

A Pragmatic Analysis of Kimeru Proverbs as Speech Acts

Eliud K. Kirigia
Laikipia University, Kenya

Abstract

Socio-cultural aspects of language have attracted the attention of many scholars for a long time. One area of language study that directly touches on people's beliefs and philosophy is the study of proverbs which express general truth or wisdom in people's everyday life. Proverbs are metaphorical descriptions of an act or event applied as a general truth. In the Meru society, proverbs are a powerful instrument of transmitting ideas, knowledge and values from generation to generation. However, these proverbs have been largely studied from a literary point of view but this study has attempted to give them a linguistic examination. The objective of the study is to examine the pragma-linguistic as well as the pragma-behavioural aspect of Kimeru proverbs against the backdrop of the Speech Act theory as first advanced by John Austin and later by John Searle. Using a descriptive qualitative study design, a purposive sample of thirty assorted Kimeru proverbs were collected from five Meru elders. The proverbs were confirmed from secondary sources as well as the researcher's native language competence. The main instrument of data collection was structured interviews, audio recording and discussion. Results indicate that Kimeru proverbs are pragmatically couched to educate the general public on Meru society's age-old values and also to entertain. The results of this study are expected to benefit scholars in sociolinguistics, cultural studies and the general public.

Key words: Kimeru proverbs, Meru society, pragma-behavioural, pragma-linguistic, speech acts.

Introduction

The term 'proverb' has been defined in several ways by different scholars depending on the scholar's interest and purpose. Fair (2003) for example, defines a proverb from a linguistic point of view as a poly-semantic unit having two different sets of meaning: Literal and Figurative. Norrick (1985: 31) on his part describes proverbs from a literary point of view as 'self-contained, pithy, traditional expression with didactic content and fixed, poetic form'. In conceptualizing proverbs as circumstantial speech acts, Amende (2013) locates their context of use in conversations, public speeches and oratorical speech acts. Amende (2013: 1) opines that since the emergence of what he calls 'Finnegan's dogmatic exposition' in 1970, scholars have investigated only the literary significance of proverbs with no major inquiry into their role in linguistic studies.

According to Lutfi (2007), proverbs are utterances that reflect morals, life experiences and practical skills of everyday living of ordinary people. They reveal the way people look at the world and thus have a great influence on people's lives. Lutfi continues to argue that proverbs are sometimes employed to express strong emotions of likes, dislikes and censure, and sometimes serve to impart wisdom. They are actualized in the context of everyday communication, thereby performing the same functions, in principle, as other utterances.

In respect of the foregoing, it can reasonably be argued that a proverb is not a mere sequence of words that exhibit a certain literal meaning but serves to offer good conduct, express doubt, instruct, advise, and exhort people to either do or refrain from doing something wrong.

According to Lutfi (2007), when somebody utters a proverb he is actually not only speaking out words but he is committing someone else to an action proposed by the linguistic signs a proverb is made up of; this is what Austin (1962) calls speech acts. The current study examines the dynamics of proverbs beyond their propositional content against the backdrop of J.L. Austin's and J. Searle's theory of pragmatic speech acts. Yanga (1977:130 as cited in Yusuf 1997) explains that the reason behind treating proverbs in terms of speech acts is the belief that the user of proverbs is not only uttering words but is also performing linguistic acts for a social purpose in a particular speech community.

Grice (1975:45) maintains that for a conversation to be successful, the speaker of a proverb, being based on the Cooperative Principle and rationality, is supposed to provide all sufficient but no excess information and be truthful, relevant and perspicuous. However, people in real life are not always 'cooperative' in the true sense of the word, but are instead indirect in what they mean; perhaps in what Leech (1983) considers 'politeness' to a third party. To achieve an indirect speech act (for instance, implied warning) as in the Kimeru proverb, 'a bird that has never been attacked builds its nest next to the roadside', some of Grice's maxims have to be infringed upon.

Grice (1975) calls what is communicated by an indirect speech act an implicature; that is, a speaker of a proverb often generates implicatures in texts, particularly when they means what they says on the literal level, but they also means something more in context. A speaker does so by violating what Grice refers to as conversational maxims; namely, be brief, be accurate, be relevant and be clear and perspicuous. The validity of this view is ascertained by the belief that hearers often fail to contribute relevantly to the text-interaction depending on its literal level. Relying on the extension of Grice's principle of conversational maxims, a further attraction is whether the indirectness of proverbs is pertinent to the idiomatic and ambiguity of their meaning. Searle (1975:76) remarks that 'in order to be a plausible candidate for an utterance as an indirect speech act, a [proverbial] has to be idiomatic in the first place'.

Transmission of meaning through language is a central factor in human communication. However, utterance meaning is not sometimes communicated explicitly and is rather implicit in many instances. The meaning of proverbs, just like the meaning of certain utterances, is obscure since it is not explicit. As has been noted previously in this paper, proverbs are a powerful instrument of transmitting ideas, knowledge and values from generation to generation. The study of proverbs in these societies has been largely approached from a literary point of view. Few have been studied from a linguistic perspective and even then, this has not been done in a substantial depth. To adequately unearth the pragmatic content of the Meru proverbs within their socio-cultural context, a pragmatic approach to the study was selected. In this paper, proverbs are conceptualized as pragmatic acts among Kimeru speakers partly because like all verbal expressions, proverbs represent a significant aspect of socio-pragmatic behaviour. In everyday life, proverbs are a regular feature of Meru society's interpersonal conversations. The objective of this paper was to examine the pragma-linguistic as well as the pragma-behavioural aspects of Meru proverbs against the backdrop of the Speech Act theory as first advanced by Austin and later developed further by Searle.

Proverbs and the Speech Act Theory

The Speech Act Theory was first developed by John Austin in 1962. He noted that utterances are better judged on the basis of what they can do instead of judging their truism or falsity. He contends that most utterances, at their base, are performative in nature. This means that the speaker is always doing something by saying something. Austin describes a threefold distinction

on the effect utterances have on speakers and hearers; that is: **locutionary act** - the act of making a meaningful utterance, for instance, *S says X to H*; **the illocutionary act** - the intention behind the utterance, for instance, *by saying X to H, S accomplishes P*; and **perlocutionary act** – the effect of the utterance on the hearer; that is, *by saying X, S convinces H about P*. These acts occur simultaneously.

Austin focuses on illocutionary acts, maintaining that the ‘force’ or the intention behind certain utterances can be demonstrated on their performative nature. In this respect, Austin as has been mentioned earlier distinguished direct (explicit) from indirect (implicit) speech acts. Direct speech acts are performative in nature and are characterized by having performative verbs in their structure such as the verb ‘obey’, Kimeru **athikira** as in the statement, **athikira abagu na nyakwe** (*obey your father and mother.*) However, indirect speech acts such as **ukumiira iriuko** (*you have defecated on the water source*) do not have such performative verbs but just give information. Many proverbs, including Meru proverbs, are interpreted within the realm of indirect speech acts (Grice, 1975).

Austin’s thinking was further developed by Searle (1969) who emphasizes the intentionality of the illocutionary acts. In Searle’s view, whenever the speaker says something to the hearer, the speaker intends to perform an illocutionary act. An illocutionary act is communicatively successful if the speaker’s illocutionary intention is recognized by the hearer. According to Searle’s categorization of illocutionary acts, there are five illocutionary possibilities that speakers can attempt to achieve in expressing a propositional content with an illocutionary force. These illocutionary acts are assertives, commissives, directives, declarations and expressives. *Assertive statements* may be judged true or false because they commit the speaker to something being the case such as Kimeru **ireraa iri-iguru** (*a chicken rears its young to maturity with the eagle lurking from the sky above*). *Commissive statements* commit the speaker to a future action such as threatening or promising as in Kimeru **ukambona!** (*You will see what I am made of*). *Directive statements* attempt to make the hearer do something such as ordering or commanding as in Kimeru **mbonia maguru** (*show me your legs*) to mean ‘get out of my sight’. *Declarative statements* attempt to change the state of affairs such as firing or passing sentence as in Kimeru **urokua uti mbeu** (*may you die without a seed ‘offspring’*). *Expressive statements* express inner states of speakers such as deploring or thanking such as Kimeru **kuria!** (*May you raise your children to maturity!*) *It is clear from the foregoing sampled proverbial utterances that many Meru proverbs in principle encode powerful speech acts in line similar to Austin’s and Searle’s Speech Acts*

Methodology

The Corpus method of data collection was used for this study. Data was collected from five purposively selected Meru male elders by virtue of their social standing, experience, availability and commitment through face to face interviews, audio recordings and discussion. Once this exercise was dispensed with, subsequent translation and transcription was done. Care was taken to minimize the loss of meaning through translation. When this exercise was complete, an assortment of thirty proverbs were purposively sampled and secured for analysis. Using a descriptive qualitative study design, the purposive sample was picked. The selection ensured a wide range of issues such as politics, values, censure and entertainment. Selection was also pegged on relevance of the proverbs and gender sensitivity. The proverbs were confirmed and authenticated from secondary sources as well as the researcher’s native language competence

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Once the proverbs were collected they were categorized, compiled and secured for analysis. In the analysis, there was literal translation of each proverb followed by the socio-cultural context of its use as well as the metaphorical translation of the intended meaning. In this respect, the illocutionary force or implied meaning of each proverb was worked out. A compilation summary of these operations is given in the appendix section.

A close scrutiny of the proverbs collected reveal that Meru society is exceptionally rich in proverbs; the proverbs are profoundly philosophical, expedient, entertaining, mischievous, and sometimes funny. When appropriately used the proverbs are refreshingly efficient in placing contemporary issues within their context; the proverbs exist in many forms and are used to convey messages which in turn, guide and control the socio-cultural aspects of the Meru community. They act as catalyst of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and values. They cover a wide range of the people's cultural behaviour and they encompass advisories, comments, reproaches, warnings, encouragements, and many other issues. Due to the diplomatic nature of the Meru people with respect to serious communication, it is considered a mark of wisdom to speak in well measured language. It would, for instance, be improper to directly scold an acquaintance who has committed an offence; the Meru would, through well couched language, make the offender realize their wrongdoing.

In general, the proverbs studied are placed under the following thematic categories: warning/censure proverbs; entertainment/humour cautionary proverbs; wisdom/inspirational proverbs; wisdom/inspirational proverbs; morality/value promoting proverbs; and justification/consequences/commentary proverbs. Although the proverbs have roughly been placed under these categories it is possible for one proverb to belong to two or even three categories. Effort has been made, however, to place a given proverb where it primarily fits. The categories are presented in the next sections.

(a) Warning/Censure Proverbs

In personal interactions, Meru proverbs are used to warn against bad behaviour or scold people for the same reason. The proverbs warn of danger, tell people how to behave and how not to behave, they give direct orders and prohibitions. The proverbs can discredit, criticize or mock somebody.

The proverbs provided here express some kind of warning.

(i) *Gataurutwa gakaga njirene*: 'A bird that has never been threatened builds its nest by the roadside'. This proverb is used in situations where people throw caution to the wind and in such situations they are reminded that their behaviour is similar to a bird that foolishly builds on the roadside with all the risks involved. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an expressive is to warn against lack of caution in doing something daring.

(ii) *Guti nyoni injega mwerene*: 'There is no nice bird in the millet'. You cannot expect a bird to spare millet however good it is. This proverb categorized as expressive is used in the context of blind trust. Its illocutionary force is that of warning against over expectation or over-rating somebody's moral values.

(iii) *Ukamena kaganda utirere*: 'Do not underrate a hut you have not slept in'. The proverb is used in the context of making rush negative judgment. The illocutionary force of this proverb

categorized as a directive is to warn against judging a book by its cover or underrating anybody or any situation.

(iv) ***Kumagwa ni gucokagwa***: ‘One can go back where they are leaving’. The proverb is used in the context of being overly critical of where one is leaving. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an expressive is to caution against burning one’s bridges or messing up with one’s chances of coming back.

(v) ***Murega akiathwa atiregaga agikunjwa***: ‘one who refuses advice does not refuse the consequences’. This proverb is used in the context of disobedience. Its illocutionary force categorized as an expressive is to warn against being impervious to counsel which can lead to serious consequences

(b) Entertainment/Humour Cautionary Proverbs

Humorous proverbs among the Meru make people laugh and think simultaneously. The humour is partly caused by the wording of the proverbs and partly by the characters used. In this case, humour and lessons about life go together. The proverbs in this section fall in this category.

(i) ***Cookera akui, Nturutimi yacookeere Nciru***: ‘Return before you go further, Nturutimi returned after it had reached Nciru’. Nturutimi was one of the age groups in Meru; Nciru is a place between Tigania and Imenti divisions where the Njuri-Ncheke Council of Elders used to meet and legally formulate rules and regulations, norms, customs and etiquette which governed the Meru people and their way of living. The illocutionary force of this proverb is categorized as a directive: The proverb warns one not to go further (for example with a legal case) because the decision that has already been taken is binding and final).

(ii) ***Ncamba ti matina***: ‘The strength of a hero does not centre on his buttocks’. The proverb is used in the context of an underrated person. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is to warn that the strength of a hero is not displayed by the calves of his legs; that is, one’s fame and strength are not determined by appearance or physical force, but by intelligence and other qualities

(iii) ***Ni nyongu ikuthejera rugio***: ‘It is a pot laughing at the potsherd’. This proverb is used in the context where the elderly are despised for their age by the youth. The illocutionary force of the proverb categorized as expressive is to warn that nothing lasts forever; even if looking youthful for even a pot will break one day.

(iv) ***Nthenge iria ibobagiira tiyo ibandaga***: ‘A he-goat that makes mating calls is not necessarily the one that mounts the female’. Normally a fast he-goat mounts the female and not necessarily the one that makes mating calls. This proverb is used in contexts of fear of those who start competitions by chest thumping to scare their opponents. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an expressive is to encourage and instil confidence.

(v) ***Mwitania na mukundu akundukaa ta juu***: ‘One who keeps Mukundu’s company acquires “ukunduness” qualities in him’. Mukundu is a mythical Meru man known for his bad character. The proverb is used in situations of suspected negative influence from friends or peers. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as ‘expressive’ is to caution that keeping bad company can make one acquire such bad qualities.

(c) Wisdom/Inspirational Proverbs

These proverbs are inspirational in nature and express collective wisdom of the Ameru's intellectual heritage. A few examples are given in this section.

(i) *Guti utiatagia–Kinya M’Nkubitu naatirie nkunu munoti*: ‘Anybody can miss, even M’Nkubitu missed the bushbuck’. This proverb is used in the context of causing an accident or an incidental mistake. M’Nkubitu is also a mythical Meru strong man who never missed his target in hunting animals. The illocutionary force of the proverb categorized as an assertive is to mollify somebody who regrets doing something wrong by accident. The English equivalent is ‘to err is human’.

(ii) *Mwanki jutiakanaga jutiugi*: ‘the fireplace does not burn on its own’. This proverb is used in the context of taking the occurrence of things for granted. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is to warn that there is always an effort behind something that you find useful.

(iii) *Njogu itiremagwa ni miguongo-eyo (yayo)*: ‘No elephant is unable to carry its own tusks’. The proverb is used in situations of giving up. Its illocutionary force categorized as expressive is to encourage one to keep trying and to withstand any challenges

(iv) *Arume bati mbara*: ‘Men do not have fire scars from warming themselves by the fire-side’. This proverb is used in the context of fire-warming induced laziness by men, which is frowned at in Meru society. It is abominable for men to sit by the fireside warming themselves. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an Assertive is to warn men against moral vices such as warming themselves by the fireplace.

(v) *Ari togi atigaa mwanki*: ‘Where there is smoke, fire cannot miss’. This proverb is used in situations of denied rumours or allegations. The illocutionary point in this proverb categorized as an expressive is to assert the fact that things do not happen by chance. It employs imagery to implicate by way of indirect speech act the fact that there is likely to be merit in what people are alleging and that it is wise to investigate.

(d) Education/Cultural Transmission Proverbs

These proverbs have a didactic function. They are used to teach people, advise them and help them sort out difficult situations as well as pass knowledge from generation to generation. The samples in this section express this function.

(i) *Mugeni ni ruuji, ka rukurukite*: ‘A guest is water that is passing’. The proverb is used in the context of intolerance of others in temporary sojourn. Welcoming people is considered a virtue in meru society and anybody intolerant of visitors is looked down upon. Visitors are compared with passing water. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an expressive is to warn against intolerance of others.

(ii) *Ikuragia rwingi ruri-iguru*: ‘They (chicken) raise the young despite the presence of eagles scanning the ground over the skies’. The proverb is used in situations of fear to try something because of lurking danger. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is to warn against fear to take risk.

(iii) *Nja iri mukuru itiguujaga nderi*: ‘The vultures would not land at the village with a (wise) old man’. The proverb is used in situations where elders can be relied upon to stop war. In cases of war, vultures would arrive to feed on war casualties. The illocutionary force of the proverb categorized as expressive is to take elders in reverence because no crime would be committed where their wisdom is sought.

(iv) *Guti mutanirwa kwaitha uri ndigi ndaaja*: ‘No one circumcised at aliens place has a long thread-like foreskin (ndigi) on his private part’. Merus who are well circumcised by qualified traditional surgeons have a fashioned long thread of skin hanging from the penis. Strangers are not expected to know this art. This proverb is used in the context of expected service from strangers. The illocutionary force of proverb categorized as an assertive is to caution against unrealistic expectations from non-acquaintances.

(v) *Ngeenda mpaara inyunyaga rwaikemba*: ‘A patient animal drinks settled water’. The proverb is used in the context of greedy rush for gain. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an expressive is a warning against impatience.

(e) Morality/Ethics/Value Promoting Proverbs

These proverbs in this section illustrate this position.

(i) *Mukenye uragundia mpumagiroti atikaraga rwarune rwa ithe kairi*: ‘A girl whose urinating parts have ripened does not sit beside the father anymore’. This proverb is used in the context of moral sexual behaviour. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is a warning against expecting no sexual feelings between kin members who are unduly exposed.

(ii) *Kuurira maagati ta Kiundu Kiundu*: ‘To get lost in the middle like Kiundu’. This proverb is used in the context of one being unable to make a choice between two favourable options. Kiundu is a mythical greedy person in Meru folklore who has a choice to attend two feasts but because of his greed of wanting to attend both feasts he is stuck somewhere along the way and attends neither feast. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as an assertive is to castigate greed. By attempting to take everything, a person is likely to lose everything. The moral of the proverb is to warn against greed.

(iii) *Mwekuru nthata akaewa mwana ka oragaga na tutu*: ‘A barren woman who gets a child kills it with food’. This proverb is used in situations of over-celebration of an accomplishment. It is compared with barren women who get children and spoil them. The illocutionary force of this proverb which is categorized as an expressive is to caution against premature or undue celebration of an accomplishment.

(iv) *Wona wa nthuki akua nagwe wi njirene*: ‘If you witness your age-mate’s death know your death is on the way’. The proverb is used in the context of situations where people do not realize that what afflicts others can also afflict them. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is to counsel that what befalls others can also befall you. ‘If you witness your age-mate’s death, know your death is on the way. The illocutionary point in this speech act is to inform the hearer of the inevitability of one’s death signalled by the death of his contemporary which induces an aura of mortality (in one)’. It captures a natural feeling which people experience. In another context, it may indicate the subjective feeling of someone who may have

witnessed the demise of a friend. By extension it also means that no one is immune to afflictions of others.

(v) *Wandumia ngakurumia na wambata ngagwata*: ‘If you give me a favour I also do the same for you’. The proverb is used in the context of people who expect free things without themselves giving out anything. The illocutionary force of the proverb which is categorized as expressive is a reminder that a good turn leads to an equally reciprocative good turn or as is put in English ‘scratch my back I scratch yours’.

(f) Justification/ Consequences/Commentary Proverbs

These proverbs are used to justify certain actions or behaviour of individuals or society. The examples in this section illustrate this notion.

(i) *Mukui atigagwa ibeere*: ‘One destined to die does not hear the sound jingles of the enemy warriors’. In traditional Meru, enemy warriors would rattle their jingles to warn against any form of resistance and men under attack were expected to stay away or take cover. Any man found around would be killed. This proverb is used in the context of unexplained fatal behaviour. The illocutionary force of the proverb categorized as expressive is to warn against failure to take warning.

(ii) *Niku kurita mbiti irinyene*: ‘It's like removing a hyena from a pit’. The proverb recalls how a certain man met a hyena that had fallen into a pit. When the hyena saw him above, he pleaded to be helped out. The man was moved in his heart as he felt pity for it. He ascended into the pit to get the hyena out of it. On reaching the bottom of that very large hole, the hyena told him: ‘I thank you for your good offer, but just before you assist me in getting out of this deep hole, you should also know that I am very hungry as I have been here for many days. Therefore, I demand that you give me either one of your legs or arms to eat’. The man realized that he was in danger and got much afraid, but cleverly said: ‘No problem, I have left the fattest arm just at the door of this hole; I should easily reach for it while stepping on your back’. He quickly stepped on the hyena's back and craftily climbed out of the pit leaving the hyena there alone. The illocutionary force of the proverb is categorized as expressive and is directed to people who are never grateful for the good deeds done to them, and who create enmity instead.

(iii) *Nagwurite kareere maigo*: ‘He has extracted the bat's teeth’. The proverb is used in the context of a daring performance. Its illocutionary force categorized as expressive is to give notification that somebody has done something extraordinary.

(iv) *Ari mutine jukuura*: ‘He is under a leaking tree’. The proverb is used in the context of somebody who is in dire need. The illocutionary force of this proverb categorized as expressive is to announce that someday is in trouble, and possibly needs help.

(v) *Nthenge inkuru ititiyaga utheri*: ‘An old he-goat does not sneeze for nothing’. The proverb is used in the context of unusual intervention. Old men do not intervene without good reason. The illocutionary force of the proverb categorized as expressive is to take the word of elders seriously. Old men speak the truth with a lot of experience and deep reasoning.

Conclusion

This paper has noted that Meru proverbs largely encode indirect speech acts of warning, advising, exhorting, urging, prophesying and the like. In doing so, the speaker expects or wants the hearer to do something in accordance with the proposition implied in the wording of the proverb in question. But, it is not always the case that there is only one illocutionary force for a single proverb and this paper recommends further study on this matter. The problem that one encounters in the pragmatic analysis of proverbs is how to account for the possible meanings of all proverbs. It is not easy to tell with absolute certainty what a speaker really intended to say when they use a proverb because of multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, this study has provided knowledge to the effect that with the use of a proverb, one can provide an endorsement of his opinion, forecast something, express doubt, accuse someone of something, jeer at somebody or even excuse somebody or justify somebody's action. Results of this study have the potential to promote knowledge of cross-cultural comparative studies on proverbs. The study demonstrates that Meru proverbs supply a wealth of knowledge that benefits Meru society and can benefit other societies as well. The world is fast becoming a global village and cultures are increasingly benefiting from each other. Since language and culture are inseparable, the awareness of a people's cultural content vis-a-vis their language behaviour through a medium such as proverbs cannot be neglected.

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