

THE PRAGMATICS OF PROVERB PERFORMANCE
IN LIMONESE CREOLE

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INTRODUCTION:

Oral narratives, song performances, riddles, rhymes and proverbs have traditionally constituted primary means of community entertainment in the folk cultures of the West African slaves transplanted to the Caribbean. These verbal expressions persist in the contemporary life of older West Indians as one of the many links between their basic African heritage and their newly-evolved Caribbean identity. Following this folk tradition, the Limonese Creole speakers of Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, a black minority of Jamaican descent, use language as a creative act in itself and they engage in all the oral art forms mentioned.

Within that wide context, this paper will deal with proverbs. In the colloquial experience of Limonese Creole speakers (from hereon LC), these nuggets of popular wisdom, couched in the form of succinct sayings, are as much a focal point of conversational exchanges, arguments or rhetorical speech as are their Anancy stories.¹ Proverbs cover a broad area of every day Limonese life, but they are especially used in three distinct ways: 1. as didactic tools in the rearing of children; 2. among adults, as cutting social weapons and 3. as encapsulating codas of oral narratives. The data on Limonese proverb performances used in this paper were obtained on two separate field trips in 1982 and 1988. The first corpus consists of conversations on a wide range of subjects in which some proverbs were interjected into ongoing discourse; the second consists of a set of proverbs obtained by eliciting both proverbs and short explanations regarding the range of situations in which they might be utilized and the range of meaning they might convey. It is hoped that discerning the broader outlines of these particular speech events will provide some insight into the study of this genre of human communication.

GOALS:

Since all of us have encountered proverbs in conversations, we are familiar with them to such an extent that until recently, it could be believed that,

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking...An incommunicable quality tells us that this sentence is proverbial and that is not.
(Taylor, 1931:3)

This intimate knowledge has led to using a priori and intuitive criteria in the identification and analysis of proverbs. Consequently, most studies have failed to distinguish this genre from semantically or functionally similar forms. In an attempt to overcome some of the pitfalls encountered by previous research, the first part of this paper will deal with the discourse that surrounds the proverb text. Although it seems to aid in the differentiation of proverbs from unmarked or ordinary use of language, context features have not received critical attention. In that sense, Briggs 1985 states that "the rhetorical force of proverb performances emerges from a subtle and complex use of the pragmatic functions of language." (p.794). The second part of the paper will be devoted to the close examination of proverbial understanding as a cognitive process. This seems essential, because ultimately such patterns may help clarify the organization of global knowledge structures.

PRIMARY PROVERB USAGES:

The obvious first step appears to be the need to provide some generalizations about the features all proverbs have in common, which may be amenable to analysis. All examples of the genre are alike in that they are sententious, witty remarks which embody wisdom, and they are used to control delicate but important social situations. Moreover, these terse messages express multiple meanings through different stylistic and semantic devices. The following usages may be listed for LC (examples are drawn from an extensive list of collected LC proverbs transcribed here in an adapted version of creole traditional notation; numbers preceding the proverb's text follow original listing.):

1. Proverbs that use associations with negative sanctions, although they are not necessarily overtly stated in the proverb itself:

10. /riba kom down tuwod mowt stop/
 "The river comes down, the toad mouth stops."
 When the river overflows, toads stop calling
 the rain.
 If you are looking for trouble, you will stop
 fooling around when it actually happens.

2. Proverbs that use puns, which are understood by certain groups, in order to amuse:

7. /kaal miy a daag bot dwon kaal miy tom pus/
 "Call me a dog but don't call me a pussy cat."
 dog = bitch = whore; puss = cat = thief
 Call me a whore, but don't call me a thief.

3. Proverbs which present challenges for verbal dueling and set the scene for other verbal art forms or games:

34. /a wanda we jankro dida duw bifo jakas ded/
 "I wonder what John Crow (the vulture) did
 (for food) before the jackass died."
 Usually said to a man who suddenly
 displays wealth which he cannot account for.

4. Proverbs that are said as jokes, but which even superficially aim at rectifying deviant behavior:

6. /plye wid popiy, popiy lik yu mowt/
 "If you play with a puppy, the puppy will lick
 your mouth."
 Avoid familiarity with children or untrained
 persons.
 cf. Familiarity breeds contempt.

5. Proverbs which abuse someone subtly,

21. /wislin wuman an crowin hen abomineyshen tu de laar/
 "A whistling woman and a crowing hen are
 abomination to the Lord."
 A woman who acts like a man ('wears the pants'
 in a household) is despicable (in God's eyes).

6. Proverbs which dwell on abstract principles to share ethical codes, such as:

23. /fala fashen monkiy olwiyz luwz im tyel/
 "A monkey that follows the fashion always loses
 its tail."
 One must be true to one's own identity.

PROVERB FORM:

As to form, LC proverbs can be grouped as follows:

1. A phrase (sentence fragment), such as

1. /tuw moch daag fi di syem bwon/
 "Too many dogs for the same bone."
 cf. Too many cooks spoil the broth.

2. A couplet, stated in parallel syntax:

22. /de haya monkiy klaym, de mo im ekspwoz im tyel/
 "The higher the monkey climbs, the more it exposes its tail."
 The higher a person climbs (socially), the more he/she will be scrutinized.

3. A couplet, using repetition in sound:

85. /avi, avi, avi naa wanti; wanti, wanti, wanti kyaan get it/
 "Have it, have it, have it, does not want it; want it, want it, want it, can't get it."
 Who owns it does not want it; who wants it cannot get it.
 People do not appreciate what they have.

Although not apparent in the data collected, it is very likely that some further classification could be made as to the settings of proverb usage: those that can be used by everyone, those that are not reciprocal--only adults may say them to children and not viceversa, and those that are reserved for members of certain groups depending on age and sex factors. Further research will be necessary to clarify this point.

On the other hand, note that even if we (1) summarized all the diverse circumstances of LC proverbs usage in a table (even more complete than the usages listed above), (2) made traditional functional statements about what proverbs do (i.e. summarize a situation, pass judgment, or recommend a course of action), or (3) attempted to analyze their superficial linguistic features, we would not produce a revealing analysis of what makes proverbs a different genre. It is precisely the very similarity of style, language and syntax to ordinary speech which gives the genre the ambiguous quality it requires and which defies a different analysis from ordinary syntactic structures. However, as a result

of focusing attention on the text and context of the proverbs, a few general observations may be made based on the sample classified above.

PROVERB TEXT ANALYSIS AND CONTEXT FEATURES:

In general, the only linguistic features of proverbial sayings which mark them as distinctive from ordinary discourse are the verb forms, which are almost never marked by tense, making the proverb acquire an aura of timeless veracity.² Their universal validity is underscored by the use of quantifiers, implicitly or explicitly expressed, which do not allow exceptions, e.g. 'all,' 'always,' 'never,' etc., as in /no kos ag, a im mek am/ "Don't curse the hog, he is what ham is made of;" appearances are deceiving. As ordinary language that they are, proverbs perform both pragmatic and conceptual functions. While the latter will be dealt with in the second part of this paper, the former is accomplished by the use of underlying assumptions to draw appropriate socially meaningful implications. This pragmatic role could be summarized as follows (Gossen 1973:227):

THE ELEMENTS OF THE PROVERB

1	2	3
Example from the physical or natural world	Ambiguous or ambivalent item or behavior	The norm or social rule

It is apparent that the genre uses several logical segments. Only part of the message is present and the social rule upheld as the norm becomes obvious by suggestion. The key to the proverb lies in the completion of the message on the basis of the segment given. What is given, however, is usually some natural or physical image (an animal, river, rain, a ghost, the devil, any kind of object or people) used to stir symbols and associations in the mind of the audience. The image then serves to conjure some normative behavior of an ambiguous nature, which by extension brings the listener to the realization of the norm. Some examples follow:

3. /yan daag dwon nwo layon/
"young dogs don't know lions."
Someone inexperienced does not know danger.

11. /if yu no mash ans, yu no fayn im got/
 "If you dont smash an ant, you don't find its
 guts."
 If you want to know what someone really feels,
 you must make him angry.

My field experience indicates that a legitimate analysis of the structure and meaning of proverb performance requires supplemental information obtained by scrutinizing the transcripts of actual occurrences, and by analyzing the discourse in which it is embedded. In that sense, Briggs claims that

Research on the social context of proverb performance has demonstrated the importance of contextual information in discerning the meaning of proverbs. (1985:794).

Briggs lists eight features which he considers indispensable to clarify this subtle and complex use of the pragmatic function of language. Following that line of thought, two excerpts of LC sample discourse were analyzed against the grid of those eight features. The result is described below. (Excerpted and adapted from Briggs 1985:799)

TABLE 1

Summary of features and their characteristics

FEATURE	OBLIGATORY/OPTIONAL	TEXTUAL/CONTEXTUAL
1. Tying phrase	—	C
2. Identity of owner	+	T
3. Quotative	+	T
4. Proverb text	+	T
5. Special association	—	T
6. General meaning/ hypothetical situation	—	T
7. Relevance to context	—	C
8. Validation	+	C

- The "tying phrase" refers to the element used in proverb performance to join preceding utterances in the discourse to what is to follow.
- The "identity of owner" is the citation of a person with whom the proverb is associated.

3. The "quotative" is the element--usually one of a small set of verbs, such as "say"--which introduces the proverb text.
4. The "proverb text" is the element which is usually isolated for collection and analysis.
5. "Special association" refers to the provenance of the proverb or to any specific association it may have, known to the speaker. This feature is not always present.
6. The "general meaning" of the proverb is often made explicit in the course of the following discourse.
7. "Relevance to context" refers to the practical application of the proverb to the present situation.
8. Most proverbs end with a "validation of the performance" to assert the validity of the proverb.

If the indirect treatment of a topic provides multiple meanings and the social context is far from being optional but rather constitutes primary data, then it is immediately apparent that the methodology employed in the collection of proverbs becomes essential. Arewa and Dundes have offered some guidelines:

One needs to ask not only for the proverbs, and for what counts as a proverb, but also for information as to the other components of the situations in which proverbs are used. What are the rules governing who can use proverbs and to whom? Upon what occasions? In what places? With what other persons present or absent? Using what channel? (e.g. speech, drumming, etc.) Do restrictions or prescriptions as to the use of proverbs or a proverb have to do with particular topic [sic]? with the specific relationship between speaker and addressee? What exactly are the contributing contextual factors which make the use of proverbs, or of a particular proverb, possible or not possible, appropriate or inappropriate? (1964:71).

The LC dialogs collected were obtained on a spontaneous basis, and no attempt was made to elicit proverbs or clarify their usage. They attest, however, to the speakers' heightened pragmatic sense which seems to lie beyond their conscious limits of awareness. The following features can be discerned: (Refer to the Appendix for the text analyzed below.)

1. Tying phrase: /Mi kan tel yu sometin ebowt man.../

2. Identity of owner: /di have a kuñado/ a brada in la/
3. Quotative: /neba sey a wer antil im yuwst tu sey somtin.../
4. Proverb text: /yu neba mis de wata antil de wel ron dray/
5. Special association: absent in this dialog
6. General meaning: /men kyaan liv widawt wimin (they appreciate women only when women leave them)/
7. Relevance to context: /taakin ebowt man/
8. Validation: I--/ay yuwst tu andastan it/
O--/wel dray/

Perhaps one could take exception at feature No. 3, which does not seem to be obligatory in other languages. Moreover, often proverbs are not quoted in their full form or they are used creatively, sometimes leaving it up to the hearer to complete a fragment of the proverb or even using the proverb in a novel fashion.³

A pragmatic interpretation of proverb performance is indeed helpful when it comes to dealing with the semantic analysis of the proverb.

PROVERBS AS METAPHORS:

The second part of this paper is devoted to answer questions such as, what underlies the ordinary language routinely used by proverbs so they become the directive force for a recommended course of action? In other words, how are proverbs understood? How do hearers transfer the point of overtly expressed generalized knowledge to the subtle interpretation of particular events, and how do they gather from them a suggestion, recommendation or command for moral behavior?

It is apparent that interlocutors go beyond the utterance itself to comprehend the meaning: speaker and hearers must share a common background of cultural knowledge and a compact economy of reasoning.⁴ Using underlying presuppositions and drawing appropriate implicatures through a process of inference, the hearers not only relate the saying with prior understandings, which they draw from their own life experience, but also fill in unstated propositions. A statement like /no ebritin we gud fi iyt, gud fi taak/ ("Not everything that is good for eating is good for talking." One must not say everything that one hears; a person must be discrete.) entails a translation of metaphorical imagery as well as familiarity with a cultural theory of ethics.

If the metaphor is viewed as a device for expressing abstract concepts in terms of other concepts more closely grounded in physical experience, then metaphorical imagery would seem to be an excellent vehicle for proverbs. The conceptual role of the metaphor on the one hand, and the pragmatic use of proverbs on the other, act in a complementary fashion. Within this line of reasoning, proverbs would be a special case of the more general process of metaphorical understanding as described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:115):

...metaphor pervades our normal conceptual system. Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.) we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientation, objects, etc.). This need leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system.

Proverbs use this model of metaphor. Mundane domains of one sort or other (animals, natural environment, food, etc.) constitute the source (as mentioned earlier). They have clearly defined conceptual entailments. Then by analogical reasoning the mappings between the source and the target domains are constructed.'

The reason why proverbs function as effective communicative devices is because they set up the hearer to draw practical inferences from listening to one or more key propositions embedded in a cultural model with known entailments. The metaphorical form allows these propositions and their behavioral entailments to be focused sharply because the proverb connects them tightly.

Following Lakoff and Turner 1989, the analysis of a proverb used by LC speakers will attempt to answer 'What does one need to know or assume in order to interpret the meaning of a proverb? What propositions and inferences enter into the ethnopsychology of LC proverbs?' Four ingredients are necessary to interpret proverbs, as follows:

the Nature of Things + the Great Chain + the
Generic is Specific Metaphor + Maxim of Quantity.

The Nature of Things and the Great Chain give it a common sense character; the Maxim of Quantity builds into it a pragmatic principle of communication, and it is the Generic is Specific Metaphor which is metaphoric in character.

For example, proverbs about human temperament frequently draw from the domain of animals. In that domain, we understand non-humans in terms of humans, i.e. animal characteristics are interpreted metaphorically in terms of human characteristics. Thus some common propositions that appear in schemas for animals in the Western world are:

--pigs are dirty, messy and rude
 --lions are courageous and noble
 --foxes are clever

They are all conventionalized instances of the Great Chain Metaphor. They belong to a cultural model. In the specific case of LC, that cultural model is that of Afro-Antilleans in which the dog is seen as the poor man, the monkey as the senseless man.⁶ It is apparent that proverbs undergo remodeling under the influence of native conditions. In the Afro-Antillean cultural model, proverb metaphors are usually applied to poverty, hunger, injury, want; almost never to love, heroism, beauty; and women are usually belittled. They express a sense of wrong doing, the nursing of injuries (real or imagined) suffered by the weaker folk, inflected on them by those whom they couldn't avenge themselves from, because they were much weaker.

In terms of the LC examples, Lakoff's Great Chain Metaphor theory can be applied as follows. Take for instance the proverb

33. /taiga maaga bot im no sik/
 "The tiger is slim but he is not sick."
 Do not judge a man by his looks.

This statement concerns a particular being (the tiger) of the animal hierarchy in the Great Chain. Two characteristics of the tiger are mentioned: that he is slim but healthy. It captures a vivid, memorable, concrete image of the source domain (the tiger), but nothing in the proverb expresses explicitly that we are referring ourselves to human beings, which constitutes the target domain. How do we know that the proverb refers to human beings? How do we arrive at the mapping between the tiger and human beings? By means of the specific-level

schema evoked by "the tiger is slim but not sick" and the Great Chain Metaphor of Lakoff and Turner's scheme, as follows:

--the Great Chain links human beings with animals. Humans as possessing higher order attributes and behavior and animals as possessing instinctual attributes and behavior. (Then would come plants possessing biological attributes and behavior and so forth.)

--the commonsense theory of the Nature of Things picks out attributes and their causal relation to behavior at the level of animals (tigers in this case) and human beings.

--the Maxim of Quantity picks out the highest attributes and behavior relevant at each level.

--the Generic is Specific metaphor extracts from this specific-level knowledge about tigers, the corresponding generic-level structure. It maps the structure onto the target domain of human beings, picking out the highest level human attributes and behavior which preserves the generic-level structure.

How does this work in detail? The commonplace knowledge that is brought to bear about the source domain of tigers to understand the proverb is knowledge from the specific-level schema, which contains a broad range of information. For instance, we know that tigers are dangerous animals, that they are carnivorous, that they have a good metabolism, and so on. Such knowledge is factored out as irrelevant by the Great Chain, the Nature of Things and the Maxim of Quantity.

Out of what is overtly mentioned in the proverb (the relative relationship between a slim tiger and his health), the ingredients of the Great Chain Metaphor lead us to pick certain parts of our knowledge about tigers, i.e. the overall causal relationship in the schema between the tiger's eating habits and his looks:

--In the image of the tiger there are at least two kinds of causally related events: the tiger eating and how food affects his looks.

--Usually the tiger eats great quantities of meat.

--Typically, when someone eats a lot the consequence is that one gets fat.

--Usually whoever is very slim is sick (particularly in the Afro-Antillean culture, where "sweet" means "a bit fat").

This knowledge is used to understand the expression /taiga maaga bot im no sik/ as referring to an unusual case; although the tiger looks slim, he is not sick. So far, the non-metaphorical aspects of the proverb have been considered. (Those that the Great Chain Metaphor picks out of the evoked source-domain schema.)

The metaphorical work is done by the Generic is Specific Metaphor in addition to the Great Chain; it maps the relevant source domain information about tigers associating it with relevant target domain information about people. Given the specific level understanding of /taiga maaga bot im no sik/ the Generic is Specific Metaphor picks out the generic-level information it contains. This information is the level of animal behavior and attributes. The Great Chain links tiger behavior to human behavior, and the Generic is Specific metaphor maps the generic-level information about tigers with the corresponding generic-level information about people. Now the entire causal relationship is translated to people. Consequently, we arrive at the statement that 'people who look slim are not necessarily sick,' which corresponds to our notion 'not to trust appearances.' This is a working explanation of how Lakoff and Turner use metaphors to explain the cognitive processes used to understand proverbs.

CONCLUSION:

The present findings support the importance of the discourse context in determining the meaning of proverbs.

The dual focus on the proverb text and the social situation of the usage contests the a priori assumption that the proverb consists of the text alone. Moreover, cultural models are revealed through proverbs. It is apparent that proverbs make use of an imaginative mechanism, the metaphor, and that they are not only the result of imagination, but they are motivated by concrete world objects, such as humans, animals, plants, complex and natural objects. Finally, linguistic evidence is a precise guide to the structure of such cultural models.

What can this description of pragmatics of a single genre in a single language tell us about the broader issues which are raised by investigations of the use of language in society? Proverb performance helps gain important insights into the pragmatics of social interactions. They are extremely subtle indexes of the social and conversational roles that obtain between participants. However, generalizations must wait for similar

genres research in other speech communities. Eventually, these findings will broaden our understanding of the nature of speech events and their roles in social life.

NOTES

¹The Anancy stories of the Afro-Antillean tradition were brought from Africa by the slaves. These fables were named for their hero Brother Nancy, the spider, who like other animals in the stories assumes human characteristics. /brada nansi/ is a trickster who steals, cheats, deceives his 'friends' and goes against all of society's ethical codes. He is usually deservedly punished.

²It must be noted, however, that there are languages in which special morphemes (i.e. gnomic morphemes) are added to obvious information conveyed (such as that expressed in proverbs; Kenneth L. Miner, personal communication). Also see Gossen 1973 for the special significance of proverbs within the taxonomy of Chamula oral tradition.

³Kenneth L. Miner, personal communication.

⁴The fact that proverbs are difficult to recall from memory without an eliciting context or situation raises questions about the form in which they are stored in memory. They are probably tied to cultural knowledge about types of situations or action-scenarios. This knowledge is activated, generated or assembled in the course of understanding specific events.

⁵However, these mappings do not necessarily have to be reconstructed every time the proverb is used, because people can render their meanings directly, in non-metaphorical terms or paraphrases, sometimes even uttering only half of the proverb frame, without reference to a particular denotation. This emphasizes the frozen quality of proverbial inference and the importance of shared cultural models.

⁶These metaphors are the same as those used in Anancy stories as mentioned earlier.

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APPENDIX

EXCERPT OF A CONVERSATION

Dialog No.1

I--mi kan tel yu somtin ebowt man/ man iz di wonli person dat hert de won him lov (1)/ an wen him down nwo/ sey/ him lov de person/ iz when him luwz it/ layk/ ay did hav a kuñado/ a brada in la/ neba say wer antil him yuwst te sey a tin/ an den ay yuwst tu andastan/ it sey/ yu neba mis de wata antil de wel ron dray/(2)

O--wel dray? (laughing) bot yu taakin bowt man!

I--yes/ an man tuw/ intu a nobela ay riyd an it sey/ an iz a man wrayt it/

O--luk aristotel nobela iz difren dan dwoz nobela wat yu riyd...

I--iz nat/ iz into a nobela/ bot iz a pasahe/ iz a tin dat aristotel rayt bowt/

O--aristotel waz e filosofa/

I--ye/ dats rayt/ bot him waz a man/ dwont it?

O--yes!

I--owkey/ an him se/ dat man iz di wonli animal dat ert im/ layk se/ him wud sey/ layk se/ im ert im gerlfren...

O--luk yu nwo dat wuman kom from man...

I--bot hu bring man intu de werl? wuman dwont it?

O--now! e man!

I--owkey/ stop tel lay/ meyk a hiyr it!

O--luk/ yu ier dat rifer dat wen dis werl wez jes...wez yan/ wez de fers man/ de fers persin/ wez on dis...him waz a man/ an dem teyk a rib from wiy an giy/ dat wey wuman liv a kostiyas nuestras!!

(1) /hurt de wan him lov/

A personal adaptation from:

/kow neba nwo de yuwz ov im tyel til im luwz it/
 "The cow never knows the use of its tail until it
 loses it."
 One does not appreciate what one has until one loses
 it.

Here used in reference to men not giving women
 recognition until women leave them.

- (2) /yu neba mis de wata antil de wel ron dray/
 "You never miss the water until de well runs dry."
 "You never know the use of water till the pond
 dries." (Jamaican)
 "You never miss the water till the well runs dry."
 (English)
 Do not let your chances pass you by.

The recordings were made on an Uher 4000. Both 'O' and
 'I' are young creole speakers, approximately seventeen
 years old at the time (1982).