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THE SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS OF NIGERIAN PROVERBS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *Things Fall Apart* AND OLA ROTIMI'S *The Gods are Not to Blame*

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Introduction

Nuggets of popular wisdom abound in many African languages to accentuate and highlight discourses at given contexts. These expressions of wisdom are usually referred to as proverbs. In Africa, especially in the Nigerian context, certain expressions are not considered rich and intelligent except when they are duly laced with proverbs, which are many in our diversified cultures. This informs why a traditional African would constantly punctuate his speech with appropriate proverbs and aphorisms to drive his points home [Lawal, (1992) cited in Lawal, et al. (1997:637)]. The ability to sum up ideas and experiences in captivating and succinct expressions has always been considered a sign of native intelligence, linguistic competence and cultural erudition.

Thus, in projecting the Nigerianness/Africanness of their themes and cultural backgrounds, many Nigerian writers articulate the rich cultural ethos of proverbs in their creative works. Our aim in this paper is to examine practically how proverbs are employed in reinforcing meanings. Two creative works, a novel and a play text, which are classics in their own rights, written by two prominent Nigerian authors, are focused on. Fifteen proverbs from each work are presented and each proverb is broadly subjected to pragma-semantic inquiry.¹ It is ultimately submitted that proverbs are a profound source of rhetorical power, literary effectiveness and discursal maturity.

Proverbs: A Conceptual Review

Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence in many African cultures, especially in Nigeria. Such "wise sayings" are usually acquired and learnt from listening to the elders' talk. Given the vintage position that the elders occupy in various African traditions as the human repository of communal or primordial wisdom, they are the masters of eloquence, rhetorics and meaning. They are the ones who know how to impregnate short expressions with vast meanings, implicating the proverb, "it is the elder's mouth that determines a ripe kola nut".

Several definitions of the term "proverb" abound in literature. The central idea in the definitions is that a proverb is "an adage, saying, maxim, precept, saw or any synonym of such that expresses conventional truth". According to *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1972), a proverb is a "short saying in common use expressing a well-known truth or common fact ascertained by experience". It is our contention, based on the above definition(s), that a proverb is any wise saying or epigram that addresses the heart of the matter in a given context, truthfully and objectively, and is ascertained by world knowledge.

Adegbija (1988) provides insights into factors responsible for the successful decoding of meanings by investigating the utterance, "My friend, where is Anini?" made by a Nigerian military President to his Inspector General of Police. He discovers that the utterance subjects itself to five interpretations (Adegbija, 1988:153) based on thirteen different presuppositions, both semantic and pragmatic. Those presuppositions made his subjects infer ten meanings from the utterance under study, which surreptitiously appears as an innocuous utterance (Ibid:158), contextualized naturally within the semantic and pragmatic frameworks.

Lawal et al. (1997:635-652) describe the illocutionary acts performed through the use of twelve Yoruba proverbs. They analyse the linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological and cosmological contexts which listeners or readers have to competently deploy to interpret the proverbs. They dissect the frontiers of meanings inherent in the proverbs through the pragmatic theory, which is a

theory of meaning. Pragmatics is mainly concerned with the different meanings which words, phrases and sentences can have in different contexts of use (Lawal, 1997:19).

Alabi (2000:215-230) highlights the form and functions of proverbs in five plays of Olu Obafemi. The three groups she identifies are, first, proverbs that echo existing Yoruba proverbs, which aim at freshness, reducing the boredom of encountering everyday proverbs. The second group consists of proverbs that are garnished by rhetorical elements such as unusual collocates, L1 lexemes, parallel structures, anastrophe, parenthesis and ellipsis which serve the function of engaging the minds of the audience/readers in the intellectual tasks of identifying new versus old forms of the proverbs. The last group comprises proverbs that sparkle in translation "with the vivid imagery of the L1 and its culture" which functionally provide the necessary cultural milieu for the plays she studied.

Following Lawal's (1992) thesis that proverbs seem to contain the richest pool of pragmatic or semantic factors, the meaning mappings provided by proverbs are therefore significant for attention especially in the second language context, where the L1 ideas are transposed on the L2 codes. Though, due to the universality of human experience, proverbs exist in all languages with similarities in terms of their reliance on vivid images, domestic allusions and word play, yet they are scantily encountered in many European languages (Crystal, 1997:53). On the contrary, proverbs feature prominently in interpersonal, transactional and ideational language use in Africa. And since African writers articulate African ethos that "enable a compelling realization of African aesthetics", many committed Nigerian writers are wont to suffuse their committed literary enterprises with abundant proverbs as a way of underscoring cultural consciousness and evoking penetrating meanings. The notion of appropriateness informs the rendition of the proverbs in English, which inevitably involves the question of Nigerian English and its distinctive register (Bamgbose, 1970:87).

Theories and Types of Meaning

Language is one of the main instruments by which values, belief systems and cultural practices are communicated. Every language, asserts Goddard (1998:2), has its own culture-specific meanings, which do not translate readily into English. For this purpose, the Nigerian writers in English have to intuitively deploy theories of meaning to their rendition of Yoruba proverbs into English and have to rely on this to get their meanings communicated. As semantics is a linguistic theory concerned with the study of meaning by seeking "to convey and classify human experience through language" (Babatunde, 1999:70) and pragmatics studies the "'invisible' meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said (or written)" (Yule, 1996a:127), the essence of the theories of meaning is to provide frameworks from which meaning can be attributed and inferred. Some of the theories of word/sentence meaning include the Referential Theory, the Ideational Theory, the Stimulus-Response Theory, the Realist Theory and the Contextual Theory.

The referential theory states that the meaning of a linguistic expression is expressed in terms of what is named, denoted and referred to by the word. Also considered as the denotation theory, it indicates that the meaning of a word or expression is the physical object which the word-stands for.

The ideational theory, otherwise known as the psychological theory, refers to the meaning of a word being associated with the idea always associated with that word/linguistic expression. In other words, the theory states that if an occasion instantiates the occurrence of a word, the idea expressed is the meaning of that word. It is a mentalistic theory of meaning. While referential theory principally deals with denotation, the ideational theory is chiefly concerned with connotation.

The stimulus-response theory, otherwise known as behavioural theory, concentrates on what is involved in using language. According to Bloomfield [(1933) as cited in Ogunsiji (2000:47)], "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer" is the meaning of a linguistic form. The theory approaches meaning by attempting to look into the process of communication in order to explain the nature of meaning.

The realist theory of meaning, an outgrowth of the referential theory, is attributed chiefly to Plato and Aristotle. It simply states that for a word or a linguistic form to have a meaning, it must refer to some existing or subsisting entity. Therefore, words are not more than "exaggerated theory of reference" as posited by Frege. It is proposed that there is an entity above and beyond the realm of sensible entities from which all particular things derive their meanings.

The contextual theory, on the last note here, is a pragmatic theory of meaning which focuses on what the linguistic form is used for, rather than what it means (Oyeshile, 2000:176). According to Firth, who is a proponent of this theory, the most vital fact about language is its social function. Essentially, the theory maintains that a word/sentence will be meaningful only if it is used appropriately in some actual contexts (Ogunsiji, 2000:48).

Moreover, since meaning is not a one-dimensional phenomenon, there are bound to be types of meanings. Leech (1974) identifies seven types of meaning so as to really delineate the nature of the elusive meaning. According to him, meanings are conceptual/denotative, emotional/connotative, collocative, reflected, affective, stylistic and thematic. As all these meaning types feature in proverbs, a brief discussion of them is deemed appropriate.

Denotative meaning is the literal, basic, plain or central meaning of a word. It is relatively stable and its scope is not open-ended and indeterminate. Connotative meaning, on the other hand, is the meaning people associate with words. It is the personal or cultural meaning which is open-ended and indeterminate. According to Odebunmi (2001:49), connotative meaning ultimately depends on "individual experience" and Yule (1996b:3) affirms the essence of "speaker meaning".

While collocative (from collocation or "placing together" of words or phrases) meaning is the meaning of a linguistic form in relation to the other forms expressed with it in a given context, reflected meaning is the sense a word or sentence evokes in a multiple conceptual situation. According to Ogunsiji (2000:52), reflected meaning arises when one of the several meanings of a word becomes directly associated with the word to the extent that we tend to forget the other uses of the word.

Affective meaning arises when language is used to reflect the personal feelings or attitudes of the speaker to the audience. This type of meaning features at the levels of politeness, indignation and rudeness. While stylistic meaning concerns the relation of the linguistic form to social or situational circumstances like geographical location, subject-matter, medium, sex, age, etc, thematic meaning refers to the manner of organising messages in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis.

As no language is monolithic and expressions lend themselves to various meanings based on the interpretation of the listeners, stamping one specific meaning on a proverb may be erroneous. What we have, rather, are possible meaning types which cannot even all be explored. The inter-relationship and inter-dependence of meanings, occasioning overlaps, thus feature in our analysis.

Presentation and Analysis of Selected Proverbs

The data analysed here are selected from the proverbs contained in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*. These two works are rooted in the Nigerian cultures, hence their significance for the purpose of this study. *Things Fall Apart* portrays the dynamics of social change that plagued the Iboland during the early contacts with the white men (missionaries and mercenaries) and the ensuing conflicts leading to the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist. *The Gods are Not to Blame* is also tragic, an enactment of King Odewale's travails. The story, set in Yorubaland, thematises man's helplessness before the gods or forces of fate and destiny as the baby doomed to be killed at infancy because of a pathetic prophecy eventually survives, living up to actually carry out the abomination of killing his father and marrying his mother.

The two works mainly highlight the significance accorded to cultural norms and nuances in the day-to-day activities of the two Nigerian settings. The proverbs are in two groups, representing the two works of Achebe and Rotimi respectively, with each group comprising fifteen proverbs, making a total of thirty. Each proverb is situated within the semantic theories and the types of meaning that can be attributed to it. A pragma-semantic analysis is subsequently

undertaken with a view to interpreting or explicating the visible and the invisible sense of the proverbs (i.e their semantics and pragmatics).

Group One Data

Proverbs From *Things Fall Apart*

1. *The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.* p. 6.

Theory: Referential

Type: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The proverb makes reference to a cosmic body, the sun, with a view to evoking its sense – that those who strive and work (by remaining standing) will benefit from the fruit of their work before those who depend on them (by kneeling or deriving succour from them). While the inference of discouraging dependency can be made, the message is mainly that those who do not face the challenges of life and work assiduously defying sunshine should satisfy themselves with the crumbs that fall from the table of the hardworking ones. The proverb discourages laziness and implies the need for everyone to be hard working.

2. *If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings.* p. 6.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative, thematic

Analysis: The proverb portrays the honour and dignity attributed to cleanliness and responsibility. It thematizes hands washing, a good character training and hygienic way of eating as a *sine qua non* to honour. We infer that if a person does the right thing at the right time, as the proverb entails, good fortune, honour, reverence, esteem and credit will be his, just like eating together with kings. The pragmatic understanding of how really high the Nigerians rate their traditional rulers provides a further clue to the semantic import of the proverb.

3. *When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.* p. 9.

Theory: Referential

Types: Collocative, Stylistic

Analysis: Reference is made to another cosmic body, the moon, in this proverb, as “shining” collocates with “the moon” and “cripple” collocates (see Oguniji, 2002:52) with “walk”. The sense of the proverb lies in the cause-effect theory that if motivation is given, action arises. In essence, night is conventionally taken as a period of rest but also in a situation where there is moonlight, not only the able-bodied feels the need to walk or work in the night but even the cripple does. Night is implied and not stated while “hungry”, a marked word that ordinarily does not apply to “walk”, is also used for stylistic effect (see Alabi, 1999:173). The underlining message is that a good cause or motivation occasions a good effect or line of action.

4. *A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.* p. 14.

Theory: Stimulus-Response

Types: Denotative, Affective.

Analysis: This is a tactful advice. If a person accords honour or reverence to the successful ones, it is likely that he is also going to be successful. In other words, the sense of the proverb is that a person who helps another man helps himself indirectly as he gets familiar with what that man engages in – and this will ultimately lead him also to greatness, directly or indirectly.

5. *A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.* p. 15.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Stylistic

Analysis: The proverb tasks our mental conception or general knowledge of the toad as a nocturnal animal. If such an animal therefore does “run” (a lexical item preferred by the author for metaphorical or stylistic effect, “an unusual register... used to attract attention”, (Bamgbose, 1970:85) against the normal collocative word, “jump”) in the day, there must be something amiss. The sense of the proverb is that there is a cause for anything strange that happens; there must be a reason, at least “no smoke without fire”. A toad running in daytime is probably pursuing something or certainly something is pursuing it. It has to do with the “cause-effect” relationship.

6. *An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.* p. 15.

Theory: Stimulus – Response

Types: Denotative/Thematic

Analysis: This proverb also exhibits “cause-effect” relationship as it thematises the old woman. It means that people who have negative features feel disturbed when such features are being highlighted. There is the effect or response of uneasiness with reference to the dry bones because an old woman whose dry bones are signs of impending death is always scared of death. The sense of the proverb, essentially, is that conscience worries people of negative attributes even when they are not addressed but their excesses (so to say) are being condemned.

7. *The lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.* p. 16.

Theory: Referential

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The proverb elicits the self-contentment and joy of good work. A good work, we can infer, is itself commendable whether people appreciate it or not. Reference is made to the lizard which nods after any activity it engages in, implicating its self-praise. The animal is personified for stylo-rhetorical effect. The English equivalent of “if you don’t blow your trumpet, nobody will blow it for you” may further illustrate the sense of the proverb – that if you do not appreciate your worth and dignify yourself, people may not bother to do it for you.

8. *Eneke the bird says since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching.* p. 16.

Theory: Referential

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: Like the previous proverb, this proverb derives its message from folklore, in which human attributes are given to animals/non-human creatures. The meaning is literal and figurative as well as multi-dimensional in scope. Changing situations give birth to innovations. If students, for example, develop novel means of cheating in the

examinations, referentially, the authorities also devise *ipso facto*, new strategies of apprehending or detecting the cheats.

9. *When a man says yes, his Chi says yes also.* p. 19.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Connotative.

Analysis: The proverb aptly sums up the essence of determination and strong will. Reference to *chi*, a person’s personal god in Igbo culture, is of connotative import. The message interpreted is that man must always take decisive decisions for himself and resolve to do whatever he tasks himself to do for that will always be the will of his supposed “god”. A possible English equivalent is that “heavens help those who help themselves”, and as such, man should always be responsible for all his actions.

10. *A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches.* p. 46.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Connotative.

Analysis: The proverb explores the logical sequence of things/phenomena: that a general analysis can be made from specific traits. In the real world, from the initial stage, from countenance and appearance, one is able to identify the good, the bad and the ugly. The reference to the chick in our psyche is illustrative: the chick that will not live long will probably look frail and sickly, right from the day it is hatched. Our actions, at particular times, are indices of our character, the proverb tells us.

11. *A child’s finger is not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.* p. 47.

Theory: Contextual

Types: Denotive/Collocative

Analysis: Given the contextual/pragmatic knowledge of a mother’s love for her child especially in the Nigerian cultures, it is implied that whatever she does, even if such superficially appears harmful, will be of benefit to the child. This is because it is presupposed that nobody loves a child better than his/her mother. Thus, the sense of the proverb,

which for effect parades "child/mother", "finger/palm", "a piece of hot yam" etc collocates, is that love bears no harm. If there is love, there is no need for reservation in taking a beloved's piece of advice, whether one considers it good or not, because a beloved person will not recommend a harmful antidote for whom he loves.

12. *If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others.* p. 87.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Connotative/Stylistic

Analysis: The proverb underlines the concept of collective responsibility: what one does implicates the involvement of the others. With tacit reference to our knowledge of the world, if a finger is dipped into the oil, other fingers get smeared alongside since they are together. In other words, a shameful act by a person brings shame, odium and opprobrium to him and by extension, to his family and community. Stylistic considerations impinge on the choice of "brought" and "soiled" from the existing alternatives – which could further communicate the same idea.

13. *A child cannot pay for its mother's milk.* p. 117.

Theory: Realist

Types: Connotative/Collocative.

Analysis: This proverb anchors an axiomatic fact: certain things are unquantifiable or priceless: No matter how much the child gives the mother later in life, such is not worth her milk, given the child at infancy. By extension, kindness, love (and such virtues) cannot be fully reciprocated, as they are inestimably valuable. Collocates like "child, mother, milk" enhance the sense of the meaning.

14. *An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.* p. 117.

Theory: Realist/Stimulus-Response

Types: Connotative/Stylistic.

Analysis: By drawing our attention to the real world of human-animal behavioural patterns, the proverb draws a line between a human being and an animal. The proverb is suggestive of the social nature of man, and the fact that "no man is an Island". The proverb suggests that it is

love that distinguishes men from animals. People who do not seek their fellow human beings' help when in danger or difficulty are therefore animalistic. Marked word patterns like "aching", "flank", "kinsman", "rubs", "scratch", that one would ordinarily prefer other words for, are used for stylistic purposes, engendering the connotative, figurative sense.

15. *Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.* p. 118.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Connotative/Stylistic

Analysis: The sense engendered by this epigrammatic statement is the vanity of arrogance. By creating the image/idea of fire in our mind, we are implicitly told that fire flares up in pride but its consequence is cold, impotent ash. The connotative meanings of "cold" and "impotent" are quite essential and their stylistic association with ash lends credence to the force of the meaning. Both fire and "ash" conjure in us human qualities – the fire gives birth to a cold and impotent child in ash. The semantic implication of this is that lamentation arises in life because life is not always logical. The sense of the proverb can be further interpreted that people should be good and level-headed when they are opportuned (to be in a position) or alive; for, when they lose such position and die, they become useless and unwanted – subsequently becoming objects of public disdain.

Group Two Data

Proverbs from *The Gods are Not to Blame*

16. *The struggles of man begin at birth.* p. 1.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: This is an epigram, implicating the centrality of struggle in man's life. Right from his first breath at birth, the proverb entails, a child struggles to live and become a (successful) man till he dies, with everyday posing its own challenges. The connotative sense derives from its being metaphorical. It is in the realm of philosophy (i.e Realist

Theory) that it will be appropriately understood that not only adults struggle, a day-old baby also battles to survive.

17. *The world is struggle.* p. 6.

Theory: Realist

Types: Connotative/Stylistic

Analysis: Just like the previous proverb, this proverb in metaphoric sense equates the world with struggle. In any struggle, it takes the fittest to survive. Man should therefore be prepared, the proverb entails, to face the struggle of the world so as to be victorious in the end. The pithiness of the proverb is of stylistic import.

18. *He who pelts another with pebbles asks for rocks in return.* p. 7.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Collocative

Analysis: This proverb communicates a moral message, more compelling than the English equivalent "he who lives in a glass house should throw no stones". Not only will an evil deed done be retaliated, the retaliation will be more devastating than the destruction wrought by the provocation. The proverb entails, with stylistic and collocative imports of such words like "pelt/pebbles", "rocks/return", that one should abstain from evil deeds so that one will not be checkmated by more severe evils – as deterrents – than the ones actually done. The "cause-effect" concept is also engendered here.

19. *Sickness is like rain, does the rain fall on one roof alone?* p. 10.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: This proverb rhetorically emphasises the universality of ill-health: it is among the phenomena that go round. At the denotative level, it is further interpretable to mean that given the low level of medical knowledge in traditional cultures like Yoruba, all sicknesses are assumed to be contagious. When the sick is not treated, others quickly contract the sickness or disease, like the rain that falls on the roofs of everybody. In essence, as rain does not discriminate, sickness also visits all people. The tragedy that befalls one group, we infer, will

soon befall the other group – thus, no people should exult because of other people's misfortunes.

20. *It is sickness that man can cure, not death.* p. 12.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Thematic

Analysis: This is a philosophical, empirical truth, portraying the limitation of man's power or ability. The meaning is lucid: man cannot cure death, even though he can cure diseases. The proverb entails resignation and surrender to what is inevitable. There is no need lamenting what is beyond one's power; sickness that man can prevent is thus thematised.

21. *To get full cured, one needs patience.* p. 14.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Thematic

Analysis: This is another philosophical truth. As all things, including cure for a disease – which is emphasised as a result of the universality of affliction, discomfort, sadness in one way or the other – need time to mature or secure, there is need for patience. The proverb is an indirect advice as we infer that cure or solution to all problems lies in exercising patience. "Time" it is said "is the greatest anesthesia". According to Adedimeji (1999:9) ---- for, whatever we feel, ---- Time turns. Time treats. Time thrills".

22. *The moon moves slowly but by daybreak, it crosses the sky.* p. 14.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The crux of the proverb, just like the previous one, is the message of patience. The idea of the slowly-moving moon is referenced. The English equivalent could be "slow but steady wins the race". With patience, the vast sky is "crossed" by daybreak. The moral message of patience is preached indirectly. The reference to the moon further elucidates the meaning and distills the sense deeper.

23. *The secrets of a home should be known first to the head of the house* p.19

Theory: Contextual

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The proverb states the principle of administration within the family context. Information is implicitly suggested as a social function, which should be disseminated along the vertical axis. The message is that the leader or head of a household (i.e the husband) should be the first recipient of sensitive information of the home, for if such information is diffused to all and sundry, it may wreck havoc on the whole family. While home connotes "family", "head" connotes "husband" since in the Yoruba culture, like other cultures, the husband is the leader of the family unit. Information management, we infer, is crucial even at the family level or context.

24. *A cooking pot for the chameleon is a cooking pot for the lizard!* p. 19.

Theory: Ideational

Types: Denotative/Affective

Analysis: The idea created by reference to two reptiles (chameleon and lizard) is symbolic of what befalls people of similar traits. Given the understanding of the Yoruba tradition wherein such animals are burnt and subsequently used for charms, it is inferred that one should not rejoice in the misfortune of the other as what befalls the former will soon befall the latter. The affective interpretation is determined by the exclamatory mark which could mean the speaker's attitude to warn, denounce, scorn or emphasise. After all, "what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander", the cooking-pot that terminates the life of the chameleon will soon serve as the grave of the lizard too, we are told. So, what is good is good and what is bad is bad for either animals or any two individuals.

25. *The horns cannot be too heavy for the head of the cow that must bear them.* p.20.

Theory: Realist

Types: Denotative/Collocative

Analysis: The proverb alludes to the horns which the cow still copes with. A philosophical/analytic proverb, it means that nature takes care of itself and providence does not burden man beyond the realm of his capacity. In other words, people of responsibilities should know how to cope with their tight schedules without fuss or complaint. The collocative importance of "horns/cow", "heavy/head" further lends credence to the successful decoding the meaning. No situation in life is unmanageable.

26. *We have left our pot unwatched and our food burns.* p. 21.

Theory: Referential/Ideational

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The sense of the proverb lies in lamentation occasioned by avoidable neglect. Reference is made to the pot of food, put on fire, which burns as a result of negligence. The "cause – effect" relationship is discernible at the ideational level – neglect leads to loss. The proverb entails that to keep what one has in its pure/real form, one should always "watch" or mind it, lest it is destroyed.

27. *Until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution.* p. 21.

Theory: Referential/Realist

Types: Denotative/Collocative

Analysis: This proverb also presents a general knowledge in a philosophical garb, related to the one in datum 12 discussed earlier. With collocates like "rotten/tooth" and "mouth/chew", the proverb evokes the sense that as long as bad influences or people remain, as few as they may be, they will still constitute a hindrance to the healthy growth or development of the society. With the rotten tooth in place, the whole mouth is rendered handicapped and whenever it eats, it must be with extreme caution. In the real world, it is a practicable truism.

28. *When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they not do to the flesh of a frog?* p. 24.

Theory: Referential/Realist

Types: Denotative/Connotative

Analysis: The proverb points to a real fact and the underlying message is that of not being bothered by the antics of the compulsively wicked. We are rhetorically questioned that if crocodiles devour their own eggs, given the knowledge of how precious other animals keep their own eggs/off-springs, should it then surprise us if other smaller animals fall their prey? In other words, the wickedness of the wicked is often suffered by his own immediate relations before the outsiders: a person who harms himself should be excused when he harms others – he is probably stupid or insane!

29. *Is it not ignorance that makes the rat attack the cat?* p. 28.

Theory: Referential/Realist

Types: Denotative/Collocative

Analysis: With reference to our understanding of the two animals, rat and cat, our knowledge of the world makes us agree with the force of the rhetorical proverb. It is ignorance that would make a person attack a more formidable enemy for such will be tantamount to his summary execution or punishment. The inference made is that a wise person will always avoid having any direct encounter with his powerful adversary so that the latter does not liquidate him. The reference to, and the stylo-collocative import of, "cat/rat" strengthen the sense of the proverb.

30. *Take your time, child, if you rise too early, the dew of life will soak you!* p. 35.

Theory: Realist/Contextual

Types: Affective/Thematic

Analysis: Our last proverb is a didactic one addressed to the child. In the Yoruba culture where age is often considered a major determinant justifying or disqualifying one's attainment, the context of the proverb is revealing. The meaning evoked is that a young person should not be too ambitious to acquire all that the elderly ones have acquired. If he is, the resultant effect is that he will be, in metaphoric sense, soaked by the dew of rising early. In other words, he will be submerged by his achievements to such extent that his lack of experience (which only comes through age) will culminate in losing his life or achievements.

The instructive theme situates the proverb within the context of advice, passed from the old to the young.

Classification and Appraisal of Proverbs Studied

As far as present writer is aware, a proper classification of proverbs is yet to emerge. The scanty scholarly works available on proverbs in Nigeria focus on functions, forms and the nuances of translation to the L₂s; majorly English and French. The present study [(cf. Bamgbose (1968) and Ajiboye (1984) for instance, cited in Alabi (2000) and Lawal et al. (1997)] attempts to fill this vacuum. Our analysis reveals that all African proverbs, as Nigerian proverbs constitute just a microcosm of the vast pool of African proverbs, can be grouped into four major types. These are rhetorical, epistemological, didactic and philosophical/analytic proverbs. The relationship between one classification and the other(s), just like our analysis of theories and types of meaning, is not always mutually exclusive. Instances of overlaps, characteristic of language studies, often occur. For instance, an analytic proverb may also serve rhetorical and didactic functions, while epistemological proverbs also serve philosophical/analytic and didactic purposes. A brief discussion of this classification or typology is as follows:

Rhetorical Proverbs: Rhetorics, according to the Aristotelian definition, reformulated by George Campbell (cited in Ajadi, 1997:206) is "the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion". It is concerned with using language in an impressive way, especially to influence people to take a step or act in a particular manner. Rhetorical proverbs are thus those pithy sayings that are geared towards persuading or influencing people to do certain things. Proverbs such as those of data 2,3,9,16,17,21 and 30 belong to this category, including those that are captioned as rhetorical questions as we have in data 19,28 and 29. They are meant to encourage, motivate and advise people with the aim of making them adopt a world-view or act in a specific manner.

Epistemological Proverbs: These are proverbs whose origins lie in history, stories, folklore, myths, legends and other oral traditional sources. They tell a story or narrate an incident at a glance. Some epistemological proverbs require commentaries for their meanings and imports to be understood. Belonging to this category are proverbs 7, 8, 9, 24 and 28.

Didactic proverbs: These are proverbs that teach moral lessons. They are meant to instill some moral training or discipline in the hearers, especially the children, by exhibiting virtues and extolling them and identifying vices as well as condemning them. They are teaching proverbs. Examples of these include those of data 2, 4, 12, 13, 18, 21, 22, 29 and 30. Many Nigerian proverbs, just like folk stories, serve didactic purposes.

Philosophical/Analytic proverbs: These are proverbs that are rooted in the study of the cosmos, the universe and knowledge of the world. They portray self-evident truths – observable, discernible, empirical and philosophical – that are often used as a “veritable horse by which words are conveyed” (Alabi, 2000:215) and for emphasizing words. They could serve didactic purposes too. In essence, philosophical/analytic proverbs accentuate communication through a close observation of, and allusion to, natural phenomena. Examples here include data 1, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28.

A holistic appraisal of the findings above reveals that Nigerians are mainly philosophers and thinkers whose intellectual/cultural erudition manifests in the reality of their proverbs. The preponderance of philosophical/analytic proverbs which are largely situated within the realistic theory of Plato and Aristotle further justifies the fact that the Nigerian cultures and languages are rich in profound meanings – which are sourced from deep thought and scientific observation. In simple terms, most proverbs are philosophical in nature because they engage our mental faculty to examine and appreciate what exists but that we hardly take note of.

Proverbs that are situated within the framework of referential and ideational theories constitute the average as our rhetorical and didactic

proverbs clearly show. This is quite normal because their chief meaning equivalents are the most basic types of meaning (i.e denotation and connotation – both of which can be taken to subsume the remaining types of meaning). It is thus basic in Nigerian cultures to make references to physical objects implicitly or explicitly as a way of further “affecting or effecting desirable action” (Lawal et al, 1997:650).

The low frequency of stimulus-response and contextual theories is also normal because the two – one behavioural the other pragmatic – fall within the mutual contextual beliefs or MCBs which are not located in the “surface structure” of proverbs (Lawal et al. 1997:650-651). In other words, the two constitute the “corresponding contexts of use” (Ibid, 650) which the language user in Nigeria naturally deploys to really appreciate the proverbs. It is the blend of the two that pragmatically underlines the effective use of the proverbs. Such theories would be of more relevance while considering cultures outside the L1 contexts. Languages/proverbs are culture-bound.

Table of Proverbs and Types

Proverbs	Examples
Rhetorical Proverbs	2, 3, 9, 16, 17, 21, 3 and 19, 28, 30
Epistemological Proverbs	7, 8, 9, 24, 28
Philosophical/Analytic Proverbs	1, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28
Didactic Proverbs	2, 4, 12, 13, 18, 21, 22, 29, 30

Conclusion

In Nigeria, not just “among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, 1975:5); [cf. Rotimi’s (1979:35) question that “what is the matter, fellow, aren’t you a Yoruba man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said?”]. As a result of the significance of proverbs in embellishing and accentuating discourse, many Nigerian authors, like Achebe and Rotimi focused here, find it

desirable and unavoidable to deploy the highly rated proverbs to the articulation of their thematic concerns. The richness of the Nigerian languages and the discursual erudition of elders (who use proverbs most) are not diminished by the fact that the authors write in English. The Nigerianness of the expressions cast in English makes their works appealing, culturally-oriented and traditionally invaluable. Various types of proverbs serve the function of clarification, explanation, instruction, persuasion, moral lesson and emphasis in their use as foregrounded above, with their intellectual, emotional and imaginative undertones.

As the semantic discipline, just like pragmatics, in the words of Chase [as cited in Crystal (1997:397)], is mainly meant "to blow ghosts out of the picture and create a new picture as close to reality as one can get," its theoretic framework has largely been used to "blow the ghosts out of" the meanings of the Nigerian proverbs studied here. The paper identifies semantic theories, meaning types and proverb types through data presentation and analysis. It showcases how powerful ideas, illustrative references, and realistic messages are distilled through the use of proverbs in Nigeria. This study is an attempt to emphasise that communication matters a lot and that effective communication in Nigeria requires a good mastery of proverbial elements, which convey more meaning and achieve more results in the hearers' sensibilities than ordinary everyday expressions. The dynamism of Nigerian languages, their cultural virility and linguistic potency, are underscored by showing through proverbs "how meaning is conveyed by L2", according to Babatunde (1995:4), "within the mediating role of the first language".

Note

1. The remaining proverbs in the two works are in the appendix.

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APPENDIX

Other proverbs from *Things Fall Apart* (1-8) and *The Gods are Not to Blame* (9-52) which could be subjected to further analysis are as follows:

1. Looking a King's mouth, one would think he never suckled at his mother's breast. p. 19.
2. A bowl of pounded yam can throw him in a wrestling match. p.16.
3. As the dog said, "if I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play".

4. A man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself (said the Tortoise). p. 68.
5. If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. p.113
6. We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have money but to have more kinsmen. p.117.
7. The clan was like a lizard, if it lost its tail, it soon grew another p. 121.
8. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. p.125.
9. Not to do something is to be crippled fast. p. 6.
10. To lie down resigned to fate is madness. p. 6.
11. It is not changing into the lion that is hard, it is getting the tail of a lion. p. 7.
12. But joy has a slender body that breaks too soon. p.8.
13. When the head of a household dies, the house becomes an empty shell. p. 9.
14. When the chameleon brings forth a child, is not that child expected to dance? p. 9.
15. When rain falls on the leopard, does it wash off its spots? p.9.
16. How long must feverish birds trouble in silence before their keeper? p. 10.
17. Only a madman would go to sleep with his roof on fire. p.11.
18. The ruin of a land and its people begins in their homes. p.13.
19. The monkey learns to jump from tree to tree without failing. Keep on trying. p. 14.
20. Life is a struggle. p. 15.
21. Your words sound like fresh wine, so full of sweetness but lacking substance. p.19.
22. When trees fall on trees, first, the topmost must be removed. p.22.
23. When the frog in front falls in a pit, others behind take caution. p. 23.
24. All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell which lizard suffers from bellyache? p. 23.
25. A chicken eats corn, drinks water, swallows pebbles, yet she complains of having no teeth. If she adds teeth, would she eat the gold? p. 26.
26. When the elders we esteem so highly can sell their honour for devil's money, then let pigs eat shame and men eat dung. p. 27.

27. He who drums for a sick man is himself a sick man. p. 28.
28. When the evil plotter beats his drum for the downfall of the innocent, the gods will not let that drum sound! p. 30.
29. The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come. p. 30.
30. If you think like a tortoise, you can plot against me without my cutting you down first with my own tortoise tricks, then, fellow, madness is in your liver. p. 32.
31. If you think that you can uproot a tree that has been planted by the gods... hmmm... my brother... (Gestures at his head to imply madness in the other's). p. 32.
32. Your highness, if you think to have heavy suspicions is wisdom, then your head is not well. p. 32.
33. You are a tortoise, a coward, a conniving slippery maggot! p. 33.
34. Two rams cannot drink from the same bucket at the same time! p. 34.
35. The lion's liver is vain wish for dogs. p. 37.
36. Meat that has fat will prove it by the heat of fire! p. 37.
37. An eagle does not go to the market-place unless there is something there. p. 37.
38. What is the difference between the right ear of a horse and the left ear of that same horse? Nothing. p. 38.
39. The tortoise is not tall but is taller than the snail; the snail is taller than the frog; the frog is taller than the lizard; the lizard is taller than the fly; the fly is taller than the ant; the ant is turn is taller than the ground on which it walks. Everything has its own place, its own level, its standing. p. 38.
40. The touch of palm oil is cool to the body. Cool me. p. 39.
41. Because the farm owner is slow to catch the thief, the thief calls the farm-owner thief! p. 46.
42. The monkey and gorilla may claim oneness but the monkey is Monkey and the gorilla, Gorilla. p. 51.
43. The mangrove tree dwells in the river, but does that make it a crocodile? p. 51.
44. Can the cockroach be innocent in a gathering of fowls? p. 53.
45. You all love me. We are all close friends. [Sneering]. Like he-goats and cocoyam! p. 53.
46. The butterfly thinks himself a bird. p. 59.
47. It is what is in the heart when there is no wine in the head, that comes out when there is wine in the head. p. 60.

48. A bush does not sway this way or that way unless there is wind. p. 60.
49. The snail may try, but it cannot cast off its shell. p. 60.
50. The toad likes water, but not when the water is boiling. p. 60.
51. Secrets of the owl must not be known in daylight. p. 62.
52. When the wood-insect gathers sticks, on its own head it carries them. p. 72.