A CRITICAL INTERROGATION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF AFRICAN PROVERBS IN *NIGHT DANCER*

Grace Ojonide Onoja &
Rhema F.E Oguche

Abstract

The paper is a Critical Stylistic study of the ideological functions of African proverbs in *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe. The paper interrogates the ideological functions of African proverbs in the selected text with the aim of unravelling the ideologies they embed or portend. This is in order to advance earlier propositions that proverbs are an integral part of conversation among Africans with a particular focus among the Igbos, in South Eastern Nigeria. Proverbs are idioms whose meanings go beyond any literal interpretation. They are forms of deeper communication, as they construct reality in speech communities. The study adopted the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as its theoretical method for analysing selected African proverbs in the text, with special emphasis on the performative functions of language where language is said to perform three meta-functions. These are: ideational; interpersonal and textual meta-functions. Thus, this study identified and classified African proverbs in accordance with their ideological functions, so as to ascertain whether or not the selected African proverbs are harmful, or should be inculcated, reinforced or rebutted. The study found out that languages are shaped in relation to the three functions or meta functions of language and these functions are all woven together and manifest in every act of language use. The paper concludes that African proverbs help to enrich the texts of African text producers by depicting ideologies, not just based on surface value, but through ideological undertones which must be unearthed with a robust linguistic analytical method.

Keywords: Critical Stylistics; African Proverbs; Language; Ideology

Introduction

Primacy of place is assigned to language in Stylistics. Stylistics as a field of study enables linguists to understand the intent of text producers through the interrogation of grammar, lexis, semantics, context, as well as phonological properties and discursive devices. Language is very important in carrying out textual interpretation of texts, as it is the vehicle through which the linguist looks critically at the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure which highlights the functionality of the text. Simpson (2) puts it succinctly as he asserts that:

> The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text. The text's functional significance as discourse, acts in turn, as a gateway to its interpretation. While linguistic features do not of themselves constitute a text's 'meaning', an account of linguistic features nonetheless serves to ground a stylistic interpretation and to help explain why, for the analyst, certain types of meaning are possible.

Jeffries (410) presents Critical Stylistics (CS) as a method of unravelling ideologies in texts. She presents the founding principles of CS to be in many ways influenced by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) or Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). As a linguistic criticism, therefore, the study of the ideologies of texts or a set of texts is the major preoccupation of the field of study. CS is a bridge between stylistics (textual choices) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA aims at exposing underpinning or deep seated ideologies in texts. It is the study of how social practices, abuse, dominance and inequality are reproduced and resisted in texts.

African proverbs are very important as their creativity and expressivity represent linguistic realism as well as social and cultural consciousness of a people. Mensah (87) defines Proverbs as forms of deeper communication and means of constructing reality in every speech community. Again, Mensah (108) likens them to carriers of meaning, the vehicles for the extension of thought and the dynamic

expressive conversational tools that encode deeper meaning (Mensah 108). Ogbeide (248) asserts that proverbs are idioms whose meanings go beyond any literal interpretation. Their heuristic nature therefore makes people to discover ideas/concepts. They are usually in forms of catchy phrases, sayings, sentences, statements. They contain wise sayings, truths, advices, morals, experiences about life from one generation to another.

Ehondor (6) pinpoints the following as examples of how proverbs help to aid statements:

> i. to provide ratification to statement or opinions;
> ii. forecast something – what the elder sees sitting down, the child cannot see even from the height of an iroko tree;
> iii. express doubts – a bird in hand is worth two in the bush;
> iv. accuse someone of something – the insect eating the leaf is in the leaf, green snake in green grass;
> iv. jeer at somebody's misfortune – when the wind blows, we see anus of the fowl; and
> v. justify or excuse somebody – the apple does not fall far from the tree.

The Nexus between Language, Proverbs and Ideology

The relationship between language, proverbs and ideology can be better understood by the categorisation of the functions of language as given by Halliday. These functions are ideational, interpersonal and textual. Ideational function simply shows how language represents the world in the broadest sense. The interpersonal function on the other hand, shows the same language mediating between people that is, the social world, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer, and finally, the textual function shows how linguistic items make the text as a whole function; that is, the flow of information in a text. The relationship between language, which is a social practice and power, is a mutual one. Language is used by individuals and institutions to construct proverbs. Constructing proverbs can only be achieved through the vehicle of language. The Linguist, Edward Sapir, cited in Kilgour (1) also sees language as not only a vehicle for the expression of thoughts, perceptions, sentiments and values characteristic of a community, but also representing a

fundamental expression of a social identity. Accordingly, Brown and Yule (1) categorise the uses of language into: the transactional and interactional functions. The transactional function of language has to do with the expression of content, while the interactional deals with the expression of social relations and personal attitudes. Brown and Yule (2) further explain that language used in portraying this function is message-oriented. This means that the message must be conveyed well enough by the speaker for the receiver to understand it clearly. The interactional function of language helps humans to establish and maintain social relationships (Brown and Yule 3); what Halliday and Matthiessen (29-30) call the interpersonal metafunction; hence, language is put to use in the following ways: informatively, evocatively, expressively, and evaluatively, among others. Language can be said, thus, to have several functions but serve one purpose – to make the expression of ideas, thoughts and feelings possible and these can be seen in African proverbs.

Accordingly, ideologies are carried through language and are either explicitly or implicitly expressed by text producers to text recipients. Thus, texts can convey particular ideologies that influence the text recipients. CS tools as well as the SFG help text recipients to be much more aware of some embedded ideologies in texts with the view to ascertaining whether those ideologies will alter their viewpoints or not. CS, as a method of linguistic enquiry, ascertains whether or not texts have ideologies and examines whether text recipients accept or rebut these ideologies.

Simpson and Mayr (4) in their book *Language and Power* assert that ideology influences language and thus, all texts, whether spoken or written including visual language, are shaped and determined by political beliefs and socio-cultural practices of humans. They argue that texts are not mere outcomes of communicative interplay between communicative participants but are influenced by shared ideas by these interlocutors. Texts are, therefore, not free from ideological influence(s), but linguistic analysis helps the linguist to understand and unravel ideologies embedded in them. Jeffries (2) observes that

approaching the question of where ideology lies in a text is critical. Thus, Critical Stylistics as a linguistic field of study is much more than just a straightforward application of linguistic description to literary texts as the field has become multidisciplinary, taking influence from all areas of linguistics, literary studies, psychology and other disciplines. Accordingly, Jeffries (5) views ideology as ideas that are shared by a community or societies which are communicated, reproduced, constructed and negotiated using the instrumentality of language. For Verschueren (7),

> Ideology is no longer an academic discipline, but rather an object of investigation. It is related to ideas, beliefs, and opinions, but this relationship is not a straightforward one. Ideas, beliefs, and opinions, as such, do not make ideology. Simplifying a bit, they are merely 'contents of thinking,' whereas ideology is associated with underlying patterns of meaning, frames of interpretation, world views, or forms of everyday thinking and explanation. Thus, the ways in which beliefs, ideas, or opinions are discursively used, i.e. their forms of expression as well as the rhetorical purposes they serve, are just as important for ideology as the contents of thinking for which these three terms serve as labels.

The above position exemplifies the notion of ideology and its ability to have embedded in texts underlying patterns of meaning with different shades of interpretations. Thus, language is the instrument through which ideology and other discursive and social practices are studied in texts. Jorgensen and Philips (68) observe that every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions. These dimensions are: (1) Text (speech, writing, visual image or a combination of these); (2) discursive practice (which involves the production and consumption of texts); and (3) social practice (human interaction). Simpson (5) argues that the motivating principle behind linguistic analyses is to explore the value of *ideology* in language and that is clearly what CS tries to achieve.

Accordingly, language operating within this social dimension could be argued to construct ideology. Therefore, text producers produce hidden ideologies with the intent and purpose to either

persuade or manipulate readers/hearers to take up specific actions. Readers/hearers are, thus, at liberty to either assimilate or rebut an ideology they encounter in texts. Language can be related to the social systems or cultures that shape our worldviews or experiences. In the learning environment, knowledge is transmitted in social contexts through human relationships. Social practices, therefore, arise out of different situations interlocutors' experience which shapes their world views. Language is social because human beings live in groups, communities or societies, with shared companionship. Hence, proverbs are transmitted through the vehicle of language which helps to sum up life experiences and the text recipients/readers/listeners are at liberty to draw their conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

The study is premised on the workings of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), a linguistic method of analysing texts. Language is so critical in establishing social relations between humans because they are a part of a community via language. They have identity through language. For humans to communicate and get by every day in their various communities, they use the functions of language to express their feelings, thoughts, and opinions and ultimately communicate meanings and become accepted in the community. Halliday, thus, categorised these functions language performs into ideational interpersonal and textual functions. These functions known as metafunctions form the fulcrum of the Systemic Functional Grammar theory.

The ideational metafunction according to Rashid and Jameel (3) is concerned with the relationship between the external world and the internal world of human experience of the world. That is to say, language through this function reflects the innate and outward experience of humans through language use. The clauses in the ideational meta-function of language can be analysed in terms of the process, participants and circumstances in texts. This function is achieved through the transitivity system where the human experience

is broken into manageable sets of process types. These process types, which are achieved through verbal elements, are material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential. These process types can be identified through the process itself, the participants (who plays what) and the circumstance associated with the process.

The interpersonal metafunction on the other hand, deals with the nexus between interlocutors that is, the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. Here, the speaker or writer expresses his/her attitudes and judgments and attempts to influence his or her listener or text recipient (reader). This function is realisable in clauses as exchanges in texts.

The third metafunction, known as the textual, deals with the flow of information in a text where language relates to the verbal world and the context of situation (Rahsid and Jameel 4). Feng (87) citing Thompson (1996) explains the three metafunctions of Halliday's functional grammar as follows:

(i) Language is used to talk about people's experience(s) of the world, including the world in their minds, to describe events and states and the entities involved in them (**ideational**).

(ii) Interlocutors use language to interact with other people, establishing and maintaining relations with them, to influence their behaviour, to express their own viewpoints on things in the world, and to elicit or change theirs (**interpersonal**).

(iii) Finally, language helps interlocutors to organise messages in ways which indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider context within which they talk or write from (**textual**).

Since functional grammar, as a linguistic theory, helps linguists understand how language is used for different purposes and in different situations, its adoption as a theory for analysis of selected texts will help practitioners shed light on the various ways language is deployed in selected texts to uncover ideologies. Its linguistic application which covers names of entities (persons and things), names of processes (actions, events/happenings/doing) and names of qualities (where persons and things are named by nouns, adjectives and verbs) is similar to the CS approach of naming and describing and representing actions/state and events.

The SFG theoretical approach provided access to meanings through the meta-functions of language. This approach helped the researcher to access experiential **(ideational)** meanings from the participants, processes and circumstances in the selected texts; how the deployment of language varieties established and maintained social relations among participants **(interpersonal meanings)**; and the cohesive and coherent flow of thoughts that construes meaning to the text recipients **(textual meaning)**. This is also in line with the provisions of the Systemic Functional Grammar where language is used to reflect experiences of the world; both real and imaginary to describe processes and the entities (characters). That is to say, texts, whether spoken or written, long or short, present particular world views which may reflect the ideological position(s) of the text producer.

The ideational meta-function of language is achieved through two areas of experiential and logical. The experiential and logical functions of ideational grammatical choices enable speakers make meanings of the world around them. Language evolved from humans making meaning from experience. Unravelling textual meaning in the selected African proverbs using the provisions of the Systemic Functional Grammar is very critical, therefore. This is so critical because, in Roland Barthes' (1984) words *"language is never innocent"* and so needs uncovering to reveal hidden meanings

Data Presentation and Analysis of Selected African Proverbs in *Night Dancer*

i. Those with buttocks do not know how to sit (p.11)

The African proverb is uttered by Madam Gold, late Ezi's best friend and Mma's late mother. The utterance can be said to be performative as it falls into any of the category of the ideational or interpersonal meta-functions of language propounded by Michael Halliday in the Systemic Functional Grammar linguistic theory. It is also loaded with ideological undertones which can be unravelled by Critical Stylistic analytical tools. It is made during a conversation

between Mma and her late mother's friend. The proverb can be interpreted to mean several things but obviously with no connection whatsoever to the physical buttocks. Mma who is on a fact-finding mission to ascertain what exactly transpired between her late mother who left her marriage and her father, Mr Mike Ugwu, is told this by her late mother's friend. The utterance can be interpreted to mean that the late mother's friend believes that Ezi should not have left her marriage because of a mere betrayal from her husband who fathered a son with their maid, Rapu. Thus, *those with buttocks do not know how to sit* can mean those who are blessed with so much may not know the value of what they have until they lose them. Ogbeide (252) opines that buttocks is the part of the human anatomy for sitting down and the meaning in the novel is the need for people to use their opportunities well to their own advantage because an opportunity lost can never be regained. Many persons like Ezi, who are blessed with great opportunities often do not know how to use them to their own advantage.

Mike, her husband is not only rich but also caring. The case in this story is a good example as Ezi loses all she suffered to build with her husband by that singular act of walking out of her home and out of the marriage and ultimately losing her life in the process. The use of the naming and describing device of *buttocks* can also refer to precious things in life like family, friends, positions and standing in the society that one may take for granted and ultimately lose.

ii.   **...no matter how high the okra tree grows, it's never mightier than the hand that planted it (p.24)**

The African proverb above is uttered by Madam Gold to Nma, her late friend, Ezi's daughter. This is when she, Nma queries why her late mother had had to take loans from money lenders like Mr Goody and his wife, instead of going to the bank. The proverb can be said to project the ideational meta-function as it reflects people's thoughts, views and generally their experiences of the world. Literally, this proverb means, no matter how tall the okra plant becomes, the

planter, in this case, *the hand that planted it*, can prune or cut it down. It cannot dictate how it wants to grow for the planter can decide to cut it down or take it out. However, the hidden ideology in this proverb is the fact that no matter how grown up a child becomes or the maturity a child attains, he or she cannot be greater or wiser than his or her parents. The clauses in this ideational meta-function of language can be analysed in terms of process, participants and circumstance. In terms of the process, the verbal elements of *grows* and *planted* can be seen in the proverb and they show the actions embedded in the proverb. The verbal elements represent the material process clause of the transitivity model of Halliday. Participants in the proverb are Madam Gold and Nma, the protagonists in *Night Dancer.* The circumstance in the African proverb on the other hand can be seen when Nma, in her conversation with her mum's friend, queries her mother's choice of money lenders instead of reputable banks and Madam Gold. The verbal process type is the material process type.

iii.   When a finger dips in palm oil, it soils the entire hand (p.47)

The Utterance above is made by Ezi, one of the two protagonists in *Night Dancer* and this is aptly recorded in her memoir titled *'My Memoirs: The Truth about My Life'* to her daughter on what transpired between her and her ex-husband, Mr Ugwu, Nma's father. The utterance in the African proverb above carries a lot of ideological connotations or colourings. It is ideational in nature, reflecting the thought pattern of Ezi who was ostracised from her family as a result of her separation from her husband. The transitivity model of Halliday can be seen in the material process clause with the use of an active verb *dips* and *soils*, which show physical activity/action. The nature of palm oil is such that, if one finger gets soiled in it, the probability of the rest getting touched is very high. Invariably, this utterance refers to Ezi's separation and the attendant shame it brings to her entire family who believe a woman should never walk out of her marriage in spite of the odds against her. Ezi's family represents the traditional Igbo family who holds tenaciously to their traditional

values and so feels disappointed at the position of their daughter, Ezi, who represents the modern African feminist. This ideology, however, should be rebutted as God created humans and wired them differently and so they react differently to situations. One's shame or misfortune in the family should not be used to judge others in the family for everyone his or her different path to follow in life.

iv.   **My mud will not stick on him (p.49)**

My mud will not stick on him is one of the selected African proverbs from *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe. The utterance is made by Ezi in her memoir in reference to her younger brother, Nma's uncle, Uncle Emma, also known as *Sugar boy*. The example in the excerpt above is also an example of the ideational meta-function of language as the African proverb reflects Ezi's view of the situation in her family. The circumstance in the excerpt happens as a result of Ezi's separation from her ex-husband and the shame the family has to endure. The family holds a harmful ideology as they believe Ezi's action will prevent her siblings from getting married. They probably believed that her action may make her siblings' marriages not to last, whenever they eventually get married. Ezi's utterance in this African proverb seems to point out that because her sibling in question is a man, her shame is not likely going to affect him. After all it is a man's world. *Mud* here is used as a naming device to personify shame. This further reveals Lokpanta, where the novel is set, as a patriarchal society, where men hold sway and decide for every other person. This explains why Ezi is disparaged and ostracised for walking out of a hurtful marriage and no one seems to blame the man for betraying the trust and love of his wife when he impregnates the maid, Rapu. They all seem to accept it, especially that she births the much needed son Ezi could not give him. Finally, the transitivity as shown in the mental process clause is the active verb *stick* which denotes being joined to something or someone.

v.   One son is good but two makes your position unassailable (p.49)

This utterance above is typical of an utterance in a patriarchal African society like Lokpanta. It is also an example of the ideational meta-function of language as it sums up the experience of Ezi who could not have a son for her husband, Mr Egwu. The utterance carries a Critical Stylistic tool of contrasting, as seen in the introduction of the conjunction *but.* The participant is Ezi who pens this down in her memoir to her daughter as she reflects on her life story, chronicling her family background where she talks about her mother having more than one son. The society sees her as a failure since she cannot have a son but a daughter. Accordingly, the society Ezi lives with privileges men over women and family over individuals. Nwokocha (219) asserts that in the Igbo culture of the South East of Nigeria, the benefits of male children as potential custodians of both identity and lineage have sustained this value of crave for sons over daughters for generations. He notes that:

> A woman, who achieves recognition and status by the birth of at least one male child, is considered fulfilled and ultimately accorded greater respect relative to her counterparts who do not achieve the same feat.

This preference for sons over daughters is a negative ideology and should be rebutted as children, irrespective of their gender are gifts from God and they should be given a level playing ground to develop and become responsible citizens in the society.

vi.   The man who refuses to open his eyes to the excreta his friend has successfully side-stepped will have no one but himself to blame when he steps on it (p.73)

The utterance in the African proverb above carries a lot of ideological undertones. The utterance, like previous proverbs was documented by late Ezi herself in her memoir to her daughter. It is an Igbo proverb actually and can be said to be the experiential function of the ideational meta-function. Ezi, in justifying her decision to leave her marriage seems to be telling her daughter, Nma, to learn from her

experience to avoid pitfalls; for, if she refuses to learn, she may make mistake. She says to her on p.73 in an utterance preceding this proverb that, she is not the enemy. The participants in the utterance are Ezi and Mma. The material and mental process clauses of the transitivity system can be seen in refuses (mental), side-stepped (material) and step on (material).

vii.   The lizard says it nods its head when it falls to encourage itself because no one else will encourage it (p.73)

This African proverb is a very common one that transcends cultures in Africa. It is not only peculiar to the Igbo culture, but cuts across all cultures in Africa. The proverb has a lot of ideological functions. Firstly, the naming and describing device can be seen in the use of the noun *lizard* which refers to the referent, late Ezi. She has to encourage herself for doing what she terms a 'good job' in singlehandedly raising her daughter, Nma to become the young lady she has grown into. In addition, she encourages herself because there is no one to encourage or appreciate her efforts. The verbal elements of *says* (verbal process clause) and *nods* (material process clause) point to the action of the *lizard* which encourages itself even in very difficult situations. This proverb reflects the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions.

viii.   When God creates an itch, it creates the finger nails with which to scratch it (p.138)

The African proverb above can be said to perform the three functions of ideational, interpersonal and textual as all are woven into the excerpt to provide the experience of the participants and establish relationship, as can be seen in the relationship between Echewa and his wife and the flow of information in the proverb that makes the reader to derive meanings from it. The circumstance surrounding the utterance happens when Mr Mike Egwu and his ex-wife, Ezi come to the family of Echewa to ask to take their daughter, Rapu to stay with them in the city. The family sees this opportunity as a manifestation

of the prophecy that was given by Ajofia, a midwife and a prophetess at the time of Rapu's birth that Rapu was going to be the light of the family, the one that will deliver the family from poverty. Accordingly, Ogbeide (252) opines that Rapu becomes the proverbial fingernail that the gods provide to scratch the poverty of an itch off her family, the Echewa family. The verbal elements of *creates* and *scratch* which represent the processes in the excerpt are examples of the mental and material clause processes of the transitivity model of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. The proverb can also mean that natural problems need natural solutions, as can be seen in Mr Mike Ugwu's desire for a son, who eventually comes through his illicit affair.

ix. A hen that did not lay eggs was not of much use to anyone (p.163)

Predicated against the above, is an expression entrenched in a deep meaning that transcends the surface interpretation. Hence, the use of a pragmatic inference that derives meanings that go beyond the level of semantics. The proverb can be said to be ideational as it reflects the held views/beliefs of certain people, especially in a patriarchal society, such as Lokpanta where the text is set. The situational context that gives birth to this expression is occasioned by the incident leading to the pregnancy of Rapu, Aunty Ezi's maid. Unknown to Aunty Ezi, her husband, Uncle Mike, is responsible for the pregnancy. Therefore, Rapu, through her inner contemplations, reveals this. The proverb is used to advance the importance attached to pregnancy by Africans. And this proverb is basically directed to the woman who does not get pregnant in her marriage. In other words, the woman, as long as she does not get pregnant in her marriage, is seen as worthless in the African context. One could argue that the proverb in itself is sexist; in that, it places the woman at the receiving end. The society does not see the lack of pregnancy in marriage as likely the fault of the man; all the blame is heaped on the woman. So, the 'hen' as used in the proverb typifies a woman (deductively, Aunty

Ezi), whose barrenness (inability to lay eggs), renders her worthless to anyone, including her husband (Uncle Mike). So, through the eyes of Rapu, the plight of the African woman in a patriarchal society is unveiled.

x.   Hot water will eventually cool down (p.209)

The above proverb uses the metaphor of 'hot' and 'cool' to enunciate that no situation, however difficult, lasts forever. It is used to elicit support and to build courage in people, especially in their moments of difficulties. This expression is occasioned by the feeling of neglect that seems to have subdued Rapu, as depicted through the conversation between Rapu and Anwuli. Anwuli uses the proverb to encourage Rapu, who feels neglected by Mike, for whom she has a son. Rapu is overwhelmed with all sense of abandonment and with no feeling of recognition as one of Mike's wives, especially after having given him the child that he had longed for, from his first wife and her madam. She feels that Mike is not giving her the necessary attention that she expects, to the extent that, "even the bride price, he had paid almost in secret" (209). It is, therefore, worthy to note that, even though the above proverb is localised to instil discipline and inspire courage, especially in one's lowest moments, its application is, no doubt, universal.

Findings

The study found out that languages are shaped in relation to the three functions or meta-functions of language and these functions are all woven together and manifest in every act of language use. The functions operate harmoniously in utterances, and separating them seems a herculean task. This is due to the fact that every language use for communicative purposes employs these functions. This study also found out that African proverbs carry a lot of ideologies that can be unravelled by Critical analysis.

Conclusion

African Proverbs play a significant role in awakening the critical impulses of critics. Suffice to say that, couched with deep philosophical underpinnings every African proverb is a tissue of expression that is layered with meanings that may appear local but universal in practicability. Therefore, African proverbs enrich the corpus of African texts with, not just deep ideological and philosophical undertones, but also with much heightened emotively charged ambience, coated with meanings that require not just a rigorous but a robust critical and linguistic analytical approach to unearth.

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