

Pragmatic Inferencing in a Social Action: An Ethnography of a Marriage Proposal Among the Yoruba of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This paper reports a speech event among the Yoruba-speaking people of southwestern Nigeria. It describes and analyses the activity of 'writing in' and tries to explain the verbal and nonverbal routines and ritualized behaviour involved in the activity using both the ethnography of speaking approach and interpretive framework. The paper concludes that the knowledge of some Yoruba cultural rules and norms is critical to both the understanding as well as successful participation in the social activity of 'writing in'.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of everyday social encounters have shown that these encounters are very often characterized by some speech or communicative events. These events themselves are not only structured but are also governed by certain cultural expectations and rules. Wedding receptions, naming ceremonies or christening, cock-tail parties and so on, which are part of the features of everyday encounters, have their own rules and specific culturally defined expectations. For example, differences exist between the character as well as norms of a wedding reception and a child naming or christening ceremony among the Yoruba. Thus, it is very crucial for a participant at any of such events not only to know the cultural norms and rules governing them but also to master these norms and rules in order to behave appropriately in similar social situations (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1982).

In this paper, an attempt will be made to report an event of a marriage proposal among the Yoruba of Nigeria. Two factors motivated this study. The first factor was that I was fascinated with what looked to me, as a participant-observer, like a huge joke or game but wondered how it continued to succeed. The second factor was also that the event looked to me as if, for the first time, I was watching people within the culture in which I grew up acting out a familiar situation. To me, they seemed not to be aware that they were 'acting'. As a Yoruba person who had on several occasions witnessed Yoruba traditional social events as a layperson rather than as a sociolinguist or a

linguist-anthropologist, I was suddenly taken aback by what I saw as 'acting' (both verbal and nonverbal) at the event which I report in this paper. I had thought to myself during this particular event that those of us who were participating seemed to be 'fooling' ourselves. This was because I had also thought that we knew what we had come to do at the house we were visiting and we could have gone ahead to place our request before the prospective bride's parents rather than resort to 'playing some game'. Furthermore, I had asked myself questions which anthropologists and ethnographers of speaking or communication had asked and would always ask. These questions, which very often also form the framework of explanation of speakers' behaviour in communicative situations include: why do language users go through what often look like avoidable routines and ritualized behaviour in order to enact some social interaction? Why should we, in the particular event described in this paper, go through what seemed to be so many 'unnecessary' and 'meaningless' processes in order to make a marriage proposal? In other words, for the present study, are there meanings underlying the ritual of a marriage proposal among the Yoruba people which are not readily available to a visitor or a first-time observer?

The focus of this study is, therefore, to seek to explain the verbal and nonverbal routines and ritualized behaviour in writing a letter of intent to marry among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The approach to the study is the ethnography of speaking and the framework of analysis is both descriptive and interpretive; locating the analysis

of the event within the larger Yoruba socio-cultural context. As noted by Wolfram and Wolfram (1983: 218), in the study of question asking, the notion of 'obvious' and 'non-obvious' information seems to relate to the role of language as it interacts with pragmatics. They argue that we use our real life experience to determine what is an appropriate and an inappropriate question. In other words, the interpretation of what is information or not in exchanges is pragmatics-driven. In other words, to be able to make meanings out of the interactions in Yoruba practice of marriage proposal we require to make some pragmatic inferencing of interlocutors' verbal behaviours.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The event that gave impetus to this paper took place in Osogbo, the capital of Osun State in the Yoruba-speaking region of Nigeria. The Yoruba-speaking people found mainly in the South-western part of Nigeria number about twenty million today. There are about fifteen sub-ethnic or dialect groups but all understand a commonly spoken koine. In marriage practice, many of the Yoruba sub-ethnic or dialect groups were, until relatively recently, endogamous. This is in the sense that people often married from their own Yoruba sub-ethnic group. In earlier times, it was not a common practice, for example, for an Ekiti-Yoruba dialect speaker to marry from the Egba-Yoruba dialect group or an Oyo-Yoruba to marry from Ijebu. However, as a result of urbanization and education, the practice of endogamous marriage is rapidly fading. Today, Yoruba people of different sub-ethnic backgrounds do inter-marry. This is particularly so in the large urban settlements. The event reported in the present study was between an Ekiti-Yoruba (Eastern Yoruba) speaking adult male and an Oyo-Yoruba (North-west Yoruba) speaking adult female who had met in the city of Ife (Central Yoruba) where neither of them came from originally.

Traditional Marriage Practice Among the Yoruba

To a large extent, in the western world today, it might look strange to want to write a letter to ask a girl's hand in marriage. One meets a girl, one falls in love and proposes at a dinner or lunch date. The proposal is made directly to the girl

involved. It could be argued that this was not the case, among Europeans, in earlier times when marriage often involved families. Furthermore, it can be said that the changes found in marriage practices in the western world, today, are attributable to industrialization and urbanization. Among the Yoruba of western Nigeria today, the contact with Islam, Christianity and the western world has also produced changes in the traditional marriage practice.

In pre-colonial Yoruba society, marriages were considered contracted between two families. That is to say that when a man had reached the age of taking a wife and a girl had also attained the age to being taken as a wife, it was the duty of their parents to arrange for their marriage. On the one hand, the man and the girl involved did not know each other until the arrangement had been concluded. On the other hand, the man and the girl could get to know each other only through an intermediary called *alarina* who was somebody who knew the two families very well. The couple could get to talk at the '*alarina*'s house. If they both agreed to be husband and wife, it was the duty of the *alarina* to report back to the parents of both the man and the girl. The parents would then arrange for '*itoro*' ('asking for' the girl's hand in marriage).

The '*itoro*' usually took place in one day. The parents of the man would arrange to meet the parents of the fiancée. They would take along with them gifts for the fiancée's parents which could include two gourds of palm wine, one jar of (home-brew) beer, some kolanuts, *orogbo* (bitter kola) and some amount of money (Ogunbowale, 1979:2). These gifts were to be shared later among the extended family of the fiancée's parents. It was during this visit that the fiancée's parents were to give their consent (referred to as '*ijohun*': 'parents' consent to marriage') to the marriage proposal. There was no formal letter other than the information the '*alarina*' had passed on to both parents before that day.

The Event

The communicative event that is characterized by 'writing in' among the Yoruba people today is also referred to as '*itoro omo*' ('asking for' one's daughter's hand in marriage) and the particular activity of going to 'ask for' is referred to as *gbigbe leta* ('the delivery of letter' of proposal). This is a planned but not necessarily a

practice that is rehearsed before it is performed. It is planned in the sense that a man about to 'write in' informs his prospective parents-in-law about his intention. The parents-in-law would then fix a date, usually on a weekend, to receive the letter. The 'receiving' of the letter called '*gbigba leta*', often involves preparation to host (usually feasting) those of the party of the suitor. The preparation may also include passing the information on to the other members of the parents-in-law's extended family or lineage, who are expected to be present at the event.

The delivery and reception of a letter of a marriage proposal generally go through some ordered sequences of performance which seem to parallel play acting with its scenes, acts and parts to be played. It involves singing (opening and closing glees), dancing and certain move-ments. It has five major act components:

- (i) *opening*; marked by the announcement of the arrival of suitor's party;
- (ii) *presentation of self and purpose* which involves the introduction of suitor's party and the purpose of visit;
- (iii) *reading of the letter*;
- (iv) *response of fiancée's parents* which is to formally grant the request of the suitor and
- (v) *closing* which is marked by the public giving of the bride.

One should mention that between each of these acts are embedded other minor acts such as testing the suitor, singing session, exhortation and prayer and identification of bride. In effect, the event of "writing in" is in some sense constitutes a formal communicative situation involving some specific procedures and unstated rules for it to function as not an everyday casual activity.

During the particular event reported in this paper, I had been co-opted into a group to deliver a letter to the family of a friend's prospective bride. The preparation for the delivery of that letter involved making arrangements for constituting members of the suitor's party. Unlike in earlier times, it is not expected that the parents of the suitor should be part of this party. The party of the suitor in this particular case was made up mainly of his sisters, their friends and a few of his own male friends. We were to deliver the letter at two o'clock in the afternoon - taking off from the suitor's residence for a forty-kilometre journey. We left in a convoy of cars with the women leading; carrying with them the letter and gifts which included wine, biscuits and soft drinks.

We, however, arrived late at the home of the suitor's parents-in-law (henceforth, parents). It would be of interest to note that, among the Yoruba, the make of the cars and the length of the convoy on the road to '*itoro*' and a wedding are often construed as markers of the status of a suitor or a man about to wed. These are important items for impression management to assure the bride's parents that their daughter is not marrying into poverty.

We approached the parents' house singing to announce our arrival. When we got to the door steps, we were met by a representative of the parents who heralded our coming (henceforth referred to as the herald). He told us that we were already late for the delivery of the letter. Although we apologized for our lateness, he shut the door against us. We had to pay some money (a kind of toll) to this 'gatekeeper' (the herald) to open the door for us. When we were eventually allowed into the living room where the ceremony was scheduled to hold, we found that seating arrangements had been made and that members of the parents' extended family were already seated. We proceeded to greet them with the women among us going down on their knees while the men stooped instead of prostrating on all fours as was required of them. We were however, told by the herald that we had missed our way and had come to the anniversary of the parents' own wedding. Although at first I fell for this information believing it was factual, I was told later that it was not only untrue but that it was a ploy to demonstrate to us, the suitor's party, that the bride's parents were not too eager to give away their daughter in marriage. To demonstrate eagerness would be to lose face. This is because eagerness could be construed as either lack of love for their daughter or a sign of lack on the part of the parents who must be very happy to transfer the burden of feeding their daughter to another man. Again, we had to appeal to the parents (the men among us prostrated while the women again went down on their knees) that we had come for a very important matter and that we should be attended to. At this juncture, a woman from the parents' party (henceforth referred to as parents' voice or PV) then asked what matter it was that had brought us to their home. Our representative (henceforth also referred to as suitor's voice or SV), also a woman, now down on her knees in front of the suitor's party, said:

SV: awon egbon wa

awon aburo wa
awon ore wa
Layo ni ko jeun lati bi ojo meta bayii
Nigbati a bere pe se ko si, won wa so fun
wa pe awon ri ododo elemii kan ni ile nying
ti o wu awon, ti won si fe ja, ti won si n wa
ona ati ja.

(English gloss)

Our elder brother

Our younger brother Our friend Layo it is
who has refused to eat for some days now.
When we asked him what the matter was,
he told us that he had just discovered a
flower in your household which he would
like to pick but had not found the means or
way to the house to enable him pick the
flower.

PV: Inu mi dun ganan, se ododo le fe ja? Olorun
se ododo la gbin kaakiri ile yii, e wa lo ja
abi n ba nyin ja kan?

(English gloss)

I am quite pleased to hear you. Did you
say you want to pick a flower? Thank God,
we have planted flowers all around our
house, you can go outside and pick as much
as you want. Or do you want me to give
you a hand?

SV: O ti o, ododo elemi ni a wi

No. the flower we want has soul (life)

PV: Ododo taa ni naa lemii.

The flower that we have also has life.

SV: O ti o eyi ti a wi lenu, o loju

No, the one we are talking about has a
mouth and eyes.

PV: O daa n'gba yen, ki ti e ni oruko ile ti e wa
yii?

Good then, tell me what is the name of this lineage
(in which you have come to pick a flower)?

SV: Alasegbe,

(SV gave Alasegbe which is the name of
the father of the girl)

PV: Iro, o o ti se iwadii to.

Wrong name, you have not done your
investigation thoroughly.

(SV went to ask members of the bride's
extended family outside the reception area
and came back with the correct name).

PV: Kini oriki idile yii?

What is the praise-name of this lineage (to
which you have come to pick a flower)?

(SV did not know and again had to go
outside the reception area to inquire. She
reported back with the correct praise-

name).

There are a few important points worth noting
from the exchanges above. These are first; that
the suitor's party did not present the letter
immediately they were allowed into the bride's
parents' home. Secondly, we would have
observed a particular style of speech, which could
be framed as 'teasing talk'. The 'teasing talk'
frame was made up of questions which functioned
to facilitate the success of the event rather than
attempts at actually seeking information.
Although the letter of proposal had not been
mentioned, the intention to seek the hand of
someone in marriage had been made known by a
subtle reference to the bride in the expression of
wanting to pick a flower from the family's garden.

The third point of significance in the
exchanges is that it was reported that the suitor
had been unable to eat for some days. This
information was actually false but it would be
difficult to interpret this as a deliberate flouting
of one pragmatic principle of co-operation – not
saying what one believes to be false. This is
because we can appeal to the Yoruba people use
of the claim of inability to eat (*ko le jeun* : 'has
been unable to eat') to demonstrate one's worries
or seriousness about a particular undertaking or
event. In the present event, the suitor could have
been unable to eat because he was confronted with
the possibility of face loss in the event of the
rejection of his proposal. The phrase *ko le jeun*
was also used to demonstrate how the suitor
valued the task at hand – having the hand of his
prospective bride.

The fourth notable reading from the exchanges
is that when the parent's voice demanded that
we gave the name of the bride's family, the name
of her father was mentioned. This name was,
however, rejected until we provided the name of
her lineage. In other words, the information we
gave was considered wrong. It required the
knowledge of the Yoruba traditional family
system to be able to interpret the rejection as
deriving from the fact that we failed to note that
among the Yoruba, the name of a family (here
rendered *idile*: 'lineage') expected in this type of
event or context is usually the ancestral name,
that is, the name of the progenitor of the extended
family or lineage which we had earlier failed to
recall.

After having "passed" the test of
demonstrating how much we knew of the girl's
family background in order to qualify to marry

her, it was our turn, that is the suitor's party, to provide her family information about ourselves: whom and what we were. Here the onus was on us to tell the girl's parents the suitor's family background, his occupation and his place of work. We provided the required information but when asked where the suitor came from, our voice (SV) mentioned the town where the suitor was born and in which he had lived for the major part of his life. That information was rejected by the parents-in-law's voice (PV) on the ground that that was not the place of the suitor's descent but rather where he was born. PV claimed that the suitor's parents came originally from another town to settle and work in their present home. In other words, the correct information about the background of the suitor should have been the place of descent of his parents.

At the end of these introductions we had thought that we could deliver the letter. However, PV felt that we had not demonstrated enough seriousness in our quest and demanded that we sang some Yoruba songs. This was probably a test of how much Yoruba traditional or folksongs we knew. Although the songs we sang were Yoruba church songs, PV did not object to the songs. Two reasons could be responsible. The first reason could be that because members of the bride's family are Christians and did not mind joining in singing those songs. The second probable reason could be that they themselves knew little or no traditional Yoruba songs. The rendering of the songs was followed by the presentation of the letter.

THE LETTER

The letter of proposal that we brought was written in English and printed in gold colour. It was wrapped up in a heart-shaped silk material and tied with a blue ribbon. As our voice, SV, wanted to deliver the letter PV refused to take it from her on the ground that the bride to whom the letter was meant could not be reached so easily. This obviously was not true because we later found out that she was kept hidden in one of the rooms in the compound. PV proceeded to ask us for some money to send the letter by express mail delivery. The desire to collect money from us, as the tradition in this type of event, was one reason for giving this 'obvious' false information. It is important to mention that although we were aware that PV did not tell the truth, we paid her

because it would have been infelicitous under the circumstance to tell us that the girl was in the house. An excerpt from the letter, which was addressed to the father of the bride, reads:

Dear Sir,

In the name of Christian spirit joy, we have great pleasure in informing you of the courtship between our son (name) and your daughter (name) and to acquaint you of their intention of being joined in a holy wedlock.

We are sincerely delighted that our son has chosen your daughter to be his wife, and we cherish the connection which this union will forge between the two families.

May I at this juncture respectfully request the consent of your family for the hand of your daughter in a holy wedlock, at a date to be decided later.

Signed
representative of the suitor's
extended family.

Although all the participants in this event understood the English language, PV accused the suitor's party of having used English, a foreign language, in our parents-in-law's home and that the onus was on us to interpret what we had written (*eni ti o ba so oyinbo ni ile aana o di dandan ki o tunmo re*). In other words, PV chastised us for violating a rule of behaviour, among the Yoruba, which seems to stipulate that one does not use, in the presence of one's parents-in-law, a language which they do not understand. When one member of the suitor's party thereafter offered to do the interpretation of the letter PV feigned anger as she considered the offer an affront. She claimed that we had behaved as if there were no literate members of their family who were capable of interpreting our letter. She decided to do the reading but surcharged us for opting to do the interpretation herself, on our behalf. At the end of her reading and interpretation of the letter to the hearing of all participants and observers, we were all asked to sing some songs together to close the first part of the event. The suitor's party was then asked to depart to come back in six months for the reply to their letter of request. We however thought that the period was too long and proceeded to plead that we be given the reply that same day. We left the living room and went outside the house to allow members of the bride's party to deliberate on the letter.

ACCEPTANCE OF PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

We went back to the house after about ten minutes. Again, we sang and danced on our entry. PV told us that it was the turn of the father of our prospective bride to respond to our proposal. The father, who addressed us in common spoken Yoruba, said that he was very happy to announce that our proposal was acceptable to him and the other members of the extended family because every parent would pray for his/her daughter to be married. This acceptance speech was greeted with profuse compliments and the song:

Baa se fe ko ri
Bee naa lo ri
Emi la o ni yo si
(English gloss)

It is the way we wanted it
And that is the way it has come
Why should we not celebrate?

After that speech, the bride's father urged us to return home immediately since he had given us the answer to our request. It is worth noting, however, that up to the time the acceptance speech was given, the bride had been kept inside a room in the house where the event took place. She was at no time allowed to show up her face to us. We therefore, said that we could not return home because we had not actually been shown the 'flower' we came to pick. PV took over the floor before the bride's father could respond and said that we could not see her because she was away outside the town. PV would only go on a journey to bring the bride if we paid some amount of money to enable her to pay her way back home. Here, as in a similar situation earlier, PV was 'obviously' not sincere and, therefore, gave false information. It was like the intent was a joke on us or a game on obvious information necessary to keep the interaction going. Again, we gave PV some money in a sealed envelope and she thereafter went inside the room where the bride was kept in order to bring her to us.

The presentation of the bride took two steps. The first step was that an impersonator was presented as the bride. That is, a different girl was brought, with her face covered. The second step was that the real bride was brought after we had broken the riddle of the first – that is that the first was impersonating. This is a usual practice

in marriage events among the Yoruba. There is often no ordering as to the steps to be taken but it is left now with the party of the suitor to be able to identify the bride from the two brought forward. The purpose of this practice is not just to test the ability to identify the bride but also to find out how much of her is known. In case of any faulty identification, it is expected that the suitor's party would pay a fine.

We were able to identify the second girl brought as the real bride and her face was subsequently uncovered for everybody to see. This last action brought the formal part of the event to a close but we were later feasted to a meal by the bride's parents.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have reported a communicative event involving the writing of a letter of marriage proposal among the Yoruba of Nigeria. In the report, I have shown that this event is not only structured but that failure to follow this structure might result in the violation of some cultural rules and routines of interaction in Yoruba. Furthermore, the Yoruba "writing in" event seems to demonstrate characteristics typical of ritual events in social encounters because of its defined boundaries and predictable verbal and nonverbal routines. Finally, if one asked: could a man marry his bride, among the Yoruba, without going through this ritual speech event? Theoretically, it is possible but such a marriage would be considered out of place.

NOTE

1. The practice of "writing in" which started in Lagos and Abeokuta in the late 19th century is borrowed into Yoruba culture through Euro-Christian tradition.

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