus, the phenomenon of language becomes the instrument for the exchange of signs by its users (Daramola, 2008; 2012).

Expressing his semiotic position in his seminal book - A Theory of Semiotics, Eco believes that "signification encompasses the whole of cultural life." Succinctly put, he (Eco) sees semiotics as being "a-extensive with the whole range of cultural phenomena."

Perhaps the most significant aspect of language is the proverbs because of their signification of symbolisms. Proverbs are classified by many linguists as metaphor; and every theory of metaphor may be used to define the concept of proverbs. Examine a definition of metaphor by Eco (1985:251) as follows:

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"the substitution of one element of language for another (the operation is completely internal to the semiotic circle) but by virtue of a resemblance between their referents."

Eco's definition above is concerned with the characteristic change of the plane of perception and, linguistically, the meaning of proverbs. Consequent upon such a change is the occurrence of two referents that are comparable.

Halliday (1994:340) contextualises the concept of metaphor in a similar way thus:

"Among the 'figures of speech' recognized in rhetorical theory are a number of related figures having to do with verbal transference of various kinds. The general term for these is METAPHOR" (capital letters his).

In the above definition by Halliday, proverbs are contextualised in rhetorical theory and classified as metaphor. Also important is its characterization as verbalization. Concerning its specific sense by which an item is referred to, Halliday (op.cit) contrasts it with METONYMY and synecdoche. All of the three involve a 'non-literal' use of words. Instantially in this work, proverbs are referred to therefore as metaphors.

Regarding what is literal and non-literal in language use, one may emphasise the fact that one of the aspects of the culture of the English people is the description and explanation of physical reality through science. Science is often thought to be precise and unambiguous; that is, literal. Literal language is thought to present an objective characteristic of reality. In the twentieth century philosophy, as an example, it was an important underlying assumption of picture of theories of meaning (see Russell 1956, Wittgenstein 1961 and Ortory 1981:11). It got to its peak in the theory of logical position that was used to state that reality could be precisely described through the medium of language in a clear, unambiguous and testable reality. In other words, in the expression of logical positivism, literal language was the order of the day.

The relativist view is however different from the logical positivism. The main idea of the relativist perspective is that cognition is the result of mental construction. They express the view that the knowledge of reality through whatever means (e.g. perception, language, memory) is a result of going beyond the information provided. In other words, it arises from the interaction of that information with the context in which it is presented, and with the knower's pre-existing knowledge (Sapir 1921, Whorf 1956). To the practitioners, the object world is not directly accessible, but is constructed on the basis of the constraining influence of human knowledge and language.¹

Beyond positivist and relativist's views, the study of metaphor often begins with the works of Aristotle (Ortory op.cit. p.3). In his works, Aristotle considered the general relationship of metaphor to language and its purpose in communication. His examinations of metaphor and language in Poetics and Rhetoric have remained relevant to this day. According to Sadock (1981:46-63):

In metaphor, the loans of indirection is one part of an utterance; namely a predication. The predication may be buried inside a noun phrase, as in Aristotle's example "the sunset of life" or it may be overt as in a sentence, "Life is a sunrise and a sunset". But all of these type of figures are alike in that they communicate in an indirect way what might have been communicated directly in terms of the convention of a language."

Concerning metaphor, Sadock's explanation above is concerned with its characterization in terms of indirectness. Indirectness will complement Eco's perception of metaphor as referential and Halliday's perception of transference. Following his concept of predication in metaphor as enumerated above, he asserts that 'most proverbs, I would think are like this, too. He exemplifies his thought by the use of "Too many cooks spoil the broth", not "A supra abundance of chefs ruins the consommé to express the point-of-view that someone's help is not desired (see pp. 61-62). He concludes his assertion by conceptualizing all metaphors as belonging to "the loans of semantic change in natural language.

The Essence of Proverbs

Proverbs as an aspect of oral language remains from time immemorial until today a very powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, philosophy, social morality and values and the sensibility of the people. Their values do not lie only, in what they reveal of the thoughts of the people, proverbs are a model of compressed or forceful language. Other than their powerful verbal techniques, proverbs have proved to be of great relevance to modern man. This is owing to the fact that users with gifts of creativity and are familiar with its techniques may create new ones to avoid hackneyed expressions. This point-of-view explains, perhaps, Chomskyan view that all normal native speakers are capable of generating novel sentences that they have never generated before.

In both traditional and modern contexts in the Yorubaland, proverbs fulfill social, religious, political and communicative functions. In this regard, Akporobaro and Emovon (1994, pp. 2-3) assert:

"In its general form, the proverb belongs to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically concerned forms of expressions like the metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms. It differs from these forms in terms of the explicit fruitfulness of what it states, and by the terseness and picturesque quality of its style and form of statement. In terms of form, the proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Its beauty, and source of delight as is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth. The truth presented in the proverbs is not a logical, a priori or intuitive truth; it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the peoples experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature.

The above reference to proverbs is, again, contextualised in metaphor. Although the reference is more literary than linguistic, the import of the interactional nature of proverbs, its universal and experiential relevance are notable. In a similar way to proverbs all over the world, Yoruba proverbs are products of the people's socio-cultural and geographical experience. In other words, they are used to express the forms and the situation, flora and fauna of the people according to their natural environment. The experimental reality of the Yoruba proverbs is different from those of other language groups whose geographical and socio-cultural realities differ. Proverbs are used therefore by the Yoruba people not only as a vehicle of the expression of truth, religion, morality but also dominant occupation, and other practices which reflect their day-to-day living.

In English culture, it seems that the use of proverbs has degenerated tremendously. Instead, the use of idioms has developed geometrically. A courtesy visit to the family of an English man in any part of the English world - England, Canada, United States of

America, Australia etc. may generate discussions during lunch or dinner hours when an old lady or a man may remember one or two proverbs while providing an illustration of an activity as practised by her or his parents or grand parents. Among the middle age and the young ones, nevertheless, the use of proverbs is almost a forgotten exercise. Instead, they have idioms for every and all occasions and practices. The elaborate use of idioms rather than proverbs by native speakers may provide intelligibility problems to second or foreign users of English in many contexts.²

Conceptual Framework

The analysis of proverbs in this paper is based on Eco's work in which he presents metaphor as being embedded in a Global Semantic Field (GSF) - one of the main notions of his semiotic theory. This proposition is based in a subjacent chain of metonymies. His goal is to uncover 'the real linguistic mechanism' in metaphor to show how it (metaphor) may be seen as the process of unlimited semiosis - the continual generation of signs. In this regard, any metaphor which 'institutes' a resemblance between the two or more semantic spaces that it is fusing, would be definable only through the metonymic chains of association in which it is embedded and also an infinite chains of interpretants. By this is meant that metaphorical expressions are already latent in the expressive possibilities of the GSF. He (Eco) asserts:

'A metaphor can be invented because language, in its process of unlimited semiosis, constitutes a multidimensional network of metonymies, each of which is explained by a cultural convention rather than by an original resemblance' and thus a metaphor is supplied with a 'subjacent, network of arbitrarily stipulated contiguities.' The contiguities can be between signifiers, between signifieds, in the code, in the co-text, and in the referent, each possibility being examined' (Innis 1985:247-249).

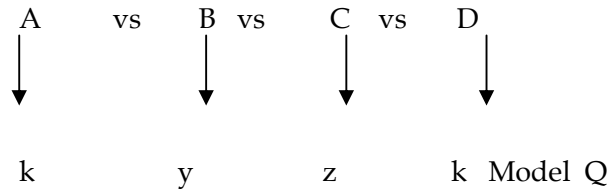
Eco believes that the seeming fusion of semantic spheres or semantic labyrinth is the GSF which he has constructed using his model Ross M. Quillian (Mode Q) notion of a 'semantic memory'. His assertion is, that factual judgments operate 'from the extension of language' while metaphor 'draws the idea of a possible connection 'from the intension' of the circle of unlimited semiosis.

Thus, the mechanism of metaphor is reduced to that of metonymy that relies on the existence of partial semantic fields that permit two types of metonymic relation'.

- (i) the codified metonymic relation procurable from the structure of the semantic field
- (ii) the codifying metonymic relation when the structure of a semantic field is culturally experienced.
 - (i) above implies semiotic judgement and
 - (ii) implies factual judgements.

The study is useful to this analysis in these ways. Proverbs, as metaphoric expressions or as cultural discourse, are codified on semantic or identifiable semantic structures. Also, the aesthetic nature of a given metaphor is also produced by contextual elements or variable of language use.³

Finally, he proffers the relevance of Model Q as a semiotic explanation of different rhetorical figures. It is the theory of interpretants which may be provided through a paradigmatic relation in a code as the following expresses:



Where the horizontal line constitutes a paradigm of different samemes and the vertical line constitutes relation from sememe to seme or semantic mark (k is a semantic mark of A; obviously, according to the model Q, k can become in its turn a sememe k to be analysed through other semantic marks. For example, k is a seme of another sememe; namely D. This is a case of metaphor in proverbial expressions. In other words, when A shares some property of B even when both of A and B do not belong to the same biological make-up, A can be substituted for B with regard to the property that they share. A is said to be in the place of the other, that is B, by virtue of a mutual resemblance. Such a resemblance is owing to the fact that there exist already fixed relations of institutions which, in some way or the other, until the substitute entities to those substituted for. All of these attributes are examined in the next section.

Data Presentation

In this section, twenty proverbs each are presented for English and Yoruba respectively. The Yoruba proverbs attract translation processes of one-to-one correspondence and equivalents while English ones do not.

English Proverbs.⁴

1. A swarm of bees in May is worth a load of hay, but a swarm in July is not worth a fly.
2. Two blacks do not make a white.
3. Birds of a feather flock together.
4. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.
5. A burnt child dreads the fire.
6. Busiest men find (or have) the most time (or leisure)
7. When the car is away the mice play (or will, or may, play).
8. Cleanliness is next to godliness.
9. Every cloud has a silver lining.
10. There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.
11. The way to an Englishman's heart is through his stomach.
12. Many a flower is born to blush unseen.
13. Gather ye rosebuds while you may.
14. Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones.
15. When Greek meets Greek, then comes a tug of war.
16. A green Christmas (or Yule, or winter) makes a full (or far) churchyard.
17. Hell has no fury like a woman scorned.
18. Lancashire thinks today what all English will think tomorrow.
19. Omelets are not made without breaking (or breaking of) eggs.
20. Table came of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves.

Yoruba Proverbs ⁵

1. Kekere la ti n peekan iroko, b tori bi o ba dagba tan ebo nii gba
small we +PROG. care iroko, because COMP. It aux. good furnish sacrifice it accepts.
An evil habit is easily subdued in the beginning, but when it becomes incurable it gains strength.
2. Eni to teyin o', l'agbado, eni la'gbado o' leyin.
who poss teeth a maize' who poss. maize NEG. teeth.
He who has teeth is without bread and he who has bread is without teeth.
3. Eni l'eku mejo a' po'fo
who poss mice two will lose
He who follows two hares is sure to catch neither.
4. Eni Sango toju e wole' ni b'Oya lekee.
who Sango witness him enter god VB PART. oya fake.
He who has had a bad experience is afraid.
5. 'Ee' yan won'
human rare
men are rare.
6. Ohun to' wu' o' 'o' wu mi, l'omo iya mejo se n jeun lototo'.
what PART. interest you NEG. interest me' PART. child mother and VERB do PROG. eat separate
All men do not admire and love the same objects.
7. B' eti ' o' gbo' yinkin' inu' ki' 'i' ba'ye.
If ear NEG. hear bad news stomach NEG. spoil
What the ear doesn't hear, the heart doesn't grieve.
8. A ki i dajo enikan ki a sore nu
we NEG. settle-case' one PART. we lose friend away
Don't pronounce sentence till you have heard the story of both parties.
9. 'A 'a bo' 'oro' la a so f'o mo huabi, bi o ba denu e; a a di odidi.
half word we say PREP. good birth PART. it enter stomach it become whole
A limit suffices for the wise.
10. Iku ya je sin
death better more ridicule.
An honourable death is better than an ignominious life.
11. B'iro ba lo logun odun, ojo kan soso loo to' o o baa
PART. lie AUX. go PART. twenty year day one only PART. truth will meet it.
Though a lie may be swift, truth overtakes it.
12. 'Okeere l'omo iya dun
distance PART . child mother sweet.
Respect is greater at a distance.
13. 'A i si nile ologinni; ile dile' ekute
NEG. be PART . house cat house PART. house rat.
When the cat is away, the mice will play.
14. Ogbon jagbara
wisdom PART. strength
skill surpasses strength.
15. Suuru baba iwa
patience father character
Patience excels character.
16. Ogun l'aye'
war PART. earth

- Life is warfare.
17. Inu ikoko' dudu l'eko funfun ti n' jade
inside pot black PART. pap white PART. PROG. outside.
A great man often steps forth from a humble cottage.
18. B' a 'o ku ri a' 'o sun ri?
If we NEG. die ever we PART sleep ever.
What is sleep but the image of cold death?
19. 'O osa to' n gbe 'ole 'o si, ise owo emi ni ngbe ni
deity PART. PRO. assist lazy NEG. exist work hand person PART. assist one.
No deity assists the lazy one, it is one's hardiwork that supports one.
20. Ina esisi ki i joni le'emeji
fire mistake PART. burn person 'twice
once beaten, twice shy.

Table 1: ENGLISH PROVERBS – ANALYSIS I

S/NO	GNS	METONYMY	SIGNIFICANT	F.J or S.J	M. Q
1.	comparison and change	bees vs hay unrelated	climatic may/July	semiotic	unlimited sememes
2.	comparison numeration	blacks vs white opposite	race ethnicity	linguistic	limited sememes
3.	comparison similarity	birds vs feather part-whole	morality agricultural	linguistic	limited sememes
4.	comparison religion	blood-marty un-related	seed agriculture	semiotic	unlimited sememes
5.	comparison accident	child-fire unrelated	fear event	linguistic	limited sememes
6.	comparison possession	men-time related	leisure event	linguistic	limited sememe
7.	comparison absence	cat-mice opposite	leisure event	linguistic	limited sememe
8.	comparison religion	clean-dirty opposite	health event	linguistic	limited sememes
9.	comparison problems	cloud-silver unrelated	morality perseverance	semiotic	unlimited sememes
10.	comparison religion	divinity - man related	helplessness	semiotic	unlimited sememes
11.	comparison success	heart - stomach part - part	food paths	semiotic	unlimited sememes
12.	comparison failure	flower - sight related	birth agriculture	semiotic	unlimited sememe
13.	comparison opportunity	flower - time unrelated	work time	linguistic	unlimited sememe
14.	comparison choice	glass - stone opposite	morality loaning	linguistic	limited sememe
15.	comparison problem	Greek - Greek Sameness	meeting disagreement	semiotic	unlimited sememes
16.	comparison opportunity	Christmas-churchyard Related	meeting agreement	linguistic	limited sememes
17.	comparison problem	well - woman related	morality scorn	semiotic	unlimited sememes
18.	comparison thought	lancashire - england related	today tomorrow	semiotic	unlimited sememes
19.	comparison creation	omelets - egg related	making breaking	semiotic	unlimited sememes
20.	comparison care	pence - pounds related	expenses moderation	semiotic	unlimited sememes

Table II: YORUBA PROVERBS - ANALYSIS II

1.	comparison problem	iroko-growth related	time small	semiotic	unlimited sememes
2.	comparison opportunity	teeth-maize unrelated	fruit agriculture	semiotic	unlimited sememes
3.	comparison roll	mice - loss unrelated	running numeration	linguistic	limited sememes
4.	comparison experience	sango - oya related	religion event	semiotic	unlimited sememes
5.	comparison problem	people-rarity unrelated	thought warning	linguistic	limited sememes
6.	comparison different	interest-disinterest opposite	eating separation	semiotic	unlimited sememes
7.	comparison experience	ear-stomach part-part	news hearing	semiotic	unlimited sememes
8.	comparison loss	people-friend related	case settlement	linguistic	limited sememes
9.	comparison discourse	half-word-full word part - whole	saying listener	semiotic	unlimited sememes
10.	comparison preference	death-ridicule unrelated	honour dishonour	linguistic	limited sememes
11.	comparison conduct	untruth - truth opposite	morality time	semiotic	unlimited sememes
12.	comparison conduct	distance - respect unrelated	interaction watch	linguistic	limited sememes
13.	comparison absence	cat - rat opposite	interaction watch	linguistic	limited sememes
14.	comparison conduct	wisdom - strength unrelated	skill use	linguistic	limited sememes
15.	comparison conduct	patience - character related	interaction behaviour	linguistic	limited sememes
16.	comparison struggle	war - living opposite	life sight	semiotic	unlimited sememes
17.	comparison endurance	pot - pap related	black white	semiotic	unlimited sememes
18.	comparison experience	death - sleep related	life loss	semiotic	unlimited sememes
19.	comparison hard work	laziness - work related	deity assistance	semiotic	unlimited sememes
20.	comparison experience	fire - bussing related	accident time	linguistic	limited sememes

DISCUSSION

On Table 1 above, column 1 consists of the Global Semantic Field (GSF) of a proverb. As can be seen from the analysis, all proverbs have the GSF of comparison followed by the underlying meaning of the proverb. Number one of Table 1, as an example, has the GSF of change. There is, no doubt, a difference between the month of May and July in the life of an Englishman. The metonymic relation of 'change' is introduced not only as a result of the months of the years but also by the multidimensional meaning of the essence of 'bees' and 'hay'. The signification of change here is weather or 'climatic' change. Its factual or semiotic judgment (in this case, semiotic) is premised on the complexity of metaphoric expression. If it is more structural, it is factual. If it is more semiotic; it is semiotic. In this instance, it is semiotic. This means that it has unlimited (i.e. complex) semiotic interpretations.

It is significant that all of numbers 1-12 (Table 1) have comparative GSF elements because all proverbs have inherent comparisons. Yet, each one has its basic resource for a separate meaning. These are change (1), numeration (2), similarity (3), religion (4), accident (5), possession (6), absence (7), religion (8), problems (9), religion (10), success (11) and failure (12). As a result of the comparisons of the GSF, all metonymic relations have paired elements (1-2) which may be unrelated (1), opposite (2), part-whole (3), unrelated (4-5), related (6), opposite (7-8), unrelated (9), related (10), part-part (11) and related (12). The column of Factual or Semiotic Judgments are either semiotic or linguistic options (1-12). Similarly the Mode Q has either limited or unlimited sememes. The same analytical pattern extends to Yoruba Proverbs on Table II.

A significant level of pattern is the differentiating elements that set apart proverbs of English and Yoruba; hence the two cultures are distinct cultures. In the months of May and July, the swarm of bees and loads of hay are significant concerning elements of change in the English man's climatic condition (see Text 1). In Text 2, there are the elements of racism in which two blacks (men) are compared to a white (man). In Text 4, the martyrdom of the Christian Church in England in particular and Europe in general is alluded to. In Text 11, a specific mention is made of the Englishman. The Englishman's love for flower is evident in Texts 12 and 13. Others are Greek (Text 15), Christmas (16), Lancashire (18), English (18), omelets (19), pence and pounds (20).

Concerning Yoruba proverbs, the African flora and fauna and religion with particular relevance to the deities are predominant. Some of these elements are untranslatable in the Yoruba cultural meaning to English. Examples are iroko (a tree) and ebo, (sacrifice in Text 1), agbado (maize in Text 2, eku (mice) in Text 3, Sango and Oya (deities in Text 4, iroko (a tree) in Text 17 and Oosa (deity) in 19.

Other than these elements of signification towards distinctive cultures in English and Yoruba, other topical issues of morality, death, destiny, scorn, time, life etc are important in the proverbs.

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this work to analyse aspects of English and Yoruba proverbs by using Eco's seminal work on the 'Semantics of metaphors' from the semiotic perspective. Most importantly, his concepts of Global Semantic Field, metonymic charms of association or relation, signification, factual and semiotic judgment and Model Q have been interpreted to bring his multidimensional network of the meaning of proverbs as metaphorical expressions. I begin from the history of semiotics with reference to the father of semiotics - Ferdinand de Saussure. Efforts are made, then, to establish the fact that proverbs form a significant part of the general concept of metaphor. This analysis has shown the semiotic relevance to the interpretation of some English and Yoruba proverbs with reference to Eco's thought on the global space of meaning. In the process, I have been able to identify, also, some elements of the semiotic essence of English and Yoruba proverbs.

Notes

1. Other views may be found in anthropology, sociology, psychology, epistemology, philosophy and sciences etc.
2. Idioms differ in usage and content from one language community to another, even when the same language is concerned.
3. Both the English and Yoruba cultures share universal values but each one may be set apart from the other.
4. English proverbs are extracted from Collin's A Book of English Proverbs, Longman.
5. Yoruba proverbs are extracted from Ajikobi's Marina Wo Niyen Ma?, Prompt Books.
6. Iroko is usually a big tree that is significant in Yoruba's religious worship.
7. Sango is the god of iron with an enormous power in the Yoruba pantheon. It is the god of thunder and lightning.

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