

A Pragmatic Study of Verbal Irony in Selected Yoruba Home Videos

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Abstract. A considerable research has been devoted to verbal irony in Yoruba language in dramatic texts and other written texts but not much attention has been paid to verbal irony in Yoruba home videos. Hence this study examines verbal irony in selected Yoruba home videos using pragmatic theory. A total of ten home videos produced within the last ten years are randomly selected for analysis using the combined pragmatics theories of Cooperative Principle (CP) and “pragmeme” proposed by Grice ((1975) and Mey (2001) respectively. The paper notes that socio-cultural background of the speaker and the listener contributes to the effective use of verbal irony. It notes, furthermore, that verbal irony is deployed to serve the purpose of instilling cultural value and norms in the Yoruba people including exposure to the supernatural world. Verbal irony is deployed in market places, homestead and public places. These discoveries will prepare the way for further studies in pragmatics and the peculiar linguistic behaviour of the Yoruba people. Other situational use of verbal irony could be investigated, as well as other linguistic functions of verbal irony in Yoruba language.

Keywords: Verbal Irony, Pragmatics, Linguistic Functions, Home Video

1. Introduction

A social phenomenon, language embodies the culture of the people who use it. In fact, social, cultural and physical realities are

reflected in the language used by a people (Ruan, 2002). The socio-cultural background of a people influences and is reflected in their language use. Irony, a product of linguistic behaviour of a people, has been investigated by various linguists including Bravo (2014) and Olatunji (1984). Wilson (2006:1723) explains that “in metaphor, the figurative meaning is a simile or comparison based on the literal meaning; in irony, [...] it is the opposite of the literal meaning”. Significantly, this concept of irony has recently been subjected to interrogation by *inferentialist approaches* to language use. It is noteworthy that rhetorical devices like irony are not exclusive to literary corpuses but are also evident in everyday communication.

Probably the first philosopher to study humour and irony, Aristotle drew attention to the higher sophistication required for ironical utterances to be fully apprehended (Aristotle, 2010). Interestingly, “the ability to understand simple forms of irony is thought to be present from around the age of six or seven [and not earlier]” (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:1). It is Wilson’s view that the ability to decode verbal irony could be seriously undermined in people whose right hemisphere is damaged (i.e. autism). Crucial to apprehension of irony is the ability to discern the speaker’s intention in ironic interlocution; the hearer’s failure to do so is bound to result in misunderstanding, a recipe for failed communication.

The study of irony has played an important role in linguistics, and especially in pragmatics, with a focus on the analysis of the purpose and intentions of irony used in both written and oral texts, as well as its identification by the addressees (Muecke, 1980; Barbe, 1995; Stanel, 2006). The Yoruba language seems to be naturally amenable to such figures of speech as euphemism, metaphor, and irony. Studies of irony in Yoruba have covered verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony. Available results from these studies reveal that investigation of verbal irony in Yoruba language has been concentrated on dramatic texts using stylistic analysis. This study attempts to fill this gap by investigating verbal irony in Yoruba home videos, using pragmatic theories. This study is unique as it combines two pragmatic theories for the analysis of data. The data are collected from the conversational exchanges among the characters in the selected Yoruba home videos. A total number of ten (10) home videos are selected across a period of the last ten years, each representing a year. Relevant conversational exchanges are extracted for analysis.

This work conducts a pragmatic study of verbal irony drawing data from selected Yoruba home videos with a view to illustrating how verbal irony functions in the Yoruba language and culture.

2. Literature Review

Irony as a concept has been in use since Aristotelian times. Irony then referred to abusive pretense and *contrarium* meaning of utterance, also often taken as a falsehood or another form of lying with aim of deceit (Stanel, 2006; Knox, 1989). Knox (1989) asserts that Aristotle himself, while citing examples, differentiated among four

opposites of irony: contraries (i.e. good and bad, tall and short) contradictories (i.e. "He is good", "He is not good"), relatives (i.e. double and half, son and father) and privation /possession (sight and blindness). However, Knox (1989 p.20) claims that the fact that irony might depend on the four Aristotelian opposites "irony was mentioned wherever figurative language was analyzed logically, notably in mediaeval commentaries on Latin grammars and in Renaissance rhetorical emphasizing the kinship of rhetorical and logic". Such interpretation and understanding of irony survived until the sixteen century when authors such as Pierre de la Ramee or Petrus Ramus (1515-1572) changed slightly the application of the four Aristotelian opposites, thus, "good" and "bad" or "rich" and "poor" were contraries.

Other scholars have offered definitions of the concept of irony. Richard (1926 p. 250) defines irony as "the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses" which is aimed at achieving a "balanced poise". Muecke (1969 p. 53) views irony as: *a way of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc, in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with the ostensible or pretended meaning,*

Arogbofa (1978:51) presents irony as "a situation where words and sentences are so expressed to mean the exact opposite of their literal meaning". Holman (1980 p. 236) asserts thus:

Irony is a figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning. Characteristically, it speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise.

In the above definitions, it could be observed that irony is regarded as a concept with simple conversational gesture, typical of saying the opposite of what one means or violating a communicative maxim. This actually makes these definitions applicable to the study. Olatunji (1984 p. 56) also conceives irony as a figure of speech that involves one thing while intending another which is incompatible with an overt meaning. It is unpleasant meanings that are couched in apparently innocuous statement". Thompson (1948) recommends three forms of irony; irony of speech, irony of character and irony of events. Muecke (1970, 1973 and 1980) is another linguist who makes an effort in classifying irony in different ways in the three of his books. In the book, Muecke (1970) presents three main categories: verbal, situational and dramatic irony. The first one refers to the situation when the speaker's utterances do not correspond to the intentional meaning. The second type of irony is listener/receiver oriented and has to do with the way in which an ironic situation is perceived by him/her. Finally, there is the theatrical irony, in which an actor/speaker assumes that an addressee/audience will perceive what is presented as truthful (Pishbin, 2010). Almost all scholars agreed that verbal irony is central to the concept of irony. This type of irony is identified by scholars like Muecke ((1970) and Pishbin (2010), giving the fact that verbal irony is by far the most common type of irony and the type that features in informal interaction/conversation. Its study is likely to illuminate proper understanding of the use of verbal irony in informal situation. Since ironic statements are opposites of what the speakers mean, the truth definition for a language would not be appropriate for the interpretation of such ironic statements, hence appropriateness pragmatic theory.

3. Theoretical Framework

Leech (1983 p. 2) defines Pragmatics as "the use of language in goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer". Levinson (1983 p. 9) explains pragmatics as being "the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language". Mey (2001 p. 6) considers that "Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society". It is obvious from the above that pragmatics is concerned with language and its context of usage. Any theory that would be adequate for pragmatics should focus on language and its context of usage.

Kempson (1977 p. 68) explicitly describes the aim of pragmatics as "the explanation of how it is that speakers of any language can use the sentences of that language to convey messages which do not bear any necessary relation to the linguistic content of the sentence used". So a pragmatic theory concerns itself with both encoding and decoding of utterances within a particular context. Grice (1975) puts forward such a theory called the Cooperative Principle (CP). The Cooperative Principle provides us with a framework within which we derive an explanation of how speakers succeed in using sentence(s) of language to communicate information which is unspecified by the literal meaning of the sentence(s) in question. The Cooperative Principle subsumes a set of maxims which specify the conventions that should govern participants in a conversation. The maxims represent an attempt to account for how conversations are construed by participants in different speech situations. Dairo and

Onadeko (2008) identify maxim of quality, quantity, relevance and manner as Gricean maxims.

- Maxim of Quality states that speakers should be truthful.
- Maxim of Quantity states that a contribution should be as informative as required for the conversation to continue.
- Maxim of Relevance states that speakers' contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- Maxim of Manner states that speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief.

However, Grice's Cooperative Principle has been criticized on the grounds that it does not adequately capture real language use. For instance, Keenan (1976) points out that some maxims of the Cooperative Principle is not applicable in some linguistic communities, and thus argues that the maxims of CP are not language universal. Nevertheless, this study aligns itself with the position of Leech (1983) that: To reject the CP on purely quantitative grounds would be to mistake maxims for statistical norms - which they are not. It is on Leech's argument that this study finds merit in Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) for the analysis of data.

To enrich this theory, the study combines it with another pragmatic theory of "pragmeme" proposed by Mey (2001). The concept of "pragmeme" in linguistics according to Mey (2001) refers to generalized "pragmatic acts" which has come to replace Austin's (1962) speech act which as observed by Mey (2001 p. 214) "lacks a theory of action", and is "non-situated". In pragmatic acts, there is always an "agent" and an "act". The identified

variables like the age of an individual, his or her social class, gender, education, etc. are termed "individual agents" or "member resource" (MR). These, according to Fairclough (1998 p. 14), are often referred to as "background knowledge", while speech acts, when used in the contexts are pragmatic acts.

For speech acts to be effective they must be situated. That is, they must rely on, and actively create situation in which they are realized. "There are no speech acts but only situated speech acts" or "instantiated pragmatic acts" (Mey 2001 p. 218). Pragmatic acts involve "adapting oneself to context as well as adapting context to oneself" (Mey 2001 p. 218). This reason justifies why pragmatic acts could be adopted in analyzing verbal irony.

4. Data Analysis

As already indicated, pragmatic acts involve the situated conversation. When conversations are held in Yoruba language, especially involving the deployment of irony, the context is important for the analysis of the ironic statements. It is important to note that irony is a pragmatic phenomenon. From the Yoruba perspective, irony is called *edaoro* which literally means indirect phrasing.

In the market place, irony is a common phenomenon in bargaining conversations between sellers and buyers (market women and the customers). For example, in the movie titled 'Ogun Abele', the following conversation takes place between a seller and a buyer:

Ex.1:Buyer: *Elonibatayii?* (How much is this sandal?)

Seller: *Egberunmefa naira* (Six thousand naira)

Buyer: *Se ko gba egberunmeji?* (Could I pay two thousand naira?)

Seller: (annoyed) *Gbe, ma sanworara* (**take it, you don't have to pay at all**)

The expression by the seller “*Gbe, ma sanworara*” (take it, you don't have to pay) can properly be understood within the context of the conversation. The seller is actually displaying her displeasure at the bargaining strategy of the buyer. A typical Yoruba market person does not appreciate his/her good being undervalued. The fact that the buyer in the above conversation cuts the price from six thousand to two thousand is not pleasing to the seller. In Yoruba bargaining strategy, given prices are gradually bargained downwards in bits. So, the seller does not actually mean that the buyer could take the good without paying. Provoked by the sharp cutting of the price by the buyer, the woman is actually being sarcastic. The seller, to achieve the ironic expression, deliberately breaks the maxim of Cooperative Principle of Quality (Do not say what you believe to be false). The seller is aware that the expression is false and does not actually intend it but rather intends the opposite.

In the domestic front, mother-child conversations among the Yoruba people are sometimes characterized by irony, especially when the mother tends to warn or instruct the child to carry out an assignment/duty. Iya Alasa, in the movie titled ‘Ile Eru’, gave the following instruction to her son while going to a town hall meeting.

Ex. 2: Mother: *Sori tin ba lo tan*
Seniki o je gbogboounje to wanle
Ki o tunfawo

Mother: Look, after I had gone
Eat all the food in the house
And break the plates

The Yoruba people, in certain situations, are economical with words, they do not say all they intend to say, rather they leave the listener to decode. This system of encoding is constantly employed by Yoruba mothers when conversing with their children. Like in the conversation above, a typical child who fails to decode the message properly would end up eating the food and breaking the plates, which is not the intention of the mother. The pragmatic model developed by Mey (2001) as modified by Aremu (2015), Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) and Shared Situational Knowledge (SSK) is identified in the conversation. The child has the Shared Cultural Knowledge that no mother or an elderly person in Yoruba culture is expected to instruct the young ones to carry out destructive acts. Eating food meant for other members of the family and breaking plates are anti-cultural values of the Yoruba people. The mother also has the Shared Situational Knowledge that under the circumstance, her ‘instruction’ would not be carried out by her child.

The following conversational instructions are also relevant for analysis with the model, Shared Situational Knowledge (SSK) and Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK).

Ex. 3: *Iya Sade: Sade, lo ba mi raewawa*
Toba wun e kosowo nu
Wade dele waba mi
Sade: Mama, mionisowo nu

Sade's mother: Sade, go and buy beans for me

If you like, lose the money

I will deal with you on your return

Ex. 4: *Mama Kunle: Kunle, wa lo wo baba*
Ayominile, eleyito ngbeniisodatiti
Toba wun e nsenikiodijukotojanititi.
Enitoku no tie gbe

Kunle's mother: Kunle, go and check Ayomi's father whether he is at home, the one who lives on the other side of the street.

If you like close your eyes while crossing the road, a dead person has lost all hopes of relevance in the word.

Ex. 5: Asake: *Mama, igoepoteni kin gbewaniyi, niboni kin gbesi?*

IyaAsake: **Ori mi nikogbesi.**

Asake; Mother, this is the bottle of palm oil you requested me to get for you.

Where should I place it?

Asake's mother: **Place it on my head.**

Yoruba parents are very passionate about instilling discipline and sense of responsibility in their children. One of the ways of achieving this is to employ irony while giving instructions. In Ex. 3, the mother actually wants the daughter to be careful with the money. She wants the daughter to be alive to her responsibilities. So, the instruction '*if you like lose the money*' is an irony. The mother has the Shared Situational Knowledge (SSK) that her daughter would not throw the money away based on her utterance. The daughter also has the Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) that her mother's statement is ironic. She shares the knowledge that her mother's intent is for her to carefully keep the money while running the errand.

In Ex. 4, Kunle shares the knowledge that closing his eyes while crossing the road is suicidal. He understands what his mother meant is for him to be careful, vigilant and at alert while crossing the road. The mother also intends to raise Kunle's consciousness about the danger of being careless while using the road as a pedestrian. The mother shares situational knowledge while Kunle shares cultural knowledge.

In Ex. 5, Asake's mother deliberately breaks the maxim of Cooperative Principle of Relevance which states that the speaker's contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange. Asake's mother's response to Asake's questions is an irony. She intends to actually teach her daughter to be courteous. Asake is expected to place the palm oil bottle beside her mother who is obviously busy. Courtesy in Yoruba culture demands that Asake should have noticed this, do the needful and not asking question. Ex. 3, 4 and 5 are taken from the movie titled "Igbo Odale"

Related to the above, the Yoruba people believe in the power of the tongue, hence they refrain from making negative statements about themselves or someone close to them. This explains why Yoruba parents would rather employ irony when expressing bitterness at the action of his/her child, as deployed in the movies 'Aseni' and 'Ayo okan'. The choice of irony in these instances is predicated on the Yoruba belief in some metaphysical powers that could bring a negative statement made for conversational purpose only to reality.

Ex 6: **Koni da funota e** (your enemy will not prosper),

Ex. 7: **olorireomoni e o** (you are a child of good luck)

These expressions are employed when a child has erred or is disobedient. Rather than cursing the child, the parent resorts to irony by expressing the opposite of their feelings. The Yoruba people's metaphysical belief refrain them from uttering negative words.

Among the Yoruba, the following expressions have some religious/metaphysical tone:

Ex. 8: **Ile tutu** (the ground is cold).

In the context of this expression, the ground is actually hot because of the hot weather.

Alaka uses the expression in ‘Gbajumo’ while showing concern for his aged mother who did not put on sandals while coming to his house. The Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) of a Yoruba person requires that negative statement should be avoided, thereby employing irony. In a similar context, the following expressions have a metaphysical undertone. For instance, it is part of the Yoruba worldview to say:

Ex. 9: **“awapupo la wanle” (we are many in the house).**

Ex. 10: **“owopolowo mi” (I have plenty cash at hand)**

The personal plural pronoun in the expression refers to one person. The character, Jagunmolu, in “ImiOsumare”, is the only one at home and he is lonely but employs irony by referring to himself as ‘many people’. It is the Shared Cultural Knowledge of Jagunmolu that metaphysical power abound in every Yoruba society which could turn a negative statement made mindlessly to reality. It is critical mention that Jagunmolu was the only one at home at the material time because other members of his family had gone out. Irony involves saying one thing while intending another which is inconsistent with literal meaning. The elders in Yoruba societies have the authority to speak in proverbs and make profound statements in conversations. Such statements often find expressions in irony. These messages in these expressions become weighty and highly instructive when couched in irony. The Ex. 11 and 12 are extracted from the movies titled “ImiOsumare” and “Jogunomi”.

Ex. 11: ***Ounniyio sin iya re***
Omo tin foriokaremu
He would surely outlive his mother
The child who cleans his nostrils with an
adder

Outliving one’s parents is one of the greatest blessings one can receive. Yoruba people place premium on outliving one’s parents. In Ex. 11, Alaka makes the statement about Yoruba belief and goes on to say that one who puts a adder in his nostrils will outlive his parents. The irony is clear because to do so to invite instant death. Adder is an extremely poisonous snake, so its mention gives weight to the expression and makes the message clear. The audience is able to decode the message based on the Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) that Alaka (an elderly character in “ImiOsumare”) means the opposite. The audience is aware that adder is poisonous hence would eventually cause the death of whoever plays with it.

Ex. 12: ***Meewayeejo, fomo re fokomefa*** (He who says he hates lawsuit troubles offers his daughter in marriage to six men). In the context of usage, it is ironical that a man who offers his daughter in marriage to six men claims to hate litigation. The notion is not entirely about lawsuit but also implies that the man will find himself in situations to constantly explain to people, settling quarrels, etc. This is similar to a Yoruba common saying “ *Eni e fewahalalabule, baale n tagbo, iyawo e n ta ogogoro*” (You claim you don’t want trouble in the village, yet the village head deals in hard drug while his wife sells dry gin) The audience also understands that such an action is against the culture of Yoruba and would surely lead to litigation and conflicts.

Ex. 13: ***Salako : Sule, tayo fun mi***

Sule: Iya to fe je lonya e lara

Salako: (looking in the direction of an approaching man) Sule, woaraile e

Sule: Ta ni? Enitiobetibadi e

Salako: Sule, play your game

Sule: You are eager to be beaten

Salako: (looking in the direction of an approaching man) Sule, look **at a member of your household**

Sule: Who? Someone who has met his Waterloo

In the Ex. 13, it is to be noted that the expression “*araile e*” (a member of your household) referred to by Salako is an irony. It takes the Shared Cultural Knowledge of Sule to decode that Salako neither means that the man in question is his family member nor someone who resides in the same house as he does. Rather, the man in question, though an acquaintance of both (Salako and Sule), could be best be described as someone Salako keeps at arm’s length, someone he has an estranged relationship with. The context of their discussion depicts that Salako actually means the opposite of “*araile e*” (a family member).

5. Discussion of Findings

The study identifies three situations/contexts in which verbal irony is deployed by Yoruba language users. These include bargaining conversation between traders and buyers in market places, instructive conversational exchange between parents (especially mothers) and their children and in public conversation which could have a minimum of two participants (friends) or a speaker and his listeners.

Furthermore, the paper reveals that verbal ironies are deployed in the situations identified above to achieve pragmatic functions. In the home fronts, parents deploy verbal irony to warn or instruct their children as in Ex. 2. Parents do encode their instructions as well as the value teaching of the Yoruba culture in ironic expressions as in Ex. 3, 4 and 5. . Wardaugh (1986 p. 21) rightly observes that:

The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ. This is because they value certain things and do them in certain ways that reflect what they value and what they do.

In some instances, Yoruba speakers prefer to use fewer words to express their feelings or opinions. Verbal irony thereby becomes the medium of encoding cultural values which, as identified in the analysis, include self-discipline, sense of responsibility, courtesy in relation to elders.

The study also notes that verbal irony deployment in conversations is a reflection of the Yoruba people’s metaphysical belief. The Yoruba people believe in the power of the tongue; hence they refrain from uttering negative statements about themselves, their relatives or their associates, as in Ex. 6, 7, 8 and 9. It also reveals in the course of the investigation that socio-cultural knowledge, background and awareness of both the speaker and the listener in verbal irony usage play a major role in the encoding and decoding process of a conversation. It could then be said that a non-Yoruba listener would encounter difficulty in interpreting/decoding the ironic expressions. Ex. 2, 3 & 4 show that the speakers rely on the socio-cultural knowledge of the listeners to appropriately interpret their messages. This is to confirm that culture and language are interwoven, and a language usually projects the culture of a people.

6. Conclusion

This paper has carried out an investigation of verbal irony in selected Yoruba home videos using pragmatic theories, Cooperative Principles (CP) and “pragmeme” revealing that (i) the socio-cultural awareness of the Yoruba language

users contributes greatly to the proper encoding and decoding of verbal irony (ii) verbal irony is deployed in market places, homestead and public places to serve various purposes like warning, instilling cultural values and norms (iii) to depict the Yoruba belief in the metaphysical world. These discoveries about verbal irony in Yoruba home videos leave room for further research in other types of irony in Yoruba language. Also pragmatics has proved to be an interesting field for the study of language in context.

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