

تحليل إجتماعي لغوي لأمثال نسوية أفروأميركية مختارة

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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Selected African- American Women Proverbs

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Abstract

The status of women has been witnessing dramatic changes throughout the history of Europe and America. These changes have not taken the same form or directions, they rather differ from one place and another and from one culture to another. As for America, the concentration of this study is basically upon the status of Afro-American women. The present study aims at explicating how African-American women are identified through the use of proverbs. Women proverbs are commonly used by men, however, women themselves make use of these proverbs as well. The study investigates women representation through African-American proverbs. For this, it starts with introducing different accounts given for defining proverbs, their uses, characteristics and functions. A brief account of the African – American variety is then presented in order to help understanding the analyzed proverbs as they are used in their actual context. Dell Hymes' model (1974) is adopted as a viable sociolinguistic framework for analyzing some representative selected African American proverbs.

Key Words : Sociolinguistics , African-American , Proverbs , Hymes' model , women , culture .

المستخلص

شهدت مكانة المرأة تحولات ملحوظة في التاريخ الأوربي والأمريكي. وهذه التغيرات لم تتخذ شكلا واحدا أو اتجاهات متشابهة بل انها تختلف من مكان لآخر ومن حضارة لأخرى. وفيما يخص اميركا فان تركيز هذا البحث يقع بشكل أساسي على مكانة المرأة في المجتمع الافرو-اميريكي وكيفية استخدام اللغة والتحديد الامثال لبيان انعكاسات المجتمع ونظرة للمرأة.

الامثال النسوية غالبا ما يستخدمها الرجال في كافة المجتمعات وكذلك فأنها تستخدم من قبل النساء في نفس الوقت بذات المعاني التي يستخدمها بها الرجال.

نظرا لان الدراسة تتعلق بتمثيل المرأة في الامثال الافرو-اميريكية فأنها تستهل بتعريف لماهية الامثال واستخداماتها وخصائصها ووظائفها. ثم تتبع بتقديم مختصر لماهية اللهجة الافرو-اميريكية لمساعدة القارئ على فهم الامثال ضمن السياق الذي استخدمت فيه. ولهذا فان نموذج ديل هايمز قد استخدم كإطار لغوي اجتماعي لتحليل بعض الامثال الافرو-اميريكية المختارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : علم اللغة الاجتماعي - الامريكان الافارقة - الامثال - مودل هايمس - النساء - الثقافة .

1.Introduction

Evidently, it is not easy to provide a definition which covers all what is meant by proverbs. Hence, Taylor(1931) has proposed that the definition of a proverb is " too difficult to repay the undertaking... An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not". This means that giving a perfect definition of proverb is debatable since it is defined differently in a variety of fields and sciences like anthropology, communication, history, religion, cultural studies, psychology, folklore, sociology, etc. Collecting, classifying and examining the social significance of proverbs is one concern of paremiological studies according to which a perfect definition of proverb is, to a certain extent, problematic due to the fact that proverbs share some elements which are commonly found in other linguistic genres as riddles, maxims, aphorisms, short fables, etc.

A proverb which has profoundly gained the interest of a great number of scholars is patently given different definitions. One of these definitions is presented by Kerschen(1998:2) who asserts that proverbs, among other forms of folklore, represent the customs, beliefs, and practices transmitted from one generation to the next. They are the representation of a way of life and all that it entails in terms of lessons and morals. As Mieder (1986: vii) points out, "Proverbs can be used in everyday conversation, journalistic writing, advertising, speeches of all types, in sermons, literature, debates, slogans, songs, legal argumentation, humorous quips, and other forms of human communications". The Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (1972) defines proverb as a " short saying in common use expressing a well-known truth or common fact ascertained by experiences". According to Mieder (1992), a proverb is a "phrase, saying, sentence, statement or experience of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experiences, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation".

Recognizing a piece of language and identifying it as a proverb or not is not difficult for a particular language user (Taylor, 1962). A proverb, Taylor continues, is something which is usually short and true. Based on popular senses or experiences, proverbs are conventionally used to express a truth and, as didactic means, they are efficiently used to guide the listener to the possible future events depending on certain previous experiences. Thus, the proverb is considered as" a traditional,

conversational, didactic genre with general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably with figurative meaning." (Neal Norrick,1985).

In fact, nothing can clearly mirror any given culture than the language used by its members. As an important part of language, proverbs almost reflect traditions, habits, beliefs, attitudes, social practices and mores. Therefore, characteristics of a given society can best be mirrored through the use of proverbs. In addition to democracy, equality, etc., gender is one of the societies' features demonstrated through the use of proverbs. So, different attitudes toward women can be seen in proverbs. In English proverbs animal imagery is frequently used to give women a subordinate role and an inferior social position. Chickens, snakes, bitches are almost used to represent women in the English proverbs (Rodriguez, 2009).

Proverbs consisting expressions raising women stereotypes will be a powerful means to transmit and reinforce biased beliefs and practices and can produce actual discrimination against women since they can be easily memorized and transmitted from one generation to another with no mentioned effort. Moreover, proverbs can be subtly used to depict women in a less favorable way and thus to enact gender segregation even their users are unaware that their linguistic behavior has any discriminatory result. (Rubini & Menegatti, 2014).

According to Yksel(1993:66), a great number of proverbs used by members of different cultures shows women undervalued and segregated and even underestimated. Most of these proverbs, whether implicitly or explicitly, express a negative value of women. This, in fact, participates in the transition of stereotypical perceptions of women and expectedly creating false generalizations about women. These probable false generalizations transferred from one person to another as a result of manipulating proverbs in their everyday communication. A number of sexist stereotypes of what women should or are supposed to be emerged as a factor greatly contributes to the evidence of proverbial oppression of the feminine gender and also underlines their negative impact on the struggle for gender equality (Balogun 2010,21). African American Vernacular English (AAVE, Hencefore) is deemed to be the first language of the majority of [working and middle classes African Americans](#), predominantly those working and/ or living in urban zones. It has its own distinct way of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

According to Edward (2004), most popular grammatical features of AAE include the following:

1. A ["zero" copula](#) (e.g., "**He my father.**" instead of "**He is my father.**").
2. The Simplification of the possessive form (e.g., "**My brother cat.**" instead of "**My brother's cat.**"),
3. The complicated use of verb aspects and tenses, which are not found in other English dialects. These include constructions such as (e.g., **I'm a-walk, I be walking, I been walkin, I done walk**).
4. The nonstandard use of the third person singular (s). In modern standard English, only third person singular verbs are assigned the mark (s) in the present tense; However, in AAE the additive suffix (s) can be assigned in other situations where the subject is plural. (e.g., "**My friends comes to the party**") (Walker & Van Herk, 2003).
5. AAE shows an interesting use of the verbal marker (be) to hint to a habitual event such as (e.g., "**Mike be kind**" instead of "**Mike is a kind person**". Green (2002, 35) reports that "this feature is very common and has been used to show how AAE differs from other varieties of English, and it has also been used as the topic of jokes and derogatory remarks about AAE and its speakers".

Some of the basic features of the phonology of AAE are:

1. [AAE is a non-rhotic accent of English as it drops the /r/ sound in syllable final position](#) i.e. under the coda of the syllable, while it kept it whenever it come under the onset.
2. AAE shows many instances of sound swap or what is more technically called [metathesis such as the word "aks"](#) instead of "ask".
3. AAE also tends to simplify glidings , more specifically diphthongs (e.g., "eye" often pronounced as "ah").
4. AAE shows a broader choices of intonation patterns than other American accents (Edward, 2003).
5. AAE tends to omit final consonant in final [consonant](#) sequences (e.g., "past" or "hand" can be pronounced without their final consonants "pas" and "han". (Richford, 2015).

It is worth mentioning that there is a variety of AAE, which is deemed to be the standard language used by African Americans. It is often known as African-American Standard English (AASE). According

to Rickford (2015), AASE is considered as the prestigious variety of AAE, which is used by middle-class African-Americans for formal, careful, or public frameworks. Spears (2015) states that AASE displays grammatical and vocabulary features of [standard English](#); yet, it preserves some features of AAVE accent such as features of intonation and rhythm.

Prahlad (1996:42) suggests that folklore genres are almost components of the "mask," that mainly function as a part of the ritual of disguise. As speech event consisting proverbs are considered, it seems that this ritual of disguise is critical because proverbs represent one of the most important genres in "masking," as evidenced by their frequent occurrence in segments of discourse characterized by elaborate and metaphorical speech. (ibid).

Another vital ritual in the African-American' speech events is the "ritual of defense/attack which can be executed through several strategies including strategies of argumentation, persuasion. In the context of many speech events, Abrahams (1972) suggests that proverbs almost function as a means of offering solutions to frequently happening problems. They constitute a part of the defense and attack strategy when African informants have to defend themselves and their culture against the others' criticism, condescension, and denigration, as well as against logically constructed arguments about one topic or another. In other cases, African American informants move from taking the defendants' stance to the attackers' stance. Hence, in such cases proverbs are often employed as a pivotal device in this strategy. As a part of the strategy, proverbs sometimes reflect visions of the social order desired by African speakers, and can thus be viewed as contributing to what Roberts(1989) has called "culture building" in these speech events. They can also function as a means of reflecting and affirming the individual' visions of social justice (Levine 1977).

Proverbs are usually preferred for communicating a message and provide the speakers as anonymous where they intend to criticize or to make social or personal description (Roberts 1978: 130). This, in fact, is expressed in the common use of introductory and closing formulas that refer to the Bible, or "The Good Book". Proverbs provide speakers as a type of indirect communication of certain visions and commentaries. They, in addition, are effectively used for forming and assisting logical arguments and for persuasion. Moreover, proverbs can succinctly include

the central point of an elaborate and decorative discourse, putting it in a terse statement and drawing the listener's attention on that point and driving it home. Yankah (1989) points out regarding Akan proverbs that they function to manipulate the mood and attitude of listeners and create the impression of unity or agreement between African speakers and Euro interviewers especially when biblical references are frequently referred to.

2. Methodology

In carrying out a sociolinguistic analysis of the selected proverbs, the data that will be used will be collected from a set of publications that have been used as reference sources including: Kerschen's *American Proverbs about Women* (1998), Prahlad's *African –American Proverbs in Context: Publications of the American Folklore Society* (1996), Darwin's *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (1941) and *The Online Dictionary – The Phrase Finder*. Other reference books that have been consulted are paremiological works: Manser's *The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs* (2002) and Simpson and Speake's *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs* (1998). Fifteen proverbs will be picked out and worked with Hymes' 'SPEAKING' acronym.

3. Experimental Facility of the Research

This research is informed by the theoretical approach of Dell Hymes' (1974) *Ethnography of Communication*, which represents "an approach to analyzing language which has been designed to heighten awareness of culture-bound assumptions" (Holmes, 2008: 365). Hymes (1972) asserts that "cultures communicate in different ways, but all forms of communication require a shared code, communicators who know and use the code, a channel, a setting, a message form, a topic, and an event created by transmission of the message." Therefore, a new approach to investigate language use is proposed by Hymes as 'ethnography of speaking', later changed to 'ethnography of communication' which is concerned not only with language structure but also with language use. Herein, ethnography refers to the description of different cultures and races, while communication refers to human language.

Instead of looking at language as an abstract set of rules, Hymes considers language as different ways of speech calling for a new theoretical methodology focusing on linguistic variety as encountered in real communicative situations.

Hymes' ethnography of communication is concerned not only with language structure but with language use (Hymes, 1989: 433). A number of components, Hymes argues, are involved in communication and they have an impact on the analysts' understanding of how a particular speech event achieves its communicative goals (Johnstone & Marcellino, 2010). These components are represented as:

- (S) Setting: refers to the surrounding physical environment and aspects of place and time.
- (P) Participant: this refers to the persons involved in communication. It is concerned with the participants' personal characteristics identifying the persons participating in communication including their age, sex, social status and even their relationships with each other's.
- (E) Ends: refers to expected purpose of the speech event itself as well as the individual goals of the participants.
- (A) act, sequence or how speech acts are organized within a speech event and what topic/s are addressed;
- (K) key: this includes the tone and manner in which a message is communicated.
- (I) Instrumentalities: represents the linguistic code used in communication i.e. language, dialect, variety and channel i.e. speech or writing.
- (N) Norm or the standard socio-cultural rules of interaction and interpretation.
- (G) genre or type of event such as lecture, poem, letter.

Obviously, these components of speech acts are intended for exploring and explaining human social purposes in language. Thus, the SPEAKING acronym is proposed as a means rather than an end by itself. Hymes states that 'the formal analysis of speaking is a means to the understanding of human purposes and needs, and their satisfaction' (1972: 7).

The ethnography of communication thus represents an approach which accounts for the diversity of language and effectiveness of language in real communication regarding the ideas of means of speech and speech economy.

4. A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Some Selected African American Proverbs.

Data 1

Act sequence:

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العدد: ٤٨ / ج ٢
شوال ١٤٤٢ هـ / حزيران ٢٠٢١ م

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Selected..... (513)

" Never to bite off more than I could chew."

Meaning: The proverb is used to mean that an individual should not hope or work more than his/her capabilities.

Typology: Philosophical.

Setting: At home. In the afternoon.

Scene: An interview between an old African American woman and a white American man asking the black woman about the factors that make her doing well in her old age

Addresser: An old African American female informant.

Addressee: A white- American female interviewer

Key: Emotional

End: The proverb is used as a caution to avoid conflict with others or to be aware not to indulge the oneself in matters that need a greater range of abilities than his own.

Data 2

Act sequence

"people sow, so shall they reap"

Meaning: At home. In the afternoon.

Typology: Philosophical and rhetorical.

Scene: A dialogue between an old African American woman and a white American man asking the black woman to describe her sentiment on slavery experience under the dominant culture of the Euro-Americans.

Addresser: An old African American female informant.

Addressee: A white- American female interviewer

Key: Sober.

End: Arguing for social equity.

Data 3

Act sequence:

"Seein is belifin"

Meaning: People do not believe the existence of things unless they can see them.

Typology: Didactic.

Setting: At home. In the afternoon.

Scene: A dialogue between an old African American woman and a white American man asking the black woman about her opinion concerning ghosts and voodooos.

Addresser: An old African American female informant.

Addressee: A white- American female interviewer

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Selected..... (514)

Key: Emotional

End: Supporting the speaker's conviction in supernatural phenomena.

Data 4

"iffen a bird fly up in de sky it mus' come down sometimes"

Meaning: "Even a bird flies up in the sky, it must come down sometimes."

Typology: Rhetorical.

Addresser: An old African American female.

Addressee: A white- American female.

Scene: A dialogue between an old African American woman and a white American woman. The black woman is refreshing her memory telling a story about some members of her community.

Tone: Critical

End: The proverb is used to characterize and comment negatively on the women.

Data 5

Act sequence:

" It's better to climb on top of the house and sat, den to live inside wid a naggin' 'oman."

Meaning: It is better to climb on the top of the house and sit than to live inside with a nagging woman.

Typology: Reflective.

Setting: At home. At night.

Scene: A man is inquired by his wife about the topic of relationships and marriage.

Addresser: An African American husband.

Addressee: His wife.

Ends: The proverb is applied to support the belief that women nag men.

Key: Resentful tone.

Data 6

Act

sequence:

"Charity begins at home".

Meaning: a person's first responsibility is for the needs of their own family and friends.

Typology: Philosophical.

Setting: At home. In the evening.

Addresser: A father.

Addressee: A daughter.

End: The proverb is used as an advice. The father wants his daughter to believe that the best place for her is her home taking care of the family members. Key: Cordial.

Data 7

Act sequence:

"Two clean sheets can't smut."

Meaning: Two Christian man and woman are not sinners

Typology: Philosophical

Setting: At the church. In the afternoon

Scene: A middle-aged man is discussing religious and social topics with an old woman.

Addresser: An African- American woman, An Ascension church leader.

Addressee: A middle- aged African American man.

Ends: Confirming the religious conviction that God has created life for enjoining its beauty and making benefit from all boondocks endowed for all human beings. Sin is doing things against the God's will and against other human's benefits.

Key: light and cordial tone

Data 8

Act sequence

"The woman who rocks the cradle rules the home"

Meaning:

Typology: Philosophical.

Setting: In the cottage. In the morning.

Scene: As a woman is sewing her husband's clothes, her daughter come and overtakes her with the good news that she is now pregnant.

Addresser: An old woman (mother).

Addressee: A young woman (daughter).

Ends: Advising the daughter to take her responsibilities as a mother, and maintaining the great role mothers in particular and women in general have done to their family members.

Key: cordial.

Data 9

Act sequence:

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Selected..... (516)

"The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice".

Meaning: Black folks are more passionate than the whites.

Typology: Rhetorical.

Setting: At home. In the evening.

Scene: An African American young man has just returned home after having an appointment with a black young girl. His friend laments him for leaving the blonde girl who was accompanying him and, instead, dating a black woman. The White man is mocking and indirectly criticize the black man behavior.

Addresser: A white male'

Addressee: An African American male.

End: Evoke racist ideas.

Key: Mockery tone.

Data 10

Act sequence:

" don't let the same bee bite you twice"

Meaning: One should be cautious against people and events.

Typology: Didactic, Rhetorical.

Setting: At home, in the evening.

Scene: A young woman being exploited by someone, is warning herself no to fall in the same trap again and to be more cautious than ever.

Addresser: A young woman.

Addressee: Herself.

End: Warning.

Key: Serious.

Data 11

Act sequence:

" Beauty is only skin deep"

Meaning: Beautiful characters are not necessarily attractive.

Typology: Reflective

Setting: In the woman's cottage. In the afternoon.

Scene: A conversation between a black man and his girlfriend.

Addresser: A middle –aged man.

Addressee: A young woman- the man's girlfriend.

End: Bemoaning his wife lack of spiritual real beauty.

Key: A bemoaning tone.

Data 12

Act sequence:

"Love is blind"

Meaning: Lovers do not pay attention to their beloved mistakes or bad appearance. Instead they consider them always beautiful and right.

Typology: Rhetorical.

Setting: In the farm. In the afternoon.

Scene: Two friends are sitting in the farm having their lunch. Missing Joseph, their friend also, one of them and asks: "where does he go? I wonder what in the girl that draws him in love with her? Everyone kept telling him she had too many issues to be in a stable relationship, but he couldn't bring himself to listen.

The answer is "Love is blind"

Addresser: A farmer.

Addressee: The farmer's friend.

End: Maintaining the idea that true love between human beings is not based on how they look but on their compatible personalities and emotions.

Key: Hearty and light tone.

Data 13

Act sequence:

"Different strokes for different folks"

Meaning: Different things are done or liked variously by different people.

Typology: Didactic.

Setting: At home. In the afternoon.

Scene: A discussion between a young woman and her grandmother.

Addresser: A grandmother.

Addressee: A young woman

End: Inspiring her granddaughter's mind and encourage her to do things in accordance to her unique potentials.

Key: Sober and hearty.

Data 14

Act sequence:

"To get a woman nowadays is like just like buying a pig in a sack."

Meaning: Life outcomes are uncertain.

Typology: Philosophical.

Setting: At night. In an inn.

Scene: Two friends are sitting in an inn exchanging their opinions concerning marriage and love.

Addresser: A middle-aged male.

Addressee: A male friend

Ends: Reflecting points of view.

Key: Sober.

Data 15

Act sequence:

" Cow that's black and ugly, has often got sweetest milk."

Meaning: Black folks are more passionate than others.

Typology: Rhetorical.

Setting: Not specific.

Scene: A young woman is arguing the Whites negative attributes towards black folks. addresses a man

Addresser: A black woman.

Addressee: A black man

End: Sarcastic strategy.

Key: Defensive tone.

5. Results

Adopting Hymes' model (1974) in the analysis of the selected proverbs has demonstrated that the physical settings or places where proverbs are used are not only restricted to home which shows the highest frequency of (11) proverbs (representing 73.33%). Proverbs are also used in the church, farm and in the inn (with (1) proverbs representing 6.66 % for each place). Actually, one can suggest that the highest number of proverbs are used at home because of its traditional importance as it represents the nucleus of the African- American society where the family members usually meet. In general, home serves primarily as the center of proverbial exchanges. For the African - American people, there is much to be interacted with the family members in the afternoon (9 proverbs are used), and in the morning (1), or in the evening (at the end of their day's work (4) proverbs). It is clear that the majority of proverbial exchanges (60% of data) takes place in the afternoon.

The analysis also shows that, for participants, addressers and addressees are found with different frequencies of occurrence. Usually the addressers are: mothers (1) proverbs, fathers ((1) proverb), Middle –aged black men ((5) proverbs), elderly women ((4) proverbs), a grandmother ((1) proverb), a young woman (1) proverb, a woman church leader ((1) proverb) and by a white man (1) proverb). The African-American culture

considers elders as keepers or masters of proverbs and this explains the higher frequency attributed to elder participants. Regarding the addressee category, the analysis appears that the highest frequency is attributed to young and middle –aged males who accounts for ((5) proverbs), ((1) proverb), a girlfriend ((1) proverb), a daughter ((2) proverbs, a granddaughter ((1) proverb) and, a young woman (1) proverb), white females ((4) proverbs) and wives ((1) proverb) with frequency of 33.3%, 6.6%, 6.6%, 13.3%, 6.6%, 6.6%. 33.3% respectively.

The analyzed proverbs demonstrate different types of Ends. They are used as warning, advising, teaching, commending, convincing. The Keys in the analyzed proverbs can be categorized as: serious ((1) proverbs), cordial ((3) proverbs), sober (3) proverb), emotional (2 proverbs), resentful ((1) proverb) and bemoaning ((1) proverb), inspiring (1) proverb), critical ((1) proverb), mockery ((1) proverb), defensive ((1) proverb) with the frequency of 20%. 20%. 13% for the first three types and 6.6% respectively for rest of the other types.

6.Discussion

It is concluded that conventions of language use and its forms are remarkably related to aspects of social behavior. Elderly people in the African- American society are the keepers of proverbs and they are considered as the persons who can advise and influence the way young people live. Proverbs are used as an effective means of guiding and giving advices to those young people who lack experience or sufficient awareness of how to be adopted with the surrounding environment and how to go through life events successfully, and appropriately in line with their society's norms and social conventions. In most of the preceding analyzed proverbs women, whether old or young, are depicted as having important roles in the English society particularly as devoted mothers or sisters who selflessly provide help and support for their relative (especially males), and who hold the great responsibilities participating in developing the life of their family members and, indirectly, the future of their society. However, some other proverbs portrait African American women as being ugly and having undesirable physical attributes specifically those used by the Whites.

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