

IGBO TRADITIONAL LIBATION AND THE SPEECH ACT

PERFORMATIVE

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Abstract

The paper examines the features of speech act performative in libation, using the context of the Igbo society, Southeast Nigeria. Speech act is a concept popularized by J. L. Austin to explain what speakers do with language. Part of the core aspects of the concept are the ideas of locution, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of utterances. However, it has been observed that both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of an utterance can be contextually influenced and determined. This forms the major thrust of the paper, that libation as the pouring of wine as sacrifice to a god contains features of speech act performative. The paper adopts the theory of ethnopragmatics to examine texts derived from participant observation of occasions of libation in Igbo society. The analyses of the texts indicate that libation in the Igbo society goes with verbal utterances; and the words are not merely uttered but deemed to be performed. It is the inherent force in the utterance that generates the feeling of spiritual satisfaction and assurance in both the performer and the audience.

Keywords: Speech Act, Performative, libation, Igbo Society

Introduction

Communication is a very important aspect of human existence. Members of every society must have modes of interaction and idea sharing; ways of making others know how one feels, the likes and dislikes; means of passing culture from one generation to another, modes of expressing values and norms, taboos etc. It is difficult for any society to exist with its members living independent and isolated lives. So, one of the major essence of communication is for social cohesion.

There are different forms of communication open to man, but the most commonly discussed is the human language, technically called verbal communication. Verbal communication may either be in speech or writing. This form of communication is unique to the human specie. However, other forms of communication which are

grouped under non-verbal communication, such the use of body movement (paralanguage), the use of space (proxemics), the use of time (chronemics) and others also exist. Non-verbal communication is more dependent on culture than verbal communication. For instance, different societies can have different interpretations for a particular body movement. Take the instance of handshake or wave of hand to indicate goodbye. Some cultures in Africa have ways of shaking kinsmen different from ways of shaking strangers. Similarly, in some cultures, a younger person does not shake hands with an elder, rather, he or she prostrates before the elder.

However, whether in the verbal or the non-verbal form, communication operates through symbols. Language is made up symbols, the phonic (speech) and the graphic (writing). Language communicates where the listener is able to decode and ascribe appropriate meanings to the sounds made by the speaker; or the reader, to the graphic representations on paper. Imagine where a Chinese who does not understand English language is given this paper to read; or where this paper is written in Chinese and given to me to read. The representations would constitute mere drawings. Communication requires that the sender and the receiver must be on the same page of interpretation of symbols.

The interest of this paper is on the Igbo traditional libation as a medium of communication. Libation ordinarily is the pouring of liquid on the ground as sacrifice to a god. It constitutes a special mode of communication involving the living and the non-living, the animate and the inanimate. It also involves the two forms of communication: the verbal because it involves the uttering of some expressions; and the non-verbal through physical body movement of the performer. The paper examines this special mode of communication against the background of speech act performative. The purpose is to delineate it as unique form of communication with unique speech act features.

Conceptual Review

There are concepts which require a bit of critical review in order to properly situate them within the focus of the paper. They include: the Igbo, libation, and speech act performative.

The Igbo: Igbo is one of the three major ethnic nationalities indigenous to Nigeria. This paper addresses a review of the Igbo from two perspectives: the Igbo in geography and the Igbo in language. First, the Igbo in geography are those who constitute the indigenes of the southeast geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The zone has five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States.

The Igbo in language expand the population to include indigenes of these five southeastern states of Nigeria, as well as indigenes of the areas in the south-south states, essentially, Delta, River, Edo, Akwa Ibom and Cross River states, who speak Igbo as their native language. For the fact that these people speak Igbo language as their native language, despite dialectal differences, they form part of the Igbo people. This second categorization also subsumes cultural similarities among these people.

The paper takes cognizance of the intricate connection between language and culture. Wardaugh explained that “the relationship between language and culture is that the structure of language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world” (221). Toni-Duruaku and Chukwu also stated that “ethnographic investigations have also proved this inseparable existence. Language forms part of the culture of a people. It is also through language that culture and collective consciousness of a people receive expression. It is difficult to think of a people without recourse to their language and culture”(121).

Focusing specifically on the Igbo in terms of language and culture, we find a people who though, may speak various dialects of the Igbo language, but who also share typical and significant common culture traits and patterns that make them significantly homogenous.

By this delineation, this paper takes the Igbo beyond the mere geopolitical description, and accepts the linguistic and cultural homogeneity as important

yardstick. Igbo people, both in the southeast and the south-south regions of the country, possess significant uniformity in culture pattern, cosmological belief, social ideals and values. The Igbo also possess their own distinct language, (Igbo language), that stands them out as an ethnic nationality. Like other languages and culture, theirs are transmitted mostly through socialization.

One of the unique aspects of the culture of the Igbo people is libation, which helps to ensure and sustain the cosmological cohesion between the natural and the supernatural. It helps to maintain this unique eco-space through a mode of communication that involves unique linguistic and non-linguistic performances.

Libation: Libation is described in simple terms, as “the pouring of a liquid offering as a religious ritual” (http://www.English_stackexchange.com). Such ritual is seen as an offering to a deity or ancestors. Libation is an exercise that exists in many cultures, though with varying levels of appeal and importance.

According to Mensah and Ekawan, “the practice of libation is a quintessential aspect of African culture and spirituality. It is a mark of piety and devotion to the gods and ancestors in an attempt to define a meaningful moment of communion...,and to chart a new form of consciousness as required by customs”(60).Furthermore, citing Opukuwa, Mensah and Ekawan identified the significance of libation as a form of ritual which “transcends both spiritual and material worlds.... The practice of libation has significant impact on setting forth people’s understanding of hospitality, tokens of fellowship, family living, death, continuity and contact”(60).

The two quotations above clearly explain the spiritual significance and socio-cultural relevance of libation within the African context. Peripherally, it is the pouring of liquid with associated utterances. However, what the people take the process to be, and its impact on them are more significant than the mere process of pouring liquid. The process is ritualistic, and the associated utterances are incantatory. The people take it to be a religious process, a communion that produces certain degrees of spiritual assurances.

In the Igbo society, libation is called *itu mmanya*. *Mmanya* means drink, and *itu* (verb) literally means to pour. As in other societies where the ritual holds, *itummanya* involves the pouring of liquid, most often alcohol and occasionally water, and the accompanying words of incantation. The occasions for this performance include festive moments, ceremonies (such as marriage, naming of a child etc), reception of visitors etc. Libation can also take private occasion, especially in the morning, where a man communes with his god and ancestors, imploring them to superintend over the activities of the day.

The mood is usually solemn and the tone of the accompanying utterances is supplication, since it is an invocation of the supernatural (the supreme God, the personal gods, and ancestors) in the natural affairs of man. As explained earlier, it is an occasion of spiritual communion that unites man and the other cosmic actors who, it is believed, play important roles in the harmony of ecological existence.

Libation in Igbo land is the exclusive preserve for male elders. Women as well as males of young ages are not permitted to perform the ritual. Libation means interfacing with the gods and the supernatural, hence it is believed that women and young men do not possess the right and power to do so. In a family, it is the head that performs libation. In the larger community, it is the elders, in union, (sometimes men with special titles such as *oji ofor*, *nze n'ozo*) that perform the ritual.

The role of liquid is also cardinal in the ritualistic value of libation. According to Nehusi cited in Mensah and Ekewan, “the ultimate significance is the restoration and maintenance of cosmic order...”(60). In the Igbo society, libation cannot take place without the pouring of liquid. Again, libation cannot take place by mere pouring of liquid without the accompanying utterances. Both the physical pouring of liquid (mostly alcohol or water), and the utterances are important in the performance.

The interest of this paper is not on the socio-cultural or spiritual aspect of libation. The focus is on the language accompaniment and its speech act implications.

Speech act Performative: Performative is one of the key concepts in J.L Austin's Speech Act Theory. Austin's major proposition is that some words are not only sounds that are uttered, but have the capacity of changing the world. In explaining the different things that users of language "perform" with words, Austin draws a distinction between locution, illocution and perlocutionary acts. Borrowing from Leech's explanation of these concepts, locutionary act is "performing the act *of* saying something", illocutionary act is "performing an act *in* saying something", and perlocutionary act is "performing an act *by* saying something" (*The Principles...199*). By italicizing the prepositions (of, in, by), Leech draws attention to the basis for the understanding of speech act performative. Locution is the speech itself of the speaker, illocution is the communication plan infused in it by the speaker, and perlocution is the result realized by it in the receiver. To present this in a simplified form, one may ask: What did the speaker say? What does he or she want to achieve by what he or she said? In line with this simple presentation, Leech has stated that locution and illocution could be taken as "goals rather than actions" (*The Principles...200*). If this is true, then, perlocution becomes the result since it comes from the listener. That is, what is the action or reaction of the listener to what is said by the speaker?

Austin further draws a distinction between performatives and constatives, that is, acts that denote real speech acts of doing something, and expressions of truth and falsehood respectively. By implication, it is not every uttered word that fits as performative. According to Brown and Yule, while some "sentences can often be used to report states of affairs", others can "in specified circumstances, be treated as the performance of an act"(231). Brown and Yule further described this specified circumstances required as "set of felicity conditions"(231). They argue that performatives "are not just a specialized group of ritual sentence forms, but are subset of the utterances in the language which can be used to perform acts"(231).

Mey also introduced the importance of context in the determination of speech act. According to Mey, "it is not primarily what I say, or intend to say, that determines my speech act, but the way it fits into the entire pattern of acting as a social being

that is typical for my culture”(95). This underscores the concept of felicity condition which we have earlier pointed out.

With regards to felicity condition which we have seen as integral to speech act, Austin, as cited in Ezeifeka, recognised two important conditions: textual and contextual conditions. Textual conditions are “visible in the text in question” (55). They are explicitly indicated through the use of speech act verbs such as, *promise, baptize, declare, promote, arrest* etc. For instance:

- I promise to give you some money tomorrow.
- I declare you husband and wife.

Again, textual conditions can be indicated through illocutionary force indicating devices such as punctuations, word order that indicates the function of the utterance as imperative, interrogation, declaration etc.

On the other hand, contextual conditions are the felicity conditions which, though implicit, must be present for illocutionary force to be achieved. Only textual conditions cannot make an utterance a speech act. The necessary contextual conditions are required. Ezeifeka listed the following as the conditions which constitute Austin’s felicity conditions (56-57).

- a. It must be a commonly accepted convention that the utterance in a particular circumstance will produce a particular effect. By implication, the circumstance or environment of the utterance recognizes the right of the person to make the utterance in the manner it is made.
- b. Participants in this process must carry out the procedure correctly and completely.
- c. The participants must have certain thoughts, feelings and intentions in consonance with the process.
- d. The participants must behave subsequently in a certain way as expected in the process.

The interest of this paper is to examine Igbo traditional libation within the praxis of speech act performative. The paper premised its argument on the institutionalized

felicity conditions associated with the exercise of libation, and the textual characteristics of the utterances.

As evidenced in most religious and cultural belief systems, the Igbo culture inclusive, some individuals enjoy the privileged recognition of possessing the right of mediating between the human and the spirit world, the natural and the supernatural, the living and the dead, the gods and man, God and the human. This is the case with libation in the Igbo society, where first, libation is the exclusive preserve for the male elders. Then, the people's willing recognition of this exclusive privilege creates the required felicity condition. Secondly, the language of libation is characterized by performatives where subconsciously, both the person exercising the action and any other witnessing the exercise of the action believe that the words used are not just uttered, but have the efficacy of producing the expected results.

Methodology

The paper adopted the participant observation method in collecting its data. The researcher observed occasions of libation in Amakohia community, Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The utterances which accompany the exercise were recorded, transcribed and subsequently translated into the English language. The method of selecting the data is simple random technique because all the libation performances observed exhibit similar characteristics. For the purposes of discussion, the data are presented in texts of both Igbo and English language translations; and the method of analysis is qualitative.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that gives background to this paper is ethnopragmatics. It is a theory that focuses on language in use with culture "playing a central explanatory role, and at the same time opens the way for links to be drawn between language and other cultural phenomena" (<http://www.academia.edu/10693>). The major proponents of this theory are Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, both of whom are interested in cognitive and cultural aspects of language. The theory is

predicated on the conclusion that speech practices relate to culture, and native speakers of any language share values, norms, assumptions and priorities which play significant roles in the encoding and decoding processes of the language. Thus, the theory seeks an analysis of language which considers culture as a cardinal factor.

Ethnopragmatics opposes the “universalist pragmatics represented by neo-Gricean pragmatics and politeness theory” (<http://www.degruyter.cm/view>). The theory believes that since culture plays vital role in language, and culture differs from society to society, the application of any language theory should also recognize this uniqueness. As such, the blanket or universalist application of linguistic theories may encounter difficulty in some languages without recognizing the uniqueness and culture specifics in the language.

Relating the theory to the present study, the assumption is that the language aspect of libation is integral to its overall process. Thus, relating the entire process to speech act must also consider cultural specifics that characterize the exercise. Austin’s speech act theory has been acknowledged universally, but its application in the study of any data should also recognize the shared values, norms and assumptions that characterize the language situation.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data presented here are excerpts from participant observation of the performance of libation. The data are presented in the Igbo language and the English language translation. They are analysed with particular attention to the illocutionary force devices, speech act verbs, and perlocutionary effects inherent in libation in the Igbo society. The method of translation followed pragmatic translation, a method that “regards translation as a special form of intercultural communication that has to be looked upon as the study of verbal and nonverbal action carried out by experts in order to functionally bridge two different cultural backgrounds” (<http://www.igi-global.com/dictionary>)

Data Presentation

Heem!

Akwa ikiri, ndi mmuo agha anya. (local wise saying, part of the invocation process.)

Eke kere uwa, anyi ekele gi. (not ordinary phatic communion, but establishes a spiritual connection, especially, as it involves the natural and the supernatural.

Ututu, tuutara anyi ihe oma, tufuo ihe ojoo. (the tone is a plea, but no direct response is expected from the addressee. Once uttered, the performer assumes that it has been approved, hence expects result in the form of action).

Eke, Orié, Afo, na Nkwo, gbaanu izuzugbe wetara anyi ihe oma. (same as above.

Ala nurukwa mmanya, nna na nnanna anyi ha site na ndudugandu ruo na ndudugandu, bia nuru nu mmanya. (speech act verbs).

Nna Iwueke na Ofoigwe, Igbokwe na Oparaocha, bianu nuru mmanya. (speech act verb).

Asi m egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwa ya. ((I declare)speech act verb).

Ndu mmiri ndu azu, mmiri atala ma azu anwu la. ((I declare)speech act verb).

Omumu nwoke omumu nwanyi. (speech act verb).

Ihe ibe jiri maa mma akwala anyi, azu nuru mmiri ya achaala ibe ya. (speech act verb).

O ji ihe nwata welie aka elu, aka jiekwa ya. (speech act verb).

O huru anyi ebe, anya mmiri akola ya uko n'anya. (speech act verb).

Ihe anyi choro bu udo, idinotu na oganihu. (tone of plea).

O ga adiri anyi n'ile mma oooo. (speech act verb).

English Language Translation of the Data

Heem(a throat clearing sound used to initiate libation and other similar cultural performances)

When this sound is made, the spirits and ancestors pay attention.

The creator of the earth, we greet you.

May the morning bring us good things and throw away the bad ones.

Eke, Orié, Afor, Nkwo (proper names of market days in the Igbo cosmology)

Join hands to bring good things to us.

Let the earth drink wine.

Our late fathers, forefathers, all our late ancestors, come and drink wine.

My fathers: Iwueke, Oforigwe, Igbokwe, and Oparaocha (proper names of the ancestors) come and drink wine.

I say, let the kite perch, let the eagle perch. Anyone that says the other should not, let its wings break.

Let the waters be and let the fish be; the waters must not dry and the fish must not die.

There shall be the birth of both male and female.

What makes others beautiful and happy shall not elude us.

When a fish drinks water, it gives way for others.

He/she, who raises his/her hand while holding what belongs to a child, let his/her hand break.

He/she, who is not happy seeing us, may tears never depart from his/her or her eyes.

What we want is peace, unity and progress.

It shall be well with all of us.

Data Analysis

The analysis here focuses on features of speech act performative that are present in the data. Thus, it has considered our earlier review of the necessary conditions for speech act: contextual or felicity conditions, and textual conditions through speech act or performative verbs.

We begin with the identification of felicity conditions which are central to the creation and sustenance of libation in the Igbo society. Our earlier review of felicity or contextual conditions identified the following:

- a. It must be a commonly accepted convention that the utterance in a particular circumstance will produce a particular effect. By implication, the

circumstance or environment of the utterance recognizes the right of the person to make the utterance in the manner it is made.

- b. Participants in this process must carry out the procedure correctly and completely.
- c. The participants must have certain thoughts, feelings and intentions in consonance with the process.
- d. The participants must behave subsequently in a certain way as expected in the process.

With regards to (a), the Igbo culture recognizes that libation is an exclusive performance for the male elders. As such, the same speeches uttered by a female no matter the age, or a male adolescent or child cannot have the illocutionary force of libation nor the required perlocutionary effect on the observers.

For (b), it is not every utterance from a male adult that is regarded as libation. There are known or ritualized processes that must be adhered to. First, the occasion must call for the performance. Again, there must be the liquid (mostly alcohol) which according to Mensah and Ekawan symbolizes “the restoration and maintenance of cosmic order...”(60). Then, the ancestors, gods and other totemized symbols must be invoked with reverence. Finally, the ritual must be able to evoke feeling of spiritual satisfaction and conviction in both the performer and observers.

For (c) and (d) which depend on (a) and (b), the thought pattern of the participants will be activated and sustained in accordance with the ritual if the performer is assumed to have the right and powers to perform the ritual, and he is carrying out the performance according to the established practice.

The next thing is to examine the textual conditions. Ezeifeke has outlined the following as conditions for realizing performative utterances:

- a. Availability of explicit performative speech act verbs.
- b. Presence of a structure indicating first person (I) + performative verb + object
- c. Presence of illocutionary force indicating devices such as word order to indicate question, command, statement etc. (55)

The conditions stated here suggest that it is not always that performatives are explicitly expressed through performative verbs. This is also in line with Brown and Yule's position that speech act could be direct or indirect depending "on a recognition of the intended perlocutionary effect of an utterance on a particular occasion"(232). Brown and Yule further posited that utterances are capable of performing more than one act. They gave instance with the utterance "Can you speak a little louder", which at one level is a "question about the hearers ability" and at another, "a request for action"(232). By implication, performative does not rely solely on the structure of the utterance, but must consider other contextual influences and their input in interpreting the utterance. Furthermore, Leech cited Austin as concluding that all utterances are performatives "in the sense of constituting a form of action, rather than simply a matter of saying something about the world" (*The Principles*, 176). The action element might not explicitly come from performative verbs, but can be contextually realized through the presence of illocutionary force indicating devices.

In the data for analysis, performative is mostly realized through illocutionary force indicating devices. Let us consider some excerpts.

(i) The creator of the earth, we greet you

What is important here is not the utterance itself (which is the locution), but the illocutionary force that goes with it. Within the context of the utterance, (performance of libation), the statement is beyond mere saying of a thing, but the action (greet) is assumed to have been performed. In the utterance, greeting the creator is assumed to have been performed.

It is noteworthy that the occasion is a communication setting between the person performing the libation and the creator of the earth being addressed, who is also assumed to be listening. Thus, it contains Ezeifeke's first person (We) + an object (you) with an action performed (greet).

(ii) The earth, drink wine, our late fathers and forefathers of all generations, come and drink wine.

In this utterance, the interpretation within the context of use transcends mere uttering of an invitation to drink. It has the illocutionary force of having given the wine to the ancestors and forefathers. This is more so where the physical action of pouring the drink on the ground complements the utterance. Again, the perlocutionary effect of spiritual assurance, that the ancestors have been duly respected, which greets the performer and the onlookers at the end of the exercise, also suggests that it is not a mere utterance but an action duly performed.

(iii) Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. Anyone that says the other should not, let its wings break.

This is one of the wise sayings in Igbo rhetoric used to underscore equity, fairness and justice. There are two parts of such utterance. The first part expresses wish, and the second part proclaims the verdict. It is therefore not only an utterance, but a judgment passed, which must be respected. Where the scene of the libation is a public ceremony, such utterance usually receives verbal response as (*haaa or iseee*), meaning (let it be so), from the audience to show the acceptance of the judgment. It is the same case with other excerpts such as:

(iv) He/she who raises his/her hand while holding something that belongs to a child, let his/her hand break

(v) He/she who is not happy seeing us, may tears never depart from his/her eyes.

Other instances of performative in the data which are contextually determined include:

(vi) There shall be the birth of both male and female children.

(vii) It shall be well with all of us

These are cases of verdicts. The question is whether the person uttering them has the right or power to do so. The answer could be sought in the cultural and spiritual significances of the exercise. It is important to recall that libation is a reserved exercise for male adults. When the exercise is being performed by the right person, and on an appropriate occasion, the context bestows on the performer the power of a spiritual intermediary between the living and the dead, the natural and the

supernatural, the gods and the human. Therefore the person, at that moment, can commune and communicate with the cosmic world to bring supernatural verdicts upon the natural. Such is the illocutionary force, which in turn produces the perlocutionary effect of acceptance in the listeners or audience.

Summary and Conclusion

From the discussions and analyses so far, it has been observed that, first, libation communicates at different levels through multimodal appeal: vocal utterances by the performer, and sometimes by the onlookers or audience who may make verbal utterances of acceptance; the physical performance of the ritual through the pouring of the liquid on the ground; and in some instances, the manner of the flow of the liquid on the floor is also cosmically interpreted.

The language of libation is also characterized by vocatives. The names of the gods and ancestors are directly mentioned and implored. Also, it is characterized by imperatives. Even where the utterance is laced with proverbs and local metaphors, they are presented in categorical imperatives with supplicatory tone that bears respect to the supernatural listener.

Again, the context of libation involves adequate felicity conditions since the participants sincerely believe that the performer of the libation has the right to do so, and the thought patterns of the participants are in consonance with the practice and efficacy of the libation.

Finally, the performance of libation relies strongly on apostrophe, which though creates seeming absurdity, but helps in effecting both the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. According to Leech, apostrophe is used “for the kind of dramatic licence whereby words are addressed to someone who is unable to hear them or reply to them” (...*Poetry*, 185). The addressee is usually absent at the scene. Relating this to libation, the communicative significance is the creation of three participants who, it is spiritually believed, are faithful to the process: the speaker who performs the libation, the listener who is the god or ancestor, and the onlooker who is spiritually dragged into the process by belief. All these are present in libation, and they help creating the communication setting.

The conclusion of the paper is, therefore, that the efficacy of libation does not lie solely in the physical pouring of wine or any liquid, but in the performative feature

of the process. It is the performative index that gives authority to the person performing the exercise, connecting his belief with the other participants: the gods or ancestors and the onlookers. This establishes the illocutionary force. Again, libation produces spiritual satisfaction and assurance in both the performer and the onlookers at the end, thereby producing significant perlocutionary effect.

The utterances of the person performing the libation are not taken to be mere speeches, but the imports are assumed to be performed and realised. By saying “nna nna anyi ha nurukwa mmanyanya” (let our ancestors and forefathers drink wine), the performer has not only uttered the words, but it is taken that he has given the forefathers and the ancestors wine.

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