

## **“Pragmatic Use Of Some Proverbs On ‘Egungun’ Among Yoruba Speakers”**

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**Abstract:** *The author aims to conceptualize proverbs on ‘Egungun’ as pragmatic acts among Yoruba speakers. We believe that like all verbal expressions, proverbs represent a significant aspect of socio-cultural improvisation of any group of people. Crucially in this work are the ones constructed around ‘Egungun’ in Yoruba culture. Every day in interpersonal conversations, proverbs are a regular feature in Nigeria. The contextual use of proverbs has become very popular among the Yorubas and those constructed on Egungun seem to inhabit a variety of spaces in the Yoruba socio-cultural experience. Egunguni.emasquerade, is one of the notable gods among the tribe whose main function is to entertain at important events. It is also regarded as a spirit among the Yoruba people. The Egungun is however seen to have created a virile and resourceful means of verbal expression among those who use Yoruba language. The study therefore examines the dynamics of constructing proverbs on ‘egungun’ with meanings beyond their propositional contents and propose a purely pragmatic approach to the use and interpretation of the selected proverbs which are anchored on J.L Austin’s and Searle’s theory of pragmatic acts.*

**Keywords:** *proverbs, ‘egungun’, verbal expressions, inference, culture, pragmatic acts.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The use of proverbs is not peculiar to one community; in fact, it is a universal phenomenon meant to achieve certain goals that are closely related to societal cohesion. Proverbs are so deeply rooted in African culture so much that almost everybody who knows how to speak his/her indigenous language is a living carrier of proverbs. Proverbs exist in many forms across cultures and languages and are used to convey messages which in turn, guide and control the socio-cultural aspects of those who understand them. Therefore, the role of proverbs as a metaphorical use of language cannot be overstressed in any discourse. Proverbs are used to inform, warn, reprimand, counsel and more often than not, to strengthen communal bonds among users of any language.

According to Rumide (2013:137), the Yorubas believe strongly in the tradition of proverbs since they use them in their day-to-day activities. In fact, it is a common practice among the Yoruba people that where communication is to go smoothly, whether serious or casual, proverbs happen to be the vehicle used to convey ideas and thoughts across to other people. More importantly, the elders use proverbs to prove the fact that where youths are present, it is the exclusive preserve of elders to use proverbs to drive some serious points to the younger ones. This is to say that even where the youth has some knowledge of proverbial proposition, he or she does not use it without the permission of the elders around. No wonder that Taylor (2013:13) observes that proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral and sociological values of a society. Taylor believes that aside the aesthetic and figurative value in proverbs, they present a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Based on this observation therefore, it is plausible to opine that the beauty and some delight inherent in proverbs is that what they say are readily perceived and accepted as incontrovertible truth. This is why it is generally held that the use of proverbs is the exclusive resource of the elders, particularly among the Yoruba people. Which is why if any elder wishes to be revered by his or her social equals or by the younger ones, the use of proverbs would first be employed in any conversation. This explains why it is posited by Yusuf (1997: 120) that the truth presented in the proverbs is not logical, a priori or intuitive truth which is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people’s experience of life, human relationships and interaction with the world of nature.

### **II. Literature Review**

‘Egungun’, i.e, masquerade among Yorubas represent a significant culture of entertainment and just like money, the proverbs around ‘egungun’ have become part of the people to the extent that the traditional proverbs connected to the gods are truly the prismatic common verbal expression of day-to-day existence of Yoruba culture. In the linguistic anthropology parlance, it is agreed that culture and language are so intertwined in such a way that the death of language automatically marks the death of the culture that such language carries. Since the wisdom of a race lies in the way they relate with the world they live in, it is obvious to state that the

proverbs connected to ‘egungun’ cannot be glossed over because they unarguably reveal the richness of Yoruba heritage. In the opinion of Lawalet. al (1999), proverbs are used by a community to express their beliefs and values. Thus, proverbs are tools for affecting and effecting desirable actions for projecting particular cosmology. This opinion tallies with Mbiti (1995) which states that proverbs are drawn from and refer to all activities of society, natural objectives and phenomena. In Yoruba culture, ‘egungun’ is revered and feared particularly during events of significance such as burials, festivals and other traditional fora that bring the people together. Most African cultures, especially the Yoruba, have different types of masquerades and they are given names to depict particular incidents in their socio-cultural lives. They are accordingly revered as sacred spirits that bring the people together, especially when important events are to be marked among them. Above all, the masquerades are accorded some forms of authority and respect so much that where issues become problematic, specific egunguns are invited to resolve or adjudicate on such matters. Thus, the masquerade no doubt preserves the culture of the people, mostly Yoruba’s’.

According to Owomoyela (2012) and Adebayo (2010), proverbs among Yoruba people are relics, preserved and transmitted over generations. To this end, the culture and habits of the people are preserved for upcoming generations. Perhaps this is why Adeyemi and Salawudeen (2014) observe that 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. This view goes in line with that of Akinmade (2012) which states that proverbs remain the most powerful and potent vehicle for culture dissemination from one generation to another. Proverbs unarguably express the nature of African wisdom as they perform various functions ranging from conflict resolution where there is evident lack of mutual understanding among people. Mara (2006) views proverbs from the perspective of dissemination of indigenous educational system, hinging his opinion on the pre-colonial experience of African communities. Using this viewpoint therefore, since African societies were noted for their cultural heritage before the European invasion, it is observed according to him, that proverbs serve as a veritable tool for enhancing and promoting the values, culture and social attitudes, especially in the indigenous educational practices. Proverbs develop from generation to generation. This is why the young will always leave the invocation of proverbs from the elders because they too would pass the use across to the upcoming ones.

Proverbs exist in many forms across cultures and languages go with them to convey messages to guide the people in their day-to-day affairs. In African tradition, there is no gainsaying the fact that proverbs represent a veritable aspect of the lives of the people. As people interact, they often engage in light and serious discussions which allow them to freely use proverbs as a vehicle of communicating ideas and feelings. According to Mbiti (1995) language of proverbs has a rich vocabulary of words, phrases, combination of words, symbols, pictures, allusions and comparisons. To this end, if culture were an important tool of cohesion and development, if language were a carrier of culture and if the relationship between language and culture were like the two-edged sword, then the role of proverbs as a metaphorical coding of language could not be glossed over. Language itself is known to be a way of life and which of course translates to the culture of the people. Therefore, what we eat, how we dress and how we speak translate to the culture of the people. Perhaps this is why Sapir (1963) argues that language does not exist independent of culture stressing that the relationship of language within culture is somewhat dual in nature since language itself is part of human nature as well as a vehicle for expressing culture. Inasmuch as every group of people is endowed with definite ways of expressing culture, proverbs should then form an integral part of this conveyance. Wall-work (1969:12) suggests that language is used for phatic communion which serves as a social regulator and as an instrument of action used to convey order and information, to influence people and above all, to enable self-expression and thoughts among people. This no doubt explains why Ademowo and Balogun (2014:1) opine that no human society can exist to experience development without effective use of proverbs through language use. This opinion seems to tally with that of Ajayi and Raji (1997:636) who hold that proverbs essentially across languages and cultures form part of the codes of behaviour and exemplify their use for the transmission of tribal wisdom and rules of conduct. Among those codes of behaviour are the notable proverbs said around the ‘egungun’ in Yoruba culture.

### **III. Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this work is based on the use of oral discussions among Yoruba speakers which is mostly woven around the masquerade. The use of the oral discussions is considered as a viable and easier means of collecting data for this work since it is assumed that such propositions would be more valid and reliable as they form the basis for the day-to-day conversations among those who use the Yoruba language. The data is therefore gathered from the interactions among the Yoruba speakers, but those conversations are the proverbs specifically centred around ‘egungun’ i.e. masquerade in Yoruba culture.

## **An Overview Of Pragmatic Concepts**

### **i. Proverbs as a Pragmatic tool**

Proverbs in every culture depends on context for use in communication among the people. Meaning in relation to speech situation seems to be the major concern of pragmatics and whatever intrinsic meaning the grammatical categories may have, context plays a crucial role in the interpretation of such meanings.

Leech (1983:13) considers context to be any background knowledge assumed to be shared by speaker and hearer which contributes to hearer's interpretation of what the speaker means by a given utterance. For example, in using the proverb '*tomodebalaso bi agba, kolelakisa bi agba*' (if a child has current wears than the elder, he/she cannot boast of having possession of more rags than the elders). The user of that proverb needs to note the linguistic and non-linguistic contexts so as to make the proverb relevant within the context in which it is used. As a result of this, 'aso', cloth or wears and 'agba', age need to be known and decoded by both speaker and hearer so that the usage can be understood and linked perfectly with the contextual use. If it were an elderly person that said that to a younger one or vice versa, the connotation, whether negative or positive, would immediately come out vividly through the context in which it is put. Therefore, as a linguistic or pragmatic phenomenon, the interpretation of a proverb depends largely on background knowledge of both speaker and hearer. Thornborrow et al. (1998:28) argue that textual materials take part of their meaning from the context. This significance of discourse, of which proverbs form an integral part, derives only from an interaction between language structure and the context in which it is employed. Therefore, in the day-to-day interactions among the speakers of Yoruba language, participants must always be prepared to have the working knowledge of the utterance. It is by so doing that the hearer of any proverb, particularly those strewn round 'egungun' (masquerade) fully aware of the circumstances leading to the information conveyed, can determine what it actually means.

However, it is very important to point out that unless, of course, one has actual experience of a similar context, and in some cases, the specific context, in which the text has arisen, then the hearer may have quite a measure of difficulty restructuring the said context to any degree of delicacy. What this implies is that the hearer will need to have access to both the material and the cultural context of situation as well as to the code of the language itself. Yet Thornborrow's position would be of importance to this study since the notion of context cannot be ignored entirely while decoding utterance meanings, most especially the proverbs centred on 'egungun'.

### **(ii) Indirect Speech Acts**

This concerns the levels of pragmatic meaning. The meaning in indirect speech is not explicit. This is an aspect of speech act which we perform in our daily use of language. It means that when we speak, we mean something more than what we mean directly. When this utterance is made therefore, it requires the context to locate the meaning. This is why Thomas (1995:120) observes that indirectness is costly and risky. According to Thomas, it is costly since an indirect utterance takes longer for the speaker to produce and of course for the speaker to produce. It is risky because the hearer may not understand what the speaker is getting at. So when proverbs are used in most cases, either intentional or unintentional, it is meant to produce a difficult task of decoding the implied meanings. However, both speaker and hearer must be aware of the social behaviour of language use inherent in communication between them. Once the speakers are aware of such forms of communicative action game, it then becomes obvious how often we talk indirectly and achieve meaning from it. And this explains why majority of the proverbs in Yoruba, especially the ones around masquerades, are tied to indirectness. This indirect speech act is however easier to understand sometimes if the speakers and hearers adhere to the rules governing the language they both use for conversations. Denham K, (2013) notices that the use of indirect speech act is just a simple direct illustration of the complexity of speech acts and of how sentence types do not always correspond to speaker intention (nor for that matter, to hearer interpretation). It is perhaps why majority of proverbs are meant to agitate the mind of the hearer.

### **(iii) Implicature**

Implicature is the expression of what is meant but not actually said. Grice (1975) is credited with the theory of implicature which is the product of his CP. According to Thomas (1995), Grice's theory is an attempt to explain how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning. Grice distinguishes two different types of implicature: conventional – whose meaning is determined by the conventional meaning of words used in an utterance, e.g., the use of 'but', 'even', therefore and 'yet' which normally carries an implicature whenever each of them is inserted in an utterance. "The boy is lazy but nice".

Notice that in everyday life, people readily respond to such conventional implicatures regardless of the context in which it occurs. And the second type of implicature is known as conversational implicature which Grice uses his maxims to illustrate:

- a. **Quality:** Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
- b. **Quantity:** Make your contribution as informative as required; do not make your contribution more informative than required
- c. **Relation:** Be relevant
- d. **Manner:** It is expected that a partner is to make it clear what contribution he is making, and to execute his performance with reasonable dispatch

According to Rumide (2013), these maxims are communicative behaviours that are learned from childhood; hence participants will conduct themselves in conversation in accordance to these principles, given the normal situation. Based on this formality therefore, when a speaker flouts the maxim with no intention of either misleading or opting out and is not faced with a clash, a conversational implicature is thereby generated.

**Data Presentation**

<b>Proverbs</b>	<b>Literal Meanings</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Implicatures</b>
Egunguntirowole, eniyantiro jade.	Masquerade staggered inside, a human staggered out.	When the action of someone coincides with an unsavoury incident	The principal cause of an incident is no more hidden
Kosigbatadegbaletaa begun, taaba begun, abago.	You will always meet the masquerade in the shrine, if you don't, you will see the costumes	When skepticism is high about one living up to promise	This is to ensure constancy of particular features
Egungunkijowowo, tegunbatijowowo, editinmaraorunniyen.	Masquerade cannot involve in misdeeds	When one fails in an expectation	Good virtue is not bought but earned
Egungunjore, kojore, afowoigbalewo	Whether a masquerade performs well or not, there is always a place ready for its return in the shrine	When a person could not meet an expected target	Whatever the situation due respect must be accorded those who deserve it
Kilegunminseti o le farojo?	What is the task before the masquerade to prevent its early rise for performance?	When meeting an important agreement between two parties is doubted	Preparedness for any assignment at all time
Asotobakehinsegunlanpenijepe	The closest costume to a masquerade is tagged: jepe.	When one experiences disappointment from a close ally	Essence of trust
Egungun to bakokojo, iranniyowogbein	The first masquerade to dance would be a spectator later	When the essential aspect of an event is undermined	He who laughs last laughs best
Odunegunamotan, omolagbaayakarajeko	Masquerade's festival will eventually come to an end; the shrine urchins thereafter queue for purchase of bean cakes	When one hangs on tenaciously to a position with no hope that change could come	What is constant in life is change
Tegungunbajore, araayaatokun e	A masquerade that dances well will definitely impress its priest	When one lives below expectation	Failure is an orphan, success has many friends
<b>Proverbs</b>	<b>Literal Meanings</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Implicature</b>
Ojopegun, ode odaramo	The masquerade is rain-drenched, situation becomes worst	When a sad incident suddenly befalls someone	Other side of the coin
Tegungunbafogunodunjo, tirowo mu wale, ti o tunlerolehin, ka kuku pegun yen ti, kagbegejelaruge	A masquerade that takes twenty years to perform without prosperity and followers should be forsaken for another god of entertainment	When misfortune becomes a perpetual experience of someone	When one fails in a chosen career, he or she should rise to the challenge in another
Ejekasisolojuegun	Let's pull the veil off the masquerade's face	When truth has been suppressed unduly	To hit the nail on the head
Egungunmonienia o mo	The masquerade knows beyond the ordinary	When someone plays pranks	No secret of a person is hidden
Egunnlalongbeinigbale	The senior masquerade takes the lead in every occasion	When someone who is looked upon appears to be incompetent	Only the courageous dares danger
Omotoniegun baba ohunajotosinikojomo, lagbaakan ole musi	A child who announces the performance of his father's masquerade but later changes the event mustn't be blamed	When an agreement is willfully broken without any recourse for remorse	He who pays the piper dictates the tune
Egungunajo, atokunaworan	The masquerade will incomparably dance for its priest to watch	A surprising incident is anticipated	Mark of extraordinary
Tegunbabonuso, a pounda	Once the masquerade wears the costume, he automatically changes his voice	When a change drastically occurred	Unpredictability of nature
Owoolowolegunna	The masquerade counts on the audiences gifts	When someone always expects from another	Commensalism
Ti	Every other masquerade may	When a person who is	Inequality

gbogboegungunbanleninidiagbado, kiise bi tegunpakoko	scare one from the farm stead but not the caricature	unequal in status to another is issuing threats.	
<b>Proverbs</b>	<b>Literal meanings</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Implicature</b>
To batiyaegun, otiya ore e	The masquerade would always move in company of its whip	When a sign of unwillingness to act is suspected	Readiness for an action
Ti egungunbapeogunnigbale, ologbojoni baba won	If masquerades number up to twenty in the shrine, ‘ologbojo’ remains the boss	When attainment of supremacy is under stiff contest among contending forces	Survival of the fittest
Asotabalaragungun, tiegunninse	Any costume found on a masquerade is adjudged its own	When one is looked down upon	Lackadaisical disposition

#### IV. Discussion

The concern of this work is the analysis of Yoruba proverbs, specifically used around masquerade. Proverbs which are symbols of communication need particular events and objects to serve as instruments of conveyance of wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals among the Yoruba people. Notable among those objects is the ‘egungun’ that is used for entertainment at specific events.

From the data presented in the foregoing sections, it is clear that proverbs around ‘egungun’ by Yoruba speakers are employed with the intention to show their logical structure with the assumption and implications for social interaction and cultural affinity. Twenty-two proverbs and four pragmatic concepts – expressions, interpretation, context and implicature on ‘egungun’ among the Yorubas were selected for our analysis. Taxonomy of illocutionary acts as presented by Searle (1979) and Grice (1975) Principle of implicature were selected as tools for the analysis.

The analysis of the proverbs selected shows that the direct illocutionary act of each is different from the indirect illocutionary act. Also some of the proverbs in the data collected have assertives and expressives as the direct illocutionary act. By so doing, all the proverbs have their indirect speech acts and most importantly, the proverbs for this work have indirect acts that are different from the direct acts.

Each of the indirect illocutionary acts has an overt implicature as shown in the foregoing data.

#### V. Conclusion

The foregoing accentuate the truth about proverbs that every speech community has a set of rules and codes of behaviours that must be followed and obeyed for mutual cohesion and understanding. Proverbs then make the people conform to those rules for enhancement of the transmission of tribal wisdom and harmony. Since masquerade is a god used for entertainment among the Yoruba, little wonder that it constitutes the basis for encoding a lot of Yoruba proverbs on it. This is because the god entertains both the young and adult, with little or no inhibitions. Perhaps this is why Adeyemi (2008:30) observes that proverbs enable people conform to desired rules, mores and traditions of the land as well as teach methods of expression of realities of life with aesthetic flavor. Soyinka (1998:19) equally attests to this position when he underscores the need to deliberately inculcate and imbibe right social values as sine qua non for people-centred development. In Soyinka’s view, culture is produced and the producers of culture at all levels should endeavour to make culture work for the purpose of development. Proverbs centred on ‘egungun’ among Yoruba speakers are no exceptions.

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