SULE E. EGYA

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY OF AGE: PROVERB VARIATION IN AGATULAND

Abstract: In the native wisdom of the Agatu people of Benue State, Nigeria, proverbs belong to the domain of the elders' speech. That is, there is an understood linguistic *chasm* between the older generation and the younger generation in matters of speech wisdom. Increasingly, with a gradual sense of rebellion, the younger people in Agatuland are also speaking in proverbs, often to the disapproval of the elderly ones who think proverbs should come *naturally* to a person as the person reaches that "age of speaking in proverbs". What is of interest to this writer in the younger people's attempt to speak in proverbs are the proverb variations that they consciously produce to suit the peculiarities of their generation. That is the crux of this paper.

Keywords: African; Agatuland; Nigerian; proverb variation; speech wisdom; youth; generation ga

I

In recent years, among the Agatu people of Benue State, Nigeria, proverbs have experienced what we may call a transition from the domain of the high to that of the low, i.e. from being the preserve of the elderly people to being a realm of speech in which the youths "forage" into in order to experience speech-wisdom. The established linguistic chasm between the speech delivery of the elders and that of the young people shrinks as a result of the adjusted speech habit of the youths. It is a self-satisfying incursion by the youths into the elders' proverbial realm, breaking the boundary of age the elders consider vital to the native wisdom of social stratification. The youths break the boundary with enthusiasm, considering it ego-boosting to partake in a proverbial behaviour deliberately denied them. In this paper, I attempt to identify the gap between the proverbs spoken by the elderly ones, which may be regarded as the real, traditional proverbs and their versions spoken by the youths which, I in-

tend to establish, have undergone a process of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic change. It will be seen that in spite of the transition, the pragmatic aim of the proverb is achieved in the sense that the versions used by the youths serve the same purposes as those used by the elders. The variation offers the youths a sociolinguistic aura that distinguishes what one may call the *traditional* youths from the *cosmopolitan* youths of Agatuland. The youths who consider themselves traditional are those inclined to create proverb variations to show, apart from boosting their egos, their closeness to their communal and cultural philosophy. Proverb variation, whether positive or negative, is largely functional, not only giving leverage to the youths in their speech, but also expressing certain social motives that are beyond mere signification.

II

Like all African languages, the Agatu language, a dialect of the Idoma language of Benue State, is rich in proverbs whose sources, as Idris O. O. Amali has pointed out, include "poetry, songs, talking instruments, individuals, natural phenomena, riddles, folktales, discussions, debates, [and] interviews" (1). In spite of the diverse sources of proverbs among the Agatu people, it is on the lips of the elderly ones that proverbs are mostly heard. A proverb, to these elders, has a nature of esotericism; only the elders can preserve and maintain its structure and meaning, guarding it from the propensity of the youths to be flippant and exuberant with speech. Recently, I asked an elderly man called Ibakwu Osu who lived in Usha village of Agatu local government area, Benue State, why only the elderly people spoke proverbs, even though today youths have started producing the "corrupt" versions of some proverbs which they interspersed in their speeches. Ibakwu Osu said that as a matter of fact, proverbs, considered as speech-wisdom in Agatuland, came to one naturally as he/she grew older. He confirmed that the elderly ones frowned at the flippant (and by this he meant "linguistically damaged") use of proverbs by the youths. While he did not as much frown at the use of proverbs by the youths, he thought the youths should be patient until proverbs came to them

naturally when they reached the age. He however admitted that there were precocious youths who could *genuinely* use proverbs as the elders.

After listening to some young men in Agatuland, mostly under the trees in their villages where they sat, told stories, chat about everyday issues, and exchange banters, I decided to collect the proverbs studied here from elder Ibakwu Osu. I insisted he gave me the proverbs in their original, traditional forms. With the original proverbs, I decided to fraternise with the young men, trying as much as I could to introduce issues that would make them respond with the proverb variations of the proverbs I had. While some of them spoke the proverb variations self-consciously, others spoke naturally, giving the impression that they had been using them for quite some time. It was as much for the purposes of passing across messages as for the purposes of amusing themselves with the *tongue* of the elders that they created and patronised proverb variations. Proverb variation is therefore a deliberate process or creation by youths in Agatuland.

In his study of the shifting nature of Yoruba proverbs in which he refers to proverb variations as "postproverbials", Aderemi Raji-Oyelade implies that the influence of cosmopolitanism on the younger generation has made the Yoruba proverb to move away from what Ruth Finnegan calls "relative fixity" (393). He opines that

> "[the] emergence of postproverbials in contemporary Yoruba society is undoubtedly the effect of the interplay of orality and literacy-modernity, the critical correspondence between an older, puritanistic generation and a younger, disruptive, and somewhat banalistic generation" (75).

This suggests a certain tension between the older generation and the younger one, which is rather supported by Ibakwu Osu's claims above. Indeed, Raji-Oyelade captures this tension, no matter how mild, in the phrase "playful blasphemy" which, according to him, is derived from the understanding that the older generation in Yorubaland considers any "wilful undermining of [proverbs'] rigid structure" (75) as blasphemous, although among the younger generation "the conscious undermining, or subversion, of traditional proverbs is generally regarded as play-

ful" (75). Similarly, in her study of proverb variation among the women of Kasena in Ghana, Helen Yitah talks of "joking behaviour" or "proverbial jesting"(234) which is the starting point of the phenomenon of proverb variation that overtly has a feministic function. Yitah writes,

> It has become common in joking situations to hear Kasena women subvert both the form and meaning of existing proverbs in order to thereby draw attention to gender inequities, to address misogynist perceptions, or to arrogate themselves certain powers not conferred by traditional society" (235).

Clearly, proverb variation, as we have seen in the case of Raji-Oyelade and Yitah, starts from playfulness, although it is also clear that motives exist behind proverb variation, pointing to the overtly pragmatic nature of proverbs.

As in the case of Yoruba and Kasena, proverb variation in Agatuland begins from playfulness or joking situations. Beyond that, there is also the consciousness among the younger generation in Agatuland to speak like the elders which is purely a matter of envy. In a way, there is a kind of arrogance which comes with the expression that "I can also speak in proverbs which the elders have kept away from me." It goes beyond an epiphanic submission or sublimity in the sense that the younger generation expresses triumph over a concerted effort to keep them unwise in a land seething with speech-wisdom. A point to note here is that, unlike in the case of Kasena women, the Agatu youths do not use the proverb variations to *get* at the elders who are custodians of the original proverbs. Rather, they use the proverb variations most often, as we will see in the proverb variations studied here, to settle scores among themselves and exhibit manhood and egoism. Indeed, if you are an Agatu youth who grows up in the city and if you have no grasp of the speech tradition, your mates who grow up in the villages have a tendency to *intimidate* you with proverb variations, reducing you to an outsider, a diasporan, who is yet to know your folkways. Given this premise, proverb variation in Agatuland is not, as Raji-Oyelade's study shows, a product of "the interplay of orality and literacy-modernity" (75). The variation, in structure, meaning and rhetoric, does not suggest an

influence of western education although there are a few exceptions. There is no doubt that Western civilisation and foreign religions have exerted influences on the folkways of the Agatu people and have, consequently, corrupted the *sanctity* of the Agatu proverbs. However, proverb variations in Agatuland are a conscious invention of the youths to appropriate for themselves the wisdom they think they deserve, and which should not be *hidden* from them on account of age.

III

In considering some Agatu proverbs that have variations as a result of the common use to which the youths in Agatuland have put them, what should be understood from the outset is that these variations are not static; they are susceptible to further variations. Indeed, as long as speech is a *living* thing among the people, other variations of these proverbs may occur, and as casually as conversations occur among peer groups in Agatuland. Proverb variations, therefore, are subjects of specific speech continuum, manifesting themselves in a sociolinguistic domain. Below I give the original proverb and its interpretation, and the proverb variation and its interpretation; a brief commentary on the difference in structure and meaning follows each pair.

Proverb 1: Akaman ukpoci g'oce go gwan ne, a go ihyepu no.

> Because you say another man's tree should not bear fruits, yours will not even produce leaves.

Proverb variation: Akaman ukpoci g'oce go gwan ne, a go ibu mnajen.

> Because you say another man's tree should not bear fruits, yours will not even grow.

This proverb is spoken to evil men and women who do not want to see progress in the community. Once a person is known to have bewitched his neighbour or relation, the community becomes curious of what the evil doer is going to achieve in life. This proverb indicates the Agatu people's belief in the law of retribution. Semantically, the proverb variation presents a bleaker repercussion to the evil doer. In other words, the youths do want the evil doer to see the grave consequences of the man who

bewitches his neighbour or relations. This may be a result of the moral and ethical decadence in Agatuland, in this generation, caused by materialism since the militarisation of Nigeria whose most destructive index has been the superiorisation of a moneyed tradition over human dignity. Some of the elderly ones in the community have taken to bewitching the children of other men who have chosen to pursue education, foreseeing that they will turn out better than their own children. Among the youths, there are those who are either not gifted for education or choose a less dignified path, and envy those who are educated to the extent of bewitching them. This situation, as instances have shown in Agatuland, is heightened by the undue riches that the educated ones flaunt around as a result of corruption.

Proverb 2: In lipihi ti g'eho me, oji ca wa g'iyu ge

> I have been in a market with bees, it is nothing to be with flies.

Proverb variation: In lipihi ti g'eho me, iyu ijama tu kwun no.

> I have been in a market with bees, flies dare not come near me.

This is a proverb for the boastful youth. Beyond being competitive, most Agatu youths, especially the male, quarrel and fight over women, farmland, family feud, fishing pond, and football matches. In such situations, they find themselves trading this proverb. He who utters this proverb means that he is evidently stronger than the person he confronts, and, if at all a fight occurs, it will take him no time to win. The proverb variation, commonly used by the youths in Agatuland today, expresses a deadlier aggression of the speaker to the supposed weaker person. In most cases, this proverb provokes the youths into a fight, especially as cowardice is generally mocked at in Agatuland. Interestingly, the proverb variation does not substitute the metaphor "flies" with something else, but concentrates on the degree of the hostility implied in the proverb.

Proverb 3: Oda ni by'oi g'ofye w'ogbo gi j'ije lo, ebo ni doka g'ene nu ti g'adanu ma

What brings the son of a slave to the dance circle has made people to ask who his mother and father are.

Proverb variation: Oda ni b'yoi g'ogbele w'ogbo gi j'ije lo, ebo ni doka g'ene nu ti g'adanu ma.

What brings the son of a mad man to the dance circle has made people to ask who his mother and father are.

This is a proverb meant to check the excesses of people who have no authentic lineages, considered vital in Agatuland. Beyond that, however, it is also meant to guard people who have committed moral, ethical, cultural and criminal offences from being judges over others. In their variation, the youths substitute "a mad man" for "a slave" in order to make the import of the proverb more pungent and caustic. Indeed, it is assumed, among the Agatu people, that a slave is far better than a mad man; to be a son of a slave is, therefore, better than to be a son of a mad man. The proverb is used to confront, as most of the proverbs used by the youths in Agatuland, and may provoke an outrage from the person confronted. The dignity of a child in Agatuland often emanates from the child's family. A man is measured, most often, by the family name he has. It is a society where everybody avoids being known as a son of a slave or a son of a mad man.

Proverb 4: Oh'eho g'ogwu ikwampe no.

A hired farmer cannot plant pawpaw.

Proverb variation: Oh'eho g'ogwu iwondu g'enu no.

A hired farmer is not the owner of the hoe.

Among the Agatu people, hired farmers are underrated and mocked at. It is assumed that a farmer who cannot farm for himself or his family but moves from place to place tilling the ground in order to earn money does not earn respect from the community. This is a proverb the elderly ones in the community often use to challenge the younger ones so that they can be composed and settle down to a life that is befitting of communal respect. While pawpaw is the metaphor that conveys the ownership of land and other landed properties in the version used by the elderly people, the youths prefer to strip the hired farmer of the

implement he takes from farm to farm. What this implies is that even as a hired farmer he has to be given a hoe before he can earn some money. Really, the satire here is that the hired farmer who lives by the hoe does not even know the importance of possessing one. If he does not know the importance of possessing a hoe, he cannot know the importance of possessing a farm through which he can establish his life since the major occupation of the Agatu people is farming.

Proverb 5: Onye j'efu ni by'ola jaluce?

Who knows the firewood that can keep fire for the community?

Proverb variation: Ony j'efu ni c'ola fye?

Who knows the firewood that can give more fire?

Youths who display an exemplary life are seen as "firewood that can keep fire for the community." This is about the future of the community. Elders entrust the spirit and truth of the community in the hands of youths who have proven their integrity and manhood. Such youths are given the art and craft of masquerades, are given opportunities to participate in the ruling council of the community, are taken into confidence about the most guarded secrets of the community, and are generally looked upon as the useful elders of tomorrow. Every father in the community hopes that his sons fall into this category. In an ambience made competitive for the youths to display acceptable qualities, some people feel underrated perhaps because they are naturally not able to measure up to certain yardstick. This proverb then becomes vital. The proverb variation clearly embeds the typical nature of competitiveness among the Agatu youths where the thrust is not whether one is going to be a formidable "fire" for the community, but the degree to which one considers himself a better "fire" than others.

Proverb 6: Iyenji Kaman owo ijanu igbepa no

The hare says rain will not beat him twice.

Proverb variation: Iyenji Kaman owo janu igbepa, anu lei ganu nmo.

The hare says if rain beats him twice, it will commit suicide.

The hare is simply displaying bravery characteristic of the youths here. Similar to proverb 2 above, most young men use this proverb to boast about their strengths in certain things. It can also be seen as the Agatu equivalent of the English saying: once bitten, twice shy. It is all about caution, and a determination to stand against any further occurrence of something deemed harmful. When this proverb is spoken by the elderly ones in the Agatu society, it is most likely to be in the second sense in which wisdom is implied. In their variation, the youths do not just stop at implying wisdom, they also imply a certain boastfulness hinged on the all-powerful nature of the heroism common among the younger ones in Agatuland. Committing suicide is pushing the stake to the extreme, a situation rooted in the exuberance of the youths.

Proverb 7: Oyi g'ogbeha it'Atu no.

The child of the poor does not wear Atu.

Proverb variation: Oyi g'ogbeha iy'inapi no.

The child of the poor does not wear nappy.

"Atu" is a locally made woven cloth which is highly valued in Agatuland. In those days, it was only the rich people that wore it because of how expensive it was. It became a material with which people measured the riches of others and it was quite uncommon for a poor person to wear it. Similar to proverb 3, the import of this proverb is that one should learn to, as the English say, cut his cloth according to his size. You do not hanker after something, especially a piece of materialism, you cannot have. In Agatuland, the elders use this proverb to call to order the over-ambitious and dreamy youths in the community. The proverb variation here may be seen as a matter of linguistic innovation as "nappy" is a recent linguistic item that finds its way into the Agatu language with the advent of Western civilisation. But the choice of "nappy" as a substitute for "Atu" reinforces the functional dimension of the variation in the sense that "nappy", apart from being a Western piece of materialism, is nothing compared to "Atu" in matters of material values even in the present society.

Like some other proverb variations earlier discussed, this one is aimed at provoking whomever the proverb is spoken *against*.

Proverb 8: Ekwuchala iy'ole n ne, aje j'Owuna

Because Ekwuchala is not at home, Owuna can brag around.

Proverb variation: Ekwuchala iy'ole n ne, Owuna ga gbele me

As Ekwuchala is not at home, Owuna has gone crazy

Ekwuchala and Owuna are two masquerades, that is, masks that appear either during the funeral ceremony of an elderly person in the society or during the popular masquerade festival called Eje G'Ekwu (Wine of the Masquerade). The two masquerades have a number of things in common: they both carry whips or canes with which they lash at children and youths on their way; they both hardly walk, only run or trot around; they are both feared because of their temper. The major difference between the two, apart from their clothing, is that Owuna, always having a flutist at his behest, may be seen dancing to the tune of the flute, but Ekwuchala does not dance at all. The Agatu people consider Ekwuchala superior to Owuna because the former is harsher, and far more temperamental. He hardly talks and even adults and elderly people are wary of his whips which he carries in both hands. It is the preserve of Ekwuchala that the day he appears there will be no other masquerade in the village/community. But usually Owuna will be found moving around even on the day Ekwuchala is expected to appear. Once Ekwuchala appears and calls out loudly to the community that he has come, Owuna disappears wherever he is. The import of this proverb is that there can be no two masters in a given circumstance. This proverb is spoken, with sarcasm, to a younger or junior person who takes charge of an event in the absence of an elderly or senior person who ought to be in charge of the event. The variation from the youths, whom this proverb is mostly spoken to, emphasises that if the opportunity presents itself, they will not only take advantage of it but do so in their own youthful way. For them, the absence of Ekwuchala, a symbol of harsh authority, is one opportunity that must be fully utilised.

Proverb 9: Iyenji tei g'aho ne, o l'aho pye

Because the hare asked for ear, he got it in big size

Proverb variation: Iyenji tei g'aho ne, o py'olodu g'aho

Because Iyenji asked for ear, he is a wealthy owner of ear

For anyone who has seen a hare, this proverb is self-explanatory. The proverb is quite common in Agatuland and it is used often to mock at the stupidity of the younger ones in the society. When a young person insists on doing something or taking an action that his parents and/or elder brothers and sisters do not approve of, such as marrying a woman deemed unsuitable for marriage, and such a young person faces serious troubles as consequences of his actions, this proverb is used against him. The variation is interesting in the sense that the young person is also using this proverb to show that even if his/her decision is unacceptable to his parents and/or his older siblings, there are some benefits for him which may put him at a greater advantage than the others. One interesting way the younger people in Agatuland have used this is when a young man marries an educated and civilised woman (considered by most elderly people to be too sophisticated to be submissive to a man) who eventually turns out to be a blessing in the sense that she can make economic and material contribution, in a civilised form, to the running of the family.

Proverb 10: Anya l'ewa, amma onya yeha

There are many women but there is no wife

Proverb variation: Anya l'ewa, anya w'onya

There are many women but women are always wives

This is a proverb that is often found on the lips of parents whose son is planning to choose a wife. The parents use the proverb, in their view, to guide their son in making the right choices. The import of this proverb is that not all women can function as wife, especially in the way that the Agatu people consider a woman to be a wife. For a woman to be worthy of marriage, or of being a wife, she must be humble, must respect her husband and his people, including all his younger siblings. She must recognise

that she is not only married to her husband alone but to the entire family, and must attend to the request, such as demand for food or help, of every member of the family. Because of the services that a wife must render to her husband's people, there often arises a situation in which the wife, probably feeling that the task is too much for her, often rebels and when she does that she is considered a bad wife. But most educated Agatu young men have come to realise that the society demands too much of the wife, and will rather side with their wife even in cases of rebellion. Any young man who is ready for that will counter his parents' proverb with the proverb variation. The proverb variation asserts that any woman is indeed a wife, depending on how she is being treated. The variation is a way of rebelling against the cultural conception of a wife in Agatuland. This is no doubt as a result of Western education. Most educated young men in Agatuland do not think their wives should be subjected to servitude and drudgery, as the case is with the older, uneducated people.

IV

Proverb variation in Agatuland, as this study has attempted to show, occurs from two dimensions: the linguistic dimension that asserts the *livingness* of speech, the sociolinguistic continuum that begets innovations in speech situations giving rise to the natural desire to *alter* what has long been existing through a social behaviour; and what we may consider as the functional dimension in which proverbs undergo a variation-process in order to satisfy the ego or motive of the user. Proverbs, it is incontestable, are a part of a functional speech, inherently situational, pragmatic and targeted at achieving a purpose. In this premise, we can understand what a proverb-preserver, as some Agatu elders are, may see as a *frivolous* use of proverbs among the youths in Agatuland. It is worth stressing that in Agatuland, the elders make *unspoken* efforts to deny the younger ones from using proverbs because they think the younger ones are not mature enough to use proverbs. It is agreed that this incursion of the youths into proverbial speech resulting in the variations of proverbs is entirely a new thing. Elder Ibakwu Osu admitted that when they were youths, they waited for that age when proverbs

came to one naturally. Evidently, the youths, whether considered as impatient or not, feel they can break the boundary of age and acquire the speech-wisdom available to them. It is expected that proverb variation will continue to be a speech reality among the newer generations to come in which case variations will be determined by the social matrices of a generation.

Works Cited

Amali, Idris O. O. "Sources of Idoma Proverbs: A Guide to Paremiographer." *Proverbium*. 16. (1999): 1-19.

Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford and Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Raji-Oyelade, Aderemi. "Postproverbials in Yoruba Culture: A Playful Blasphemy." *Research in African Literatures*. 30. 1. (1999): 74-82.

Yitah, Helen. "Throwing Stones in Jest: Kasena Women's 'Proverbial' Revolt." *Oral Tradition*. 21. 2. (2006): 233-249.

Sule E. Egya
Georg Forster Research Fellow
Department of African Studies
Humboldt University
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin
Germany
Email: es.egya@yahoo.com