

# THE PRAGMATIC RELEVANCE OF IRONICAL UTTERANCES IN YORUBA INTERACTIVE DISCOURSE

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## 1. Introduction

The term irony is familiar in literary studies as a figure of speech. Holman's (1936) *A Handbook to Literature* defines verbal irony as "a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning." Holman (1936: 279) also gives a further characterization of verbal irony thus:

*...it differs from sarcasm in that it is usually lighter, less harsh in its wording though in effect probably more cutting because of its indirectness.*

*...it speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise, though its inherent critical quality makes the first type much more common than the second.*

It is ironical that although irony is a language (or speech) feature, it has hitherto mainly been conceived in literary terms. It has rarely been focused outside literary communication, especially from the perspective of language studies. There is no doubt that a language-oriented study of verbal irony can give a lot of useful information about the linguistic and socio-cultural relevance of the feature in social communicative interaction.

In this paper ironical utterances are described as ritualized utterances of semantico-pragmatic relevance. According to Cook and Gurr (1981) and Akinnsaso (1985), a ritualized speech describes aspects of speech behaviour that have become normal routine for members of a speech community, being enacted primarily in the context of day-to-day communication. Though different ironical utterances are produced in diverse contexts of communication, what co-interactants produce and interpret are stereotypical as they, conventionally, do not alter the structure or meaning of the utterances. However, in order to understand and conform to the ground rules and routines underlying such ritualized behaviour, co-interactants have to be adequately socialized and situated in the communication context (cf. Wolfson, 1983).

Ironical utterances, like proverbs and riddles, provide a channel by which children and non-native speakers are made aware of some of the ground rules of appropriate socio-linguistic behaviour in speech communities. However, unlike these other speech genres, ironical utterances have rarely been focused in pragma-linguistic studies. The study of these utterances in this paper will

be useful especially for language learners, linguists, ethnographers and ethnomethodologists.

The pragmatic relevance of ironical utterances in Yoruba is explained in the following procedural steps of their production and reception. First, the speaker produces an utterance with particular wordings, which express a meaning and give an intention. Following this, the addressee engages in a set of tasks, as follows:

- (i) interpreting the utterance meaning by assigning a reference or sense to the words;
- (ii) re-interpreting the utterance meaning in an opposite direction by substituting antonyms for or negating one or more words in it;
- (iii) and finally interpreting the speaker's pragmatic intention by assigning a force or value (in terms of functions and uses), having recourse to the socio-situational context of communication.

The interaction below illustrates a typical usage of ironical utterances:

Ex 1

- |   |   |                                    |
|---|---|------------------------------------|
| Y | = | Mama, e fun mi niN 20              |
| K | = | Owo po lowo mi gan an ni           |
| Y | = | Nigba wo lee wa lowo lowo?         |
| K | = | Titi ose to n bo.                  |
| Y | = | Mum, give meN 20                   |
| K | = | I have so much money on me indeed. |
| Y | = | When will you then have money?     |
| K | = | By the coming week.                |

Y correctly interprets the sense of K's utterances in line 2 as '+ money + possession'; she re-interprets it as '+ money - possession'. Further she understands the intentions as an assertion 'denoting' (function) and 'pleading' (use) lack of possession of money. Y also shows awareness of the social reason (e.g. fear of saying an unpleasant thing about herself) underlying K's reply; otherwise, she could have mis-interpreted K's intention. It is common for both children and adults learning Yoruba to misinterpret ironical utterances; hence, the adult Yoruba speaker who gives the kind of instruction in Ex. 15 below to his innocent children may be doing so at his own peril.

## 2. Data Base of Study

The ironical utterances described in this study derive from two sources: naturally occurring speech recorded on tape; and intuitive speech invented by this writer based on his personal competence in Yoruba.

The natural conversations recorded serve as the most reliable data to illustrate ironical utterances, especially when there is the need to contextualize such utterances. However, since these utterances are not restricted to conversations, the intuitive data will enable us, especially at this initial stage of investigation to give a general account of their occurrences in diverse types of discourse. It is essential to note here that ironical utterances are features of all interactive informal discourse, including drama dialogue, oratory speech and stories, monological discourse is also sometimes designed interactively in this respect (cf. Coulthard and Montgomery, 1981).

## 3. Ironical Utterances in Pragmatic Perspective

The scope of pragmatics as an area of language studies is reportedly a wide one (cf. Levinson, 1983). But following the explanation of some scholars in the area (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Wilson and Sperber, 1981; Leech, 1983 and Thomas, 1983), pragmatics accounts for the individual socio-situational meanings of particular utterances, unlike semantics which accounts for the general (dictionary) meaning of sentences. In this study we shall need pragmatic principles in order to:

- a. interpret the indirect meanings of ironical utterances in Yoruba interactions;
- b. describe the functions and uses of ironical utterances in Yoruba interactions;
- c. describe the cultural stereotypes underlying the use of utterances in Yoruba interactions.

The principles which are of immediate relevance to the above tasks are explained briefly below.

First, we require the knowledge of Grice's (1975) cooperative principles, and how participants may follow or flout them deliberately, to explain the expression of indirect meanings in utterances. Cook (1989) observes that figures of speech such as iron, sarcasm, metaphor and hyperbole deliberately flout the maxim of quality. By violating this maxim in an ironical utterance, the sender assumes that the receiver will realise (i) that such violation is intentional, (ii) that the latter should not interpret the meaning literally and (iii) that the utterance is not a lie. If the receiver does not realize that it is deliberate, according to Cook (1989: 31), "Communication degenerates into lying, obfuscation, or simply breaks down altogether".

Also, Lakoff's (1973) suggestion of maxims of politeness is found useful in accounting for the interactive and cultural situations of occurrence of ironical utterances. His maxim 'make your receiver feel good' provides a base for a lot of ironical utterances in Yoruba which indicate good moral behaviour (moderation, decency, respect and humility). Brown and Levinson (1978 and 1987) maintain that politeness phenomena indicates respect for face in interactions. They contend that indications of respect for face may be culture specific, as the nature of face varies from society to society; while initial refusal of an offer in some cultures may be merely polite, in others the opposite may be true. Cultural specificity notwithstanding, face-work (Goffman, 1955) is a universal principle of communicative interaction, where participants present faces to each other, protecting their own faces and protecting others' faces.

The concepts of 'common-sense knowledge' (cf. Garfinkel, 1967) and 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972; Bell, 1976) enlighten us about how participants establish and maintain socialization in communicative interaction. A child learns the values and preoccupations of its culture largely by learning the language. According to Roger Fowler (1986: 19),

*...language is the chief instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person is, willy-nilly moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into which he/she happens to be born. Language gives knowledge and allows knowledge to be transmitted from person to person. But this knowledge is traditional, not innovative, for language is a stabilizing, stereotyping mode of communication.*

Communicative competence implies the ability of participants in an interaction to relate linguistic forms with the social norms and contextual features in order to interpret utterances correctly.

On contextual features, three areas of pragmatic studies become very relevant. First is the ethnographic framework of communication presented by Hymes (1974). A description of situational features in interactional speech can select relevant ones from his factors of 'speaking' - setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre - as categories of description. Jakobson's (1960) functional categories are applicable to the description of general functions of utterances. His suggestion includes the following functions: expressive, conative, referential, poetic, phatic and metalinguistic. Lastly, a description of uses or purposes of utterances can be done in the direction of speech (or discourse) acts. Examples of such acts formulated by Austin,

(1962) and Searle (1969) are promising, greeting and teasing.

Finally, a knowledge of some Yoruba cultural stereotypes can also intimate us with the Yoruba world view.

Abimbola (1975 and 1976) mentions some evil spirits who can be offended by one's careless speech or action. They get annoyed at one's misdemeanor or oversight. They may also be invoked to do evil by human beings who are one's enemies or who are jealous of one's achievements.

Both the sociability and morality characteristics are well-described in sociological works on Yoruba people and their institutions (cf. Daramola and Jeje, 1969; Fadipe, 1970; Awoniyi, 1975 and Adeoye, 1979). According to Fadipe (1970: 301):

*The Yoruba is gregarious and sociable. Life under the conditions which exist in compounds would have been intolerable if ways and means had not been devised for living together in harmony...There is an elaborate code of manners and etiquette, the observance of which serves to reduce the strains and frustrations of interpersonal relationships.*

The Yoruba has a salutation for every conceivable occasion and situation in which he may find a fellowman at any time of the day. He does not only greet relations and friends, but also extends extensive modes of salutation to acquaintances and strangers. On the maintenance of social relationship, the Yoruba have contacts of a more or less intimate character with a very large circle of blood and affinal relations, neighbours and friends. The principle of seniority reinforces authority and obedience on rather well-defined lines.

Lastly, on morality, the Yoruba seem to pay great attention to the moral education of their children. A Yoruba proverb says "Omo ti a o ko ni o gbele taa ko ta The child that we deny home-training is the one who will put whatever house we build on sale". The hallmark of a successful man is good character. According to Awoniyi (1975: 357), 'Omoluabi' is "the fundamental basis of Yoruba traditional education". Attributes taught during the education process include the following among others: honesty, modesty, hardwork, courage, endurance, respect for elders, politeness and decency.

#### 4. Functions and Uses of Ironical Utterances in Yoruba Interactions

Four functions are noticeably performed by the ironical utterances in our data collection, the most prominent being the referential conative functions. The poetic and metalinguistic functions are absent, the latter being attributable, perhaps, to the lack of formality of the speech events and the former being attributable to the interactional non-aesthetic nature of the data

former being attributable to the interactional non-aesthetic nature of the data described. We present below the observed functions and uses of ironical utterances in Yoruba interactions.

### The Referential Function

The referential function performed is oriented towards the context of communication, referring to non-human (see, e.g. Ex. 1 above) and human objects:

- Ex. 2: A: Se ko si o? Hope there is nothing?  
 B: Ko si... There is nothing...
- Ex. 3: Ile yii tutu mo mi lese. This ground is cold on my feet.
- Ex. 4: Omo yii fuye This child is light.
- Ex. 5: Bisu eni ba ta, a a dowo boo ni. When one's yam grows big, we shield it with our hands.
- Ex. 6: Oun pupo ni mo bi Precious him is only what I've got.
- Ex. 7: Eni soro saaju ti soro tan; The previous speaker has said afikun ti mo ni si ni... everything; the addition I have to it is...
- Ex. 8: Omode ni mi, kini mo tii se? I'm a child; what have I done yet?
- Ex. 9: Mi i se Olowo. A dupe lowo I'm not a wealthy man. I thank God Olorun.

Several uses are served by the utterances above in their various contexts.

Ex. 1 and 2 are assertions given in reply to previous questions. Ex. 3 and 4 remark on human beings and nature. Ex. 5 is a proverb used for advice. Ex. 7 comments on the quality of a contribution. Lastly, Ex. 8 and 9 appraise the status of the speaker in the utterances.

### Conative Functions

The conative function is oriented towards the listener in an interaction.

The function is expressed as vocatives or directives, e.g.:

- Ex. 10: Oko mi, dakun ba mi ra ose... My husband, do help me to buy soap...
- Ex. 11: Mi o gbo, wi fun mi ki n gbo. I can't hear you, tell me and let me

hear you.

- Ex. 12: A: E gba owo kee fi woko  
 B: Fi i le  
 A: E gba se e  
 B: Eyi o wa po ju? O daa mu nibe...  
 A: Have this as your transport fare.  
 B: Don't bother.  
 A: Have it.  
 B: Isn't this too much? Take some out of-it...

- Ex. 13: Duro, ki n wa ba e wa ounje to dara je  
 Wait, let me come and give you good food to eat.

- Ex. 14: O o se kuku bo mi lowo.  
 Why don't you offer me a handshake?

- Ex. 15: Bi mo ba jade tan ni kee bere erepa, kee da gbogbo ile ru, ki n de ki n wa ba yin.  
 As soon as I get out you can start your wild play, scatter everything in the house, then when I come, I shall meet you.

- Ex. 16: O rojo 're wa onii. Pada sibi o ti n bo o.  
 You see today as a good day to come. Go back to where you are coming from

- Ex. 17: O bere niyen o. Ma fowo kan mi sa.  
 You've started again. Don't touch me.

The various uses of the above utterances are stated as follows: teasing (10), urging (11), refusing and imploring (12), scolding (13 and 20), warning (15), accusing (16) and tickling (17). Note the prominent use of ironical utterances here as a means of social control.

### Expressive Function

The expressive function is oriented towards the speaker in the

interactions. It is expressed mainly as exclamations.

- Ex. 18: Mo ku o!... I'm dead!...  
Ex. 19: Mo-rire o! I see goodness!

The two examples above serve the uses of assurance and prayer respectively. In Ex. 18 the fact that the speaker can shout gives him assurance that he is still alive. And in Ex. 19 the speaker expresses his wish to witness good things instead of bad ones.

### Phatic Function

The phatic function is oriented towards interaction management. It expresses greetings and remarks of solidarity, appreciation and congratulations. For example:

- Ex. 20: a: Mo n bo o. I am coming.  
b: E maa ba mi kalo o. Come along with me  
c: N ko i tii fi yin sile I'm not yet leaving you.
- Ex. 21: Sisi ma ti de, o ma ti di A lady is around, you've iyawo bayii.now  
become a bride.
- Ex. 22: A: E ma seun mi ana Thank you for (what you did) yesterday.  
B: Ko t'ope That's not worth thanking me for.
- Ex. 23: A: Lo ti roko lo bi ile bi You've cleared so much eni yii! ground this morning!
- B: Mii tii se nkankan. I haven't done much.
- Ex. 24: A: O yar. di loya naa niyen You've become a lawyer so quickly like that.  
B: Ese yin la n to. We're following your footsteps!

- Ex. 25: A: E ba wa tun le yii se, eyin alagbara.  
B: Oju yin la n wo  
A: Ka maa woju Olorun.  
A: Repair this land for us, you elders.  
B: We're looking up to you.  
A: Let's all look up to God.

The greetings in Ex. 20 express solidarity. That in Ex. 21 appreciates the rapid growth of a child. Ex. 22 and 23 show appreciation of earlier greetings and modest replies. In 24 the addressee replies a greeting with the attitude of deference to the addressers. Lastly, in Ex. 25 the participants give regards to each other and to God.

### Social Implications of Ironical Utterances

#### Expression of Fear

Fear is expressed in ironical utterances in four ways. First, there is the avoidance of unpleasant ideas so that the ideas expressed may not come to pass. For example, the participants in Ex. 4 would not say that anything was wrong even if it were clear to them that something was wrong. In Ex. 5 the speaker does not wish to say directly that a child was heavy. Lastly in Ex. 6, a mother most zealously guards her only son, who is precious to her. The underlying tone here is that the woman had actually wished to have many children.

There is also the fear that someone who flaunts his or her good luck (wealth, success, etc.) may arouse the jealousy of the evil eye who may cause him or her some harm. No competent Yoruba speaker will say, or admit, openly that s/he is rich even if s/he owns the world. s/he will rather attribute his success to God. In ex. 8 and 9 the speakers play down their achievement and wealth respectively.

Thirdly, the mention of names of some things in Yoruba creates fear among the speakers because of the evil such a mention may invoke. In Ex. 3 the expression 'ile tutu' 'cold ground' is used instead of 'ile gbona' 'hot ground' because the latter Yoruba expression is homonymous with dreadful disease in the society, viz small pox.

Lastly, there is the fear of death expressed by the speaker in Ex. 18 when he is in trouble. the mention of 'ku' 'die' in the utterance is psychological. It is meant to reassure the speaker that he is still living:

### Expression of Moral Norms

The examples of ironical utterances given above reveal a lot of moral norms which are obeyed in Yoruba communication. One of these is the norm that forbids a person to boast of his or her achievement(s). Ex. 5 is in fact a proverb which guards against breaking this norm. Further illustrations of modesty can be seen in Ex. 22 and 23.

Another norm is that one should give due regard to others while communicating with them, e.g. Ex. 7. One should also show deference to older persons, as a mark of respect to them, e.g. Ex. 24 and 25.

Lastly, an illustration of the norm of decency is provided in Ex. 12. The addressee here shows decent behaviour by initially refusing a gift, and even urging the given to take out of it, before finally accepting it.

### Expression of Social Control

Ironical utterances serve as an indirect but forceful way of showing that a listener's action is imprudent. The utterances were to maintain social control, based on four principles:

- i) The speaker is normally higher in status than the listener;
- ii) The speaker believes that the listener knows what to do;
- iii) The speaker believes that the listener has done a wrong thing;
- iv) The speaker disapproves of the listener's imprudent action.

In Ex. 13 'ounje to dara' 'good food' refers to the cane; the speaker intends to scold the listener for performing a wrong action. In Ex. 14 the listener fails to greet the speaker properly, which the speaker sees as an affront. The handshake is a western mode of salutation as against prostrating or kneeling down for the elder male or female person. In Ex. 16, a woman accuses her man friend of neglect. Lastly, in Ex. 23 the woman playfully rejects the love advances of her friend. This initial rejection is normal by a decent woman, so a man need not take it seriously; it may in fact be an invitation extended to him for further play.

### Expression of sociability

The feeling of togetherness is expressed by the Yoruba in various forms of greetings. For example, all the utterances in Ex. 20 are made when the speaker is leaving the listener. The psychological feeling is that the former is still with the latter in spirit, even when they are no longer physically together. In Ex. 10 the vocative is used to indicate intimacy between the speaker and listener. Although in context of this utterance, the 'husband', ironically, is her son, the listener could as well be her daughter or any child in the environment. The 'child' is elevated to the status of 'husband' to make him feel good, and thus becomes very responsive to the speaker.

### 6. Conclusion

In this paper we have maintained that ironical utterances are features of communicative interaction generally. They characterize conversations, interviews, drama dialogues, orations and stories. We thus observed the need to collect and study the occurrences of the utterances both within and outside literary studies.

It was observed that ironical utterances performed referential, expressive, conative and phatic functions; they did not perform poetic and metalinguistic functions. The utterances were also used to give remarks, scold, warn, tease, assure, tickle and greet. Thus, contrary to earlier impressions about what ironical utterances were used for, it was observed that these utterances were used to express both contemptuous and salutary intentions.

It was observed that the utterances revealed a lot of cultural stereotypes among the Yoruba regarding the fear of the evil eye, sociability and social control and morality. They thus serve as a linguistic window through which attitudes and beliefs of the society can be viewed.

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