

Swear Words in Idjwi Territory: From Morpho-Semantic to Socio-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

Human beings need reinforce confidence while they interact with one another in different matters. They also need show others when they sound serious during a debate, conversation, etc. In Bahavu culture, there is a number of swear words which are used to make people believe what somebody says. The use of a swear word is a self-engagement whereby a swearer attests to be responsible for any good or bad thing which is likely to happen just in case. Since swear words play a major socio-cultural role, a Muhavu, who is aware of the mystery which is hidden behind swear words, does not swear anyhow.

Key words: swear words, taboo, sexual intercourse, socio-cultural, Idjwi, Bahavu.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural values, beliefs and traditions significantly affect community life. They shape community members' role and responsibilities towards one another, how community members relate to one another, how decisions are made within communities, how community education passes from one generation to another. Culture further influences how community struggles to build confidence among themselves by swearing traditionally. Swear words are multidimensional. The present article will deal with the dimension whereby swear words are used to make a solemn declaration, invoking a deity or a sacred person in confirmation of witness to the honesty or truth of such a declaration. Say, you want to borrow money, and so you must promise to return it by swearing, which is the most efficacious option to secure your promise. The oath you make is the equivalent of a legal written contract that would make you liable if you renege.

Historically, people started swearing making reference to a deity, God. (Steven Pinker, 2007:3), says: "The historical root of swearing in English and other languages is, oddly enough, religion."⁽¹⁾ So, it was frequent to hear the following:

- "I hope to die if I tell a lie."
- "May God strike me dead if I'm lying."
- "As God is my witness."
- "Blow me down."
- "God blind me."

As (Steven Pinker, 2007: 3) still puts it forwards: "Such oaths, of course, would have been more credible in an era in which people thought that God listened to their entreaties and had the power to carry them out. Even today, witnesses in U.S. court proceedings have to swear on the Bible, as if an act of perjury undetected by the legal system would be punished by an eavesdropping and easily offended God."⁽²⁾

Following God's commandment (Exodus 20:7, 1983:56), "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."⁽³⁾ Bahavu people strictly observe the commandment and they resort to other means to swear. The means which avoid swearing by the name of the Almighty God all the time function socio-culturally well. The research attempts to answer the following questions: Why do many-if not all-swear words imply taboo sexual intercourse or murder in Idjwi island? Are swear words used at random?

Anticipated answers to the questions would be: 1) Sex is a sensitive issue among Bahavu people and it is regarded with high respect within the community. A Muhavu is not allowed to have sex with whoever, nor is he

allowed to discuss sexual-related topics with whoever, say a mother-in-law, lest it become a taboo. 2) Swear words are not used at random, they follow certain socio-cultural norms.

To carry out this research an interview was conducted with locals, who master the culture well, to collect the data. The prior knowledge of the researcher was also helpful. The documentary method was finally resorted to.

1. Corpus

1. Ekihango kinyise
2. Mbokuloga
3. Mbologa Rubenga
4. Mboly'omwihwa
5. Mboyisa Bera
6. Mpinduke dasa
7. Mpinduke Omwihwa munyere
8. Mpinduke Omwihwa musole
9. Mpinduke nyama
10. Mpinduke nyoko
11. Mwawe
12. Ndale na dasa
13. Ndale na nyama
14. Ndale na nyoko
15. Nkuhinduke
16. Nzuke na malume
17. Yemukawe
18. Yenyoko
19. Yesho

2. MORPHO-SEMANTIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

It has been decided to resort to the morpho-semantic analysis on the one hand, to sort out the underlying abstract representation that is called deep structure since it is the input of transformation rulers. For example, the swear word "Mbokuloga." Its deep structure is "Mbone nakuloga" → n-bon-e na-ku-log-a. On the other hand, the socio-cultural analysis will provide the socio-cultural meaning embodied by a swear word. After all a language is an integral part of culture

1. Ekihango kinyise: -°e-ki-hango ki-n-yis-e

°e-: augment

-ki-: nominal prefix of class 7

-hango: nominal theme meaning "blood pact"

ki-: verbal prefix of class 7

-n-: substitute (first person singular)

-yis-: verbal stem meaning "to kill"

e-: final

S1. May the blood pact kill me.

S2. In the past, two men could publicly drink each other's blood in order to become friends. During the ritual process the two men agree freely on a number of things which must not be violated by either man or his family members. Both men could swear by the blood pact, as shown above, to tell that they are making a serious promise. This serious promise, made by either man, reassures the other and discards any suspicion in his mind. If one of the two family members lies, something bad may happen to him.

2. Mbokuloga: the deep structure is "Mbone nakuloga": °n-bon-e na-ku-log-a

°n-: substitute (first person singular)

-bon-: verbal stem meaning “to see”
-e: final
na-: substitute (first person singular)
-ku-: object infix
-log-: verbal stem meaning ”bewitch”
-a: final

S1. May I see myself bewitching you.

S2. When a friend of yours wants to tell you he is serious with what he says, he touches your chest and swears using the words “Mbokuloga”= May I see myself bewitching you. This, he says because, in fact, a true friend can never bewitch you. If he swears in vain, he, therefore, is as equally punishable as any sorcerer.

3. Mbologa Rubenga: the deep structure is “Mbone naloga Rubenga”:

°n-bon-e na-log-a Ø-Rubenga

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-bon-: verbal stem meaning “to see”
-e: final
na-: substitute (first person singular)
-log-: verbal stem meaning ”bewitch”
-a: final
Ø: zero morpheme

-Rubenga: proper name of one of the former chiefs of **Rubenga collectivity**

S1: That I may see myself bewitching **Rubenga**.

S2: In the history of North-Idjwi chieftaincy, **Rubenga** is the father of the incumbent chief of **Rubenga** collectivity, **Ntawenderundi**. **Rubenga** is a honorable icon according to his sons and notables (Bashamuka). They owe him much respect even though he is no longer alive. One way of owing him respect is swearing by him, that is, “**mbologa Rubenga**” to support any statement they make as being true. If the person swears in vain, it is total lack of respect towards **Rubenga** and his successors. Also, it means that you cannot help bewitching him (**Rubenga**). Therefore, you are as equally punishable as any sorcerer. Similarly, sons and notables of **Ntambuka** in the southern part of Idjwi may swear by “**Ntambuka**” as: “**Mbologa Ntambuka**”, for example.

4. Mboly’omwihwa: The deep structure is “Mbone nalya omwihwa”: °n-bon-e na-li-a o-mu-ihwa.

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-bon-: verbal stem meaning “to see”
-e: final
na-: substitute (first person singular)
-li-: verbal stem meaning “to eat”
-a: final
o-: augment
-mu-: nominal prefix of class 1
ihwa-: nominal theme meaning “nephew/ niece”

S1. May I see myself eating the nephew/niece.

S2. A person can swear by his/ her nephew/niece if only he has got one. Culturally speaking a nephew/niece deserves much respect especially by his/her maternal uncles/aunts. A maternal uncle, for example, cannot in any case spill his/her nephew’s / niece’ blood. If he does so mistakenly, he will have to pay a fine. So an uncle swears by his/her nephew/niece to sound serious.

5. Mboyisa Bera: The deep structure is: Mbone nayisa Bera: °n-bon-e na-yis-a Ø-Bera

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-bon-: verbal stem, meaning “to see”
-e: final
na-: substitute (first person singular)
-yis-: verbal stem, meaning “to kill”
-a: final

Ø-: zero morpheme

-**Bera**: proper name of one of the former chiefs of **Rubenga collectivity**

S1: That I may see myself killing **Bera**

S2: In the history of North-Idjwi chieftaincy, **Bera** is the grandfather of the incumbent chief of **Rubenga collectivity**, **Ntawenderundi**. **Bera** is also a honorable icon according to his grandsons and notables (Bashamuka). They owe him much respect even though he is no longer alive. One way of owing him respect is swearing by him, that is, “**mboyisa Bera**” to support any statement they make as being true. If the person swears in vain, it is total lack of respect towards **Bera** and his successors. Also, it means that you cannot help killing him (**Bera**). Therefore, you are as equally punishable as any sorcerer who could attempt to kill **Bera**. Similarly, grandsons and notables of **Mihigo** in the southern part of Idjwi may swear by “**Mihigo**” as: “**Mboyisa Mihigo**”, for example.

6. **Mpinduke dasa: °n-hind-uk-e Ø-dasa**

°**n-**: substitute (first person singular)

-**hind-**: verbal stem meaning “to turn”

-**uk-**: radical extension

-**e**: final

Ø-: zero morpheme

-**dasa**: nominal theme meaning “father”

S1. That I become my father.

S2. Culturally speaking, a daughter cannot have sex with her father. Even when they share the same bed by any chance, the daughter could not turn towards her father to suggest sex. By swearing “Mpinduke dasa”, a daughter reassures anybody that she is telling the truth.

7. **Mpinduke Omwihwa munyere → °n-hind-uk-e o-mu-ihwa mu-nyere**

°**n-**: Substitute (first person singular)

-**hind-**: verbal stem meaning “to turn”

-**uk-**: radical extension

-**e**: final

o-: augment

-**mu-**: nominal prefix of class 1

-**ihwa**: nominal theme

mu-: nominal prefix of class 1

-**nyere**: nominal theme meaning “daughter”

S1. That I become my niece.

S2. As it was pointed out earlier, a maternal uncle owes special regards towards his niece. Just as a maternal uncle cannot spill his niece’ blood lest he should pay a fine, he cannot also have sex with his niece. When a maternal uncle swears “Mpinduke Omwihwa munyere”, he ascertains that what he says is simply true. If he lies, he may bear the consequences.

8. **Mpinduke Omwihwa musole: °n-hind-uk-e o-mu-ihwa mu-sole**

°**n-**: substitute (first person singular)

-**hind-**: verbal stem meaning “to turn”

-**uk-**: radical extension

-**e**: final

o-: augment

-**mu-**: nominal prefix of class 1

-**ihwa**: nominal theme meaning “nephew/ niece”

mu-: nominal prefix of class 1

-**sole**: nominal theme meaning “boy”

S1. That I become my nephew.

S2. This swearing has the same meaning as the one above but they are not interchangeable. The swearing here is concerned with maternal aunt and not the maternal uncle.

9. Mpinduke nyama: °n-hind-uk-e Ø-nyama

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-hind-: verbal stem meaning “to turn”
-uk-: radical extension
-e: final
Ø-: zero morpheme
-nyama: nominal theme meaning “my mother”

S1. That I become my mother.

S2. Culturally speaking, a son cannot have sex with his mother. A son must not even see his mother’s nakedness. Even when they could be found on the same bed at random, a son cannot turn towards his mother to propose her sex. So in Bahavu culture when a son swears “Mpinduke nyama”, he must be believed.

10. Mpinduke nyoko: °n-hind-uk-e Ø-nyoko

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-hund-: verbal stem meaning “turn”
-uk-: radical extension
-e: final
Ø-: zero morpheme
-nyoko: nominal theme meaning “your mother”

S1. That I become your mother.

S2. In Bahavu culture when a man gets married, his wife’s mother becomes definitely his biological mother like. He owes her so special regards that he cannot joke with her. As his mother-in-law equals his biological mother, a man cannot turn towards the former, in any case, to suggest her sex. So a husband reassures his wife by swearing “Mpinduke nyoko”. If ever the husband swears in vain, he will not only endanger himself but also he will show tremendous contempt towards his mother-in-law. Consequently he will be heavily fined.

11. Mwawe: Its deep structure is “mwana wawe”: °mu-ana u-awe

°mu-: nominal prefix of class 1
-ana: nominal theme meaning “child”
u-: pronominal prefix of class 1
-awe: pronominal theme “your”

S1. Your child (have sex with you).

S2. In daily relationship between children and parents, confidence is reinforced among themselves using the swear word “mwawe” = “your child”. To mean I am your child, the truth is for you, I cannot lie you, believe me in what I am telling you. However, if you lie yet you use the swear word, it means you do not have any respect towards your mother or father and vice versa. In other words, you cannot help having sex with your mother or father and vice versa.

12. Ndale na dasa → °n-lal-e na Ø-dasa

°n-: substitute (first person singular)
-lal-: verbal stem meaning “to sleep”
-e: final
na: connective particle
Ø-: Zero morpheme
-dasa: nominal theme meaning “my father”

S1. That I sleep with my father.

S2. Culturally speaking, daughter cannot have sex with her father due to the biological relationship. Whenever a daughter swears “Ndale na dasa,” she gets rid of any doubt which was hanging in her audience’ mind.

13. Ndale na nyama

S1. That I sleep with my mother.

S2. Unlike the upper swearing, a son cannot have sex with his mother due to the biological relationship, as far as culture is concerned. Whenever a son swears “Ndale na nyama,” he gets rid of any doubt which was hanging in his audience’ mind.

14. Ndale na Nyoko

S1. That I sleep with your mother.

S2. Culturally speaking, it has already been said that the mother of someone’s wife is definitely his mother like. She equally deserves the same respect as his biological mother. He can neither joke with her nor have sex with her. In a debate which engages a husband and his wife, the former swears referring to his mother-in-law to reassure his wife that he is truthful.

15. Nkuhinduke → °n-ku-hind-uk-e

°n-: substitute (first person singular)

-ku-: object infix

-hind-: verbal stem meaning “to turn”

-uk-: radical extension

-e: final

S1. That I become you.

S2. This swearing is used when you talk to any person with whom you cannot have sex even when you shared the same bed. S/he could be your father, father-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, son, son-in-law, daughter, daughter-in-law, uncle, nephew, niece,...

16. Nzuke na malume. Its deep structure is "Nzuke na nyamalume" → °n-zuk-e na Ø-nyama-lume

°n- : substitute (first person singular)

-zuk-: verbal stem meaning “to get up”

-e: final

na: connective particle

Ø: zero morpheme

-nyama: nominal theme meaning “my mother”

-lume: nominal theme meaning “man”

S1. That I get up with my maternal uncle.

S2. The sexual relationship between a girl and an uncle is forbidden in Bahavu culture. As a matter of fact, a girl swears “Nzuke na malume” to mean that what she tells is true. Apart from this truth supported by the swearing, there is not any other truth I can tell you.

17. Yemukawe → Deep structure “yewe mukazi wawe” → °i-ewe mu-kazi u-awe

°i-: pronominal prefix of class 1

-ewe: pronominal theme meaning “her/him”

mu-: nominal prefix of class 1

-kazi: nominal theme meaning “wife”

u-: pronominal prefix of class 1

-awe: pronominal theme meaning “yours”

S1. Her, your wife.

S2. In a debate which engages a son and a father, both swear “Yemukawe” to sound truthful. You will remember that in Bahavu culture, a son cannot have sex with his biological mother. Neither can a father have sex with his son’s wife.

18. Yenyoko. Deep structure “yewe nyoko”→ °i-ewe Ø-nyoko

- °i-: pronominal prefix of class 1
- ewe: pronominal theme meaning “her/his”
- Ø-: zero morpheme
- nyoko-: nominal theme meaning “your mother”

S1. Her, your mother.

S2. As it has already been said, a son-mother sexual relationship is culturally forbidden. So when brothers make public promises among themselves, they swear “Yenyoko.” This swearing also involves grandsons and grandmothers. In Bahavu cultural family relationship extension, someone’s grandmother is regarded as his wife.

19. Yesho. Deep structure→”yewe sho”→°i-ewe -Ø-sho

- °i-: pronominal prefix of class 1
- ewe: pronominal theme meaning “her/him”
- Ø-: zero morpheme
- sho: nominal theme meaning “your father”

S1. Him, your father.

S2. As the culture asserts it, sexual intercourse between a daughter and a father is forbidden. Also in Bahavu cultural family relationship extension, a grandfather regards his granddaughter as his wife. So during a serious matter talk engaging daughter-mother, granddaughter-grandfather, the former swears by “Yesho” to reassure her mother or grandfather that what she says is true.

Here after is a chart matching the analyzed swear words to appropriate contexts

Swear words	Appropriate context
Ekihango kinyise	Two family friends by pact of blood.
Mbokuloga	Close friends
Mbologa Rubenga	Rubenga’s sons and/or any Rubenga’s Mushamuka
Mboly’omwihwa	A maternal uncle to his nephew/niece or any other person
Mboyisa Bera	Rubenga’s sons and/or any Rubenga’s Mushamuka
Mpinduke Omwihwa munyere	A maternal uncle to his niece or to any other person
Mpinduke Omwihwa musole	An aunt to a nephew or to any other person
Mpinduke nyama	A husband to his wife or to any other person
Mpinduke nyoko	A husband to his wife
Mwawe	A son to his mother, a son to his father, a daughter to her mother, or to her father and vice versa
Ndale na dasa	A wife to her husband or to any other person
Ndale na nyama	A husband to his wife or to any other person
Ndale na nyoko	A husband to his wife
Nkuhinduke	A son to his mother, a son-in-law to his mother-in-law
Nzuke na malume	A niece to her uncle or to any other person
Yemukawe	A son to his father or to his grandfather, A father to his son, a grandfather to his grandson
Yenyoko	A brother to his brother or to his sister
Yesho	A granddaughter to her grandfather

CONCLUSION

The present article has simply dealt with the morpho-semantic and socio-cultural analysis of some swear words in Idjwi Island. As a matter of fact, swear words are not used at random. A person swearing should know the degree of relationship of the person he is talking to or he is swearing by: Is the person he is talking to his /her wife, husband, brother, mother, daughter, father-in-law, friend... So, kinship plays an important role in the production of effects. It determines the efficacy and power of a given swear word. If, for example, a false/wrong swear word is uttered in front of a wrong person, there will definitely be no effect. It is worth reminding that swear words embody special power which is socio-culturally recognized: They may harm, hurt, kill or save because language has often been regarded as a weapon, and people ought to be heedful about where to target it and when to shoot. Moreover, many swear words imply taboo sexual intercourse or murder. However, it does not mean Bahavu people are sexually immoral or killers. The purpose behind swear words is to sound serious, to be truthful, honest, to restore confidence when things are about to fall apart.

Culturally speaking, Bahavu people avoid lies at any cost. Telling lies for Bahavu people is as if someone had taboo sexual intercourse or killed a special person for him. So, to tell the audience that someone has not told any lie, he implies taboo sex or killing. If something evil has been done yet the evildoer swears in vain, there are a number of consequences to bear. This opens the way to another prospective research. Other swear words dimensions may be looked into as well. For example, if a husband lies to his wife yet he swears "Yenyoko", it means that the husband has no respect towards his mother-in-law because he attests that he can have sex with his mother-in-law. For such violation and misuse of swear words, the culture foresees an appropriate punishment. It is hoped that Bahavu young people who had nearly forgotten the use of swear words will find the correct usage of them.

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