

The Poetic Formulae of the Language of the Somali Proverb and How It Helps Communicate Messages

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Abstract

The study investigates the stylistic devices used in communicating messages in the Somali proverb. Several features including: Register, Imagery, Sound effects and Rhetorical devices were discussed. In addition, the study identifies the relationship between the poetic devices that the Somali proverb utilises and the effective delivery of its message. The main proposition of the study is that there is a close link between the oral poetic composition of the proverb and the community's perception of the message. The study reveals that, in the Somali context, the performance of the proverb derives directly from the people's way of life and their everyday experiences in their nomadic, pastoral activities. Based on material collected through field research from the Somalis in Garissa, Wajir and Mandera counties in Kenya and the lower Juba region in Somalia, the study endeavours to interpret the messages of the proverb from the point of view of the people who perform it and among whom it is performed. Twenty four (24) male respondents and eighteen (18) females who were considered opinion shapers were interviewed. Fifty nine (59) proverbs were collected but thirty nine (39) were analysed. The study adopts a combined reader-response and author-oriented theoretical framework to analyse the language usage of the proverb. It suggests that the community response to the proverb is closely related to the stylistic devices used.

Keywords: Proverb, Device, Somali, Style

1. Introduction

The role of the proverb in the art of communication by African communities is well-captured and documented by many researchers and scholars. Any serious piece of orature by an African elder, be it for peace or marriage negotiations or a religious sermon, proverbs feature promptly. The Somali proverb has got many functions and the artists create and exploit some stylistic features to pass the message.

This study discusses the language that is used in communicating messages in the Somali proverb. The discussion is limited to showing how the language used is suitable to communicating the particular message of the proverb. This is the focus of the study. Language, in this study and the way it is tackled, is broadly used and does not mean language per se but the style used in the proverb.

We could not exhaustively discuss all the stylistic features of the Somali proverb in the study, therefore, for the purpose of time and space limitations, I discussed some of the glaring features of the Somali proverb such as imagery, sound effects, rhetorical devices and the register. I have also made an attempt to assert that the Somali proverb, because of the said features, assumes poetic nature. Proverbs I displayed in this study to support my argument and which are outstandingly armed with the poetic features include:

“Dheefey ku aaway, Dhibbaan Dhinaca ka jiraa”

(Where are you success? I am behind difficulties)

“Caano Daatay, Dabadoo daa la Qabtaa”

(Do not waste milk, however little)

“Hubsiiyo, Hal baa la Siistaa”

(For confirmation of an issue, is worth a she-camel)

In the broad spectrum of folklore and relatively obvious but crucially important social aspect of proverb, poetry and literature as a whole is emphasized mainly by African critics like Anozie (1981), Irele (1981), Okpewho (1979) and Achebe (1958).

The study supports and follows their formulations. The basic tenet of the interpretation of theoretical approaches used is that proverbs are products of specific social contexts and they are consumed in specific contexts.

2. Research Hypothesis

The following research premises guided this study:

1. The style of the language of the Somali proverb has got nothing to do with the message it delivers.
2. Among the Somalis, there is no strict demand for poetic language in the proverb.

3. Research Methodology

A study of this nature, where the research is based on community, the researcher cannot afford the luxury of being an armchair scholar. He/she must be an active participant of clan meetings where proverbs usually feature

promptly. I relied on the community for the material to be analysed, therefore, the method adopted for this study was people-oriented.

I embarked on general data collection strategy. Data was required to support the arguments I advanced in the study. I, therefore, did a wide reading of material on proverbs in general and the Somali proverb in particular. The thorough reading, during the researcher took place in the libraries of Garissa, Kenyatta and Nairobi universities. I also visited the American cultural centre in Nairobi and Kenya National Archives.

4. Field Research

This being a culturally based study, the researcher heavily leaned on field work. I attended and actively participated live performances of the proverb in the clan meetings. In total, I was physically present in seven meetings. This offered me an opportunity to record and analyse a variety of proverbs in different contexts. To gain insight into how language is employed in the proverb, I interviewed twenty four (24) elderly men from different Somali clans. These community leaders I interviewed were well known figures and, therefore, I used purposive sampling technique to get them.

I also reached women through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. I initially interviewed one woman from each clan who in turn led me to the rest. In total, I interviewed eighteen (18) women whose views represented the other women in the society.

The whole corpus of material collected during field work comprised of fifty nine (59) proverbs. Out of these, thirty one (31) proverbs were analysed in detail in this study as a basis of illustration of our arguments.

5. Theoretical Framework

Robert Scholes (1991) suggests that local researchers need to acquire the interpretive codes of their cultures so that they appreciate the texts. Based on this and being a member and a researcher who hails from the Somali community, I strived to get the interpretation and appreciation of the stylistic features of the proverbs from both the point of view of the composer and the audience.

In the process I began sifting through a wide spectrum of theoretical territories and discovered each approach has its own limitations because it only discusses one aspect of literature. For example, the psychoanalytical approach only puts emphasis on the emotional and psychological response to literature, while it says very little about the literary qualities. On the other hand, structuralism only concentrates on the structure of the system and relations between its elements ignoring the functions of these elements at the expense of defining the object. Likewise, the social theories such as pragmatics and discourse analysis talk only of the interactional purpose of literature, while the historical-geographical theory tries to trace the exact historical and geographical origins of folklore and plots its journey from place to place, but neglects the roles of the performer and composer in folklore.

This gave me the understanding that this study needs to utilise more than one approach so as to achieve its objectives.

I, therefore, adopted a combined approaches of (1) Reader-response and (2) author-oriented approaches.

Reader-oriented criticism emphasizes the reader's (audience) response to the text. The proponents of this school argue that readers/listeners/audiences make right meaning from the text. The author-oriented approach privileges the composer (reciter) of the text and "argues the composer's intention is the key to the meaning of the text". The primary conviction of these theories is that adequate interpretation of the texts must take into account both the composers (reciters) and the audiences input.

I used the two theoretical approaches to analyse the effective employment of linguistic devices by the proverb speakers and proper interpretation of the meaning of the stylistic feature by the audience.

6. The Language of the Somali Proverb

According to my observations, as I conducted this study, the Somali proverb employs poetic techniques such as imagery and sound effects like alliteration and rhyme. Elders interviewed, consented the view and added that the poetic nature of the language of the proverb is simply to heighten its message. However, it is not only the Somalis that have proverbs with poetic formulae. In his discussion of the language of the proverb in Akan community, Boadi (1981) observes, 'A speaker often selects a particular proverb with striking metaphor because he wishes to elevate his message with a poetic dimension, or demonstrate to his opponents his superior sophistication, education, eloquence or sensitivity in the use of his language'.

Let us consider the following proverbs in which the language used is poetic.

"Intaadan wax Falin, ka Fiiro"

(Think before you leap)

"Deefey Ku Aaway, Dhibbaan Dhinacaa Ka Jiraa"

(Where are you success, I am behind difficulties)

The first proverb means that you should think before you leap, while the meaning of the second proverb is

that for one to succeed in life, he/she must face challenges before he/she enjoys the fruit of his/her hard work.

The Somali versions of the above proverbs reveal the poetic nature of the Somali proverbs. For example, both proverbs utilise the poetic device known as alliteration. In the first proverb the words **Falin** and **Fiiro** alliterate while in the second proverb the sound (Θ) – a labial dental fricative, appears as the initial sound in the 1st, 4th and 5th words.

6.1 Register

A unique and important aspect of the language of the Somali proverb is that, unlike the other genres of the Somali folklore, proverbs are composed without the influence of foreign languages. While, for example, Somali poems heavily borrow from other languages such as Arabic and Kiswahili, proverbs do not borrow words from other languages.

The choice of words is usually restricted by the poetic nature of the proverb, especially the strict demand for alliterative sounds. Words, however, pour out as they fit the context and the topic for discussion. The words used in the proverb are usually drawn from the immediate and familiar environment. Let us see the following proverbs:

“Caano Daatay, Dabadoodaa La Qabtaa”

(Do not waste milk, however little)

“Bannaankiisa mare, Maradiisa geed ma Qabsado”

(Whoever walks in the plains, never gets his clothes torn by trees)

The first proverb means that you should save the little you have, while the second proverb means that if one avoids controversy, she/he will stay free of it.

These proverbs do not borrow foreign words and words used are drawn from the immediate and familiar environment. Words like “milk”, “plain” and “tree” are all tangible in the pastoral life and are common place in the nomadic lifestyle of the Somali society.

Another unique aspect of the Somali proverb which this study reveals is that the origin and the composer of the proverb are always unknown. The anonymity of the composer affects the language of the proverb because proverbs take an introductory clause like “the Somali said” or “it was said” before the proverb is uttered. Examine the following proverb:

Waxaa La yiri, “Waxaa Day, Waxa ka Sokeeyana day”

It was said, (look at that, but also look at this (closer things)

Somali waxay tiri, “Indho waa ay Isku Hurdaan, ee ma Kala Hurdaan”

Somali said, (Eyes sleep together, but cannot sleep separately)

The first proverb means one should not only think of future, but should also think of the present, while second proverb stresses the kinship bond of the clan members. The emphasis is if a member is befallen by a calamity, the whole clan should feel for him.

6.2 Imagery

The most striking aspect of style used in Somali proverb as contented by this study is imagery. Literarily, imagery is the technique of employing figures of speech that bring pictures to the minds of the audience. Finnegan says: ‘Proverbs are rich of imagery of succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw’ (1970).

The use of images in the Somali Proverb is so prevalent and condensed that it sometimes becomes very difficult for non-native speakers to fully comprehend the proverbs in the translation. The following proverb are good examples:

“Qowl Nin Weyn ka Dhacay, waa Qolof Geed ka Dhacday”

(An agreement among elders is irreversible, like a tree cannot repossess the dry leaves it has shade)

“Nin Yar Intuu Geed ka Booduu, Talo ka Boodaa”

(A young man leaps over important issues, the same way he leaps over trees)

“Bakayle Intuu Bur ku Jiruu, Bur Kale Raadsadaa”

(A hare looks for another hide-out, before it vacates the one it has)

The first proverb means peace accords are final and no one dare to violate them. The second proverb means an inexperienced person makes many blunders, while the third proverb means secure another job before you leave the current one.

These proverbs, in their original version, are far much removed from the translation in terms of conveying the vivid picture of the images like “Qowl” (agreement), “Qolof” (dry leave), “Geed” (tree), “boodaa” (leaping) and others as used in the proverb.

Among the Somalis, proverbs with condensed images seem to be rated higher than the ones with plain ordinary imagery. This is one of the literary aspects that the Somali society shares with many African communities, for example, the Akan community.”

Boadi (1981) says, “Proverbs are assigned to places in the hierarchy not on the basis of their factual content and validity but on the quality of their imagery. The more concrete and unusual the image, the higher the proverb rates.”

The use of imagery in the Somali proverbs is varied and numerous. But for the sake of this study, we would like to discuss the three main prevalent components of imagery namely:

- Metaphor
- Simile and
- Personification

Metaphorical images that figuratively refer to things, events and so on are commonly employed in the Kenyan Somali proverbs as is evident in the following proverbs.

“Tolkaa Xaar buu, ku Cunsiiyaa”

(Your kinsmen can make you feed on faeces)

“Shimbiir Duulduul badan, Af Libaax bay Shab Tiraahdaa”

(A bird that flies frequently, lands in a lion’s mouth)

The first proverb means that clan interest always supersedes the one of a member. In other words, the clan can cause one to do what it wants. The speaker employs the words “feed on faeces” as metaphorical allusions to refer to the power of the kinsmen to make a member of the clan do disgusting things. Likewise, the image is metaphorically used to reveal to us the member’s total dependency and subjection to the clan. The second proverb means that a person who does not take precautions will land in problems.

Simile is another poetic feature that the Somali proverb portrays. Many proverbs that are collected for analysis in this study employ this device. The following proverbs may serve as examples:

“Naagtaada oo kaa Warrantay, waa Maradaada oo kaa Warrantay”

(A wife divulging the secrets of her husband; is like clothes revealing the secrets of the body)

“Nin Isfaanshay, waa Ri Isnuugtay”

(A person who praises himself, is like a she-goat that sucks itself)

The first proverb compares a wife revealing the secrets of the husband with that of personified cloth capable of talking to reveal what it covers in the body. The second proverb means a self-praiser is an object of ridicule.

Among the Somalis, the simile, as a stylistic device is very crucial and subtle in conveying the message and the wisdom in the proverb. It helps the listener draw deeper meaning from the objects compared.

Personification is another equally common poetic device the Somali proverb uses to enrich its message. In the proverb, sometimes human mannerism is assigned to inanimate things. For example, animals, objects or even abstract entities may assume human behaviour like talking or emerging in some tangible actions. The following proverbs utilise personification as a technique to communicate their messages effectively:

Waxaa la yiri “Saddex Kaama Tagaan”,

“Maral Mawd Og”

“Gaajo Guri Og”

“Gardarro Garab Og”

It is said, “Three things will never leave you alone”

(Disease that knows Death)

(Hunger that knows home (empty))

(Aggression that knows supporters)

“Libaax Nin Ganay iyo Nin Galaday, Kala Ogsoon”

(A lion can differentiate between one who threw the spear at him and the one who supported him (did not throw at him))

The meaning of the first proverb is that some of the things affecting our lives would not leave one till they accomplish a mission. For example, a chronic disease that will eventually kill, a famine where there is no food security and violation against one’s right supported by some hidden forces. All the abstract nouns like “Disease”, “Hunger” and “Aggression” are treated as living things. The second proverb means that one should be able to differentiate between foes and friends. In this proverb the “Lion” is personified so as to distinguish among the attackers, the one who actually wants to kill him.

7. Sound Effects

Under the sound effects we shall discuss the following three main features in the Somali proverb.

- Rhythm
- Rhyme
- Onomatopoeia

7.1 Rhythm

Rhythm, by nature, is such an elusive device that strikes one in any poetic piece of literature, but it is always

difficult to give a tangible and concrete definition. Deutch,(1958) says “Rhythm” is as natural as breathing, the ebb and flow of tides, the return of the seasons, it is immediately experienced and recognized with pleasure, but it eludes definition”.

We observed the nature of the Somali proverb and realised that the stressed syllables which normally mark the rhythm of the proverb fall at almost equal intervals. This regularity of the occurrence of the stressed syllables helps create the pattern of the “beat” of the proverb and brings out the rhythm of the proverb. Some of the proverbs studied here indicate the stressed syllables and their regular intervals e.g.

“**H**al Hunguri **W**eyn, Geela **H**ortii Bay **D**himataa”
(A greedy she-camel dies before others)

“**G**acan Wax **Q**aadma **B**aratay, **H**addii la **G**ooyana **G**umudkaa **D**haqaaqa”

The meaning of first proverb is that too much greed can cost you your life. The second proverb means that old habits die hard.

In the two proverbs, there is a pattern of using tones with the stressed syllables (marked), while there is falling tones with the unstressed syllable (unmarked) and this happens at equal intervals. The rising and falling of tones as a result of the stressed and the unstressed syllables create a regular alternation of high and low pitches in the proverbs. This helps the speaker to communicate the message of the proverb effectively and persuade the audience.

7.2 Rhyme

Rhyme may be defined as the repetition of the same sound at recognizable and regularly recurring intervals. In the case of proverb, unlike poems, there are not many lines to rhyme. However, within the proverb the words rhyme. The most common rhyme that almost all the Somali proverbs use is the kind known as “internal – rhyme”. This is what is known as “Leonine or in-line rhyme”. In the following proverbs, this kind of rhyme is extensively used.

“Af Joogo, Looma Adeego”

(A present person is not advocated)

“Ani Nin Yiri, Dad iska Bixi”

(A man who said “myself” has excluded himself from others)

7.3 Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia, stylistically is a sound device in which word sounds are chosen to actually suggest their referents. Some words in the proverb are used to imitate the sound of things that the user of the proverb is referring to. All the words in brackets in the following proverbs actually imitate sound.

“Ili Geedka (Dhabi) ma Aragto”

(An eye cannot detect the thorn that pierces it)

“Shimbiir Habeen (Duulay) Wixii Duuliyaa Jira”

(A bird flies at night for a reason)

In the first proverb, the word (Dhabi) (to pierce) helps us feel the sound of the thorn that pierces the eye, while in the second proverb the word (Duulay) (to fly) suggests both the sound and movement of the frightened bird that is forced to fly from her enemy in the dead of the night. Onomatopoeia usually gives us a vision of shape, movement, colour and so on and its impact on the listener of the proverb can be powerful.

8. Rhetorical Devices

In terms of literary meaning, rhetoric is the art of employing language in a certain way so as to deliberately impress the audience.

In most African societies, the adult speakers are fond of employing language in a certain way so as to deliberately impress the audience. Elderly speakers of African origin usually employ rhetorical devices in the proverbs and the Somali community is no exception.

In his discussion of Akan proverbs, A. Boadi (1972) states: “In Akan society, rhetoric is a far more important part of adults linguistic equipment than in most other societies. A mature participant in a dialogue or public discussion always strikes to use vivid language because his audience is continually making folk-literary analysis of his speech”.

Our discussion of rhetoric in the Somali proverb, mainly for the space and time limitation of this study, hovers over two major devices:

- Hyperbole
- Allusion

Hyperbole is common in the Somali proverb. As negotiations go on and elders speak in turns, using proverbs abundantly, the element of exaggeration in the proverbs becomes more evident. Hyperbole, especially comes out clearly when the proverb compares two things. This device abounds in the following proverbs:

“Naagtaada oo kaa Warrantay, waa Maradaada oo kaa Warrantay”

(A wife divulging the secrets of her husband is like clothes revealing the secret parts of the body)

“Nab iyo Naar, baa la Simay”

(False allegation and hell fire are likened)

“Nin Isfaanshay, waa Ri Isnuugtay”

(A person who praises himself is like a goat that sucks itself)

“Tolkaa Xaar, buu ku Cunsiiyaa”

(Your clan can make you feed on faeces)

In all the proverbs above, the element of exaggeration (hyperbole) is quite obvious. For example, in reality, clothes are not capable to reveal the secret parts of the body, while no sane person will ever feed on excreta. Therefore, though the point is made, the issue is grossly exaggerated. Speakers use this technique to reinforce the message and the effect is felt by the listeners.

Allusion is the artist's technique where he/she makes indirect references in his/her proverb. The indirect reference, however, assumes various forms. Acceptable acts by a member of the community is referred to positively, while taboos are negatively in directed. The society is either called upon to emulate positive behaviours or abhor the anti-social ones.

Allusion is effectively utilised in the following proverbs:

“Bohola Haddimo Ha Qodin, Haddad Qoddana ha Dheerayn, ku Dhici Doontaana ma Ogide”

(Don't dig trenches for others, but if you must dig, do not make them too deep, for you don't know whether it will be you who will fall in)

The first proverb means evil friends have bad influences. A bad member(s) of the community is alluded to negatively in that with his/her/their rotten behaviour he can infect the good members. The second proverb means you should not sabotage humanity it may turn against you. The speaker indirectly warns the deceitful member of the society that whatever he is doing behind the scenes may turn against him.

The effect of allusion, as a technique, is to enrich the meaning of the proverb and stimulate the listeners to infer hidden meanings that are not explicitly stated.

9. Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief exploration of the language style in Somali proverb helps to establish its viability as a significant form of creative activity among its recitors and audiences. The attempts to contextualize it within the physical, social and economic environment that engenders it and within which it is performed are part of a conscious effort to respond to the proverb from the point of view of the people who compose, perform and consume it.

Systematic analysis of the stylistic devices of the proverb proves it to be a highly conscious and sophisticated form of linguistic art. It is suggested, nevertheless, that the composition and recitation of the proverb is not merely a clever, affectatious aesthetic exercise. Rather, it is a grassroots participatory activity, delivering from and contributing deeply-felt needs and concerns of the community. This explains the emphasis laid on the stylistic features of the proverb. Its artistic value can only be truly appreciated in the perspective of its functions.

10. Constraints

As suggested in the introduction, the study cannot claim exhaustive coverage of the subject of the language of the Somali proverb. Apart from the physical and material limitations to the research, other factors hampered the study. An almost complete lack of scholarly material on this specific area of study meant that one had, in most instances, to rely on intuition, both one's own and that of field informants who, in most cases, have never had occasion, or the need, to objectivize their response to the proverb. The absence of in-depth studies of the Somali language with its dialectical differences, especially as spoken in northern Kenya, raised similar challenges.

Above all, this study would have benefited from reference to an overall theory of African oral literature. The researcher was not able, in all his archival investigations, to identify any such theory. This is a challenge not only to him but also to other scholars of African orature.

11. Recommendations

A number of important issues which require serious attention in the area of Somali proverb was revealed to the researcher in the process of developing this study.

1. The need for thorough linguistic study of the Somali language.
2. Formulation of a comprehensive literary theory of African Oral Literature.

3. A broader sample of the proverbs over a wider area than that covered by the research.
4. A broader and more systematically selected sample of field informants to enhance the researcher's insight into the community's attitudes and responses to the proverb.

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