

# The Role of Context in Determining the Meaning of Proverbs: Dawro Proverbs in Focus

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**Abstract:** *This research was conducted to assess the role of context in determining the meaning of proverbs. The proverbs were taken from bulletins, magazines and textbooks. The proverbs were translated to English with great care to keep the original meaning and beauty of the proverbs. Finally, it is concluded that proverbs are performed in a particular context to give a certain meaning, and the alteration of the context results in the alteration of the meaning of the proverb.*

**Keywords:** proverbs, Dawro proverbs, context, meaning, Dawro Doona

## 1. Introduction

Dawro is one of the administrative zones in South Nation Nationalities and People Regional Government (SNNPRG) of Ethiopia. It is found 496 Km far from Addis Ababa, 280 Km far from Awassa and 148 Km far from Jimma. It is bordered with Oromia region at North, with Kembata Tembaro Zone at North-East, with Wolayta zone at East, with Gamo-Gofa Zone at South, and with Konta special wereda at west. Dawro zone consists of 5 weredas and one administrative town. There are 175 kebeles and 8 municipalities in the zone. The number of population is about five hundred and fifty thousand (550, 000) and area of the zone is 446,082 hectare [1].

Dawro people have their own custom, tradition, history and language. Dawro language, in addition to serving as means of communication, is used as a medium of instruction of all subjects from grade one to four, is given as one subject from grade one to eight, and is used as a medium of instruction in teachers training institution for first cycle teachers [1].

Every society has a common understanding about the nature and what they think to be true. This common understanding is transmitted from generation to generation through language. Thus, language is the way in which culture of a certain people is manifested. Miruka stated that narratives of any speech are not told only for their own sake but also to impart some important aspect of social instruction. The important aspect of a speech can be found when analyzed and interpreted according to the context and the purpose of the speaker.

Dawro language has been representative of cultures, traditions and customs of Dawro people since the beginning of the people at the area. Despite this, Dawro language has not developed as expected because of many internal and external factors [1]. As other languages have, Dawro language has got widely used proverbs. These proverbs are the wealth of the people that passed from generation to generation through word of mouth representing the norms, social status, culture, etc of the people [1].

This study was conducted to assess the role of context in determining the meaning of proverbs.

## 2. Review of Related Literatures

Proverbs are brief statements full of hidden meaning, accepted and used by a community as an expression of truth and wisdom [2]. This indicates that proverbs have connotative meaning that is worthy of explanation. This is why people ask 'What do you mean?' when somebody uses proverbs out of context. Proverbs are the common wealth of a society used to express the common truth of that society. As Melakneh states proverbs gain the common sense and acceptance because of their frequent use [5]. Even though we say that proverbs are accepted by a society sometimes, they may be accepted differently by different groups of a society [3]. Proverbs are the representation of the culture, wisdom, attitude and custom of a society. They emerged from the way of the life of a society and their philosophy [1]. Proverbs are a shorthand method of communication. A ready-made statement, a proverb, conveys a culturally agreed upon idea which may be expressed less clearly and effectively in a speaker's own words. In the few words of a proverb, one can concisely make the point to be clearly understood [3].

Every genre of literature has its own characteristics that differentiate it from others. One of the identified characteristics of proverbs is its Truth, wisdom, meaning or pithiness: proverbs are full of meanings that reflect the cultural and historical truth and wisdom of a society. The Meanings deserve explanation and are determined by the situation under which it is used. Proverbs also have poetic beauty in the expression. Proverbs are short but full of meaning and express the meanings well [2].

Context refers to the situation (occasion) in which the proverbs are performed, the purpose of the speaker in using the proverb and the tone of the speaker in pronouncing the proverb. When Finnegan expresses the strong relation of the context and the use of proverbs as "... it is particularly true of proverbs whose use and application depends so crucially on their context that no full understanding can be reached without some knowledge of occasions and purposes of their actual use" [4].

A proverb can be used in many different contexts. It can have one meaning in one situation, but completely different meaning in another situation. This shows that the meaning of

a proverb depends on the situation in which it is used. This makes proverb multi- Contextual [3] [4] [2]. Finnegan strengthens that 'There is no proverb without a situation.' [4].

Proverbs give an insightful sense of a society. They act as mirrors through which we glance at the society and its attitudes. They are used to know the facts of a society that survived yesterday, apply today, and give the direction of tomorrow. With proverbs, we understand, express and preserve the values and cultural beliefs of a society [3].

### 3. Methods

The proverbs were collected from *bulletins, magazines and textbooks*. The collected proverbs were put in different contexts for analysis. Different settings, tone of speech and purposes of speaker are assumed to find the meanings of proverbs. Finally, the proverbs were analyzed and discussed altering the contexts.

### 4. Discussion

A person who uses a right proverb at a right time and in a right context is respected in the society and thought to be as gentle and thoughtful. He is worthy of taking part in many social discussions. He is still assigned to present the result of the discussion of elders to the interned body when the people need representative for a certain issue; he is selected to represent the people of the area /village. When there is conflict among people, he is selected with recognized elders even if he is not aged to be said elder. This is because proverbs which are used at a right time and in right context are more persuading, convincing, offending, and meaningful than the ordinary speech.

The use of proverbs depends on the context of the speech. A proverb used in unrelated context plays no positive role in the speech.

#### *Performance of Proverbs and Tone of Speech*

Tone is a quality of voice which shows what the speaker's feeling or thinking. When somebody uses proverbs in his speech, he assimilates the tone of proverbs to the tone of his speech. This is to meet the purpose of his speech being helped by proverbs.

As it is an oral art, a proverb is performed where the speaker and the listener are face – to – face. This makes a great chance for communicators to read the type and level of tone to one another. As a result, one can easily understand the meaning and the purpose of a proverb in the speech. Hence, we can say that the function of a proverb can be indicated by the tone of the speaker. Therefore, a proverb with different tones can have different functions. This can be seen in the following Proverb.

#### **Maganxxay tumuwa bayzzenna.**

→ A bribe cannot extinguish a truth.

- With a normal tone, this proverb can be used to declare that truth is powerful.
- With a strong tone, it is used to criticize somebody who took or gave bribes to conceal a truth.

- With a medium tone, it is used to warn somebody who took or gave bribes that a truth will win and his acts will be exposed.
- With a soft tone, it can be used to advise a person of a truth when he thinks or says that the defendant has given bribes to a judge to get his truth concealed.
- With exclamation it can be used to express surprise when an issue that has been concealed because of bribe is exposed.

As it can be seen from the example, the change in tone of the speaker is strongly related to the meaning of his speech. It is only one proverb, but when the performer performs it with different tones, it means differently.

### 5. Context and meaning of proverbs

Context refers to the cultural background of the society, the moral and emotional status of the audiences (interlocutors), the point of discussion at a time, and the purpose of discussion. The use of proverbs that does not consider these all is judged to be of less or no importance in Dawro society. If a speaker uses a proverb that does not fit the context, he is laughed at and is judged to be of having less quality in speech. This decreases the weight of his total speech. For example, it is unexpected to use a proverb:

"Barena erennawe bare godakka ernna" which means

→ He who doesn't know himself doesn't know his lord  
When one is suggesting somebody to help each other or in the middle of the discussion which is about to lose some personal benefits for sake of common benefits.

The meaning of a proverb differs when the context in which a proverb is used differs. We can consider the following proverbs by altering contexts.

**Case a.** Achcha acuu cigina wureenna. which means

→ The debt of teeth is not terminated.

In Dawro, people are not advised to laugh at others' failures, weaknesses, inabilities or mistakes. If somebody laughs at another, people express their ideas according to the levels of their feeling and the context as follow:

- The proverb is used to advise when the speaker uses it by referring somebody else who laughs at others' failure and when he is telling that feeling happy at failure of others results in one's own failure.
- It is used for criticizing when a speaker uses it to somebody who laughs at others' failures, inabilities, weaknesses or/and errors by telling that the one who laughs has also a weakness.
- Elders who are discussing about the way of correcting others' mistakes can use the proverb for teaching. Here, it is used to teach youth that laughing at somebody's mistakes is debt that cannot be easily compensated and what once come out from mouth cannot be corrected.
- It is believed by Dawro people that if somebody laughs at another's failure, he himself will fail in the same or another way and he will also be laughed at. Therefore, this proverb can be used to warn those who laugh at others. It is also used to warn that it is impossible to compensate the debt of speech. That is, even if the one who wrongs with words or says something wrong

towards somebody tries to compensate, it cannot totally terminate the feeling.

#### Case b. Cuulettawe wuttenne suyqii?

→ **The choked does not whistle, but waves hand.**

- a) When a speaker uses the proverb to address the family members who want their parents to provide everything their rich neighbors do, it means our situation is different. It in short expresses that the neighbor does it because he has, but I do not provide because I do not have. Meanwhile, the proverb criticizes the person who is in a seriously dangerous condition but pretends that everything is alright.
- b) When an elder says “Cuulettawe wuttenne suyqii?” during conciliation to someone for example, to a husband who has a case with his wife, the proverb means you have no option than what we say.
- c) When the proverb is used to address somebody who reacted wrongly (for example, a worker who bit his boss in order to get his wage which he cannot bring an evidence for) it criticizes having a meaning you lost your chance. It condemns inappropriate reaction to a situation.

#### Case c. quuna bittan quuni hamete which means

→ **In the land of hunched, walk as they do**

- a) When a speaker uses it who tries to live or act differently or not according to the norm and culture of the people, this proverb informs to live according to the situation meaning let's follow the norm of the society.
- b) When the speaker addresses himself with the proverb, it is to mean I am living out of my level because of the influence of the society.

#### Case d. Abban utti xaasa laacce which means

→ **He sits in the ocean, but licks the dew**

- a) When this proverb is used to address a person who has a plenty of chances but facing problems because of not using the chances, it advises having a meaning ‘use your resource’.
- b) When the speaker uses the proverb to address the person who is in a better condition but wishes somebody else's life, it is used to mean you do not really understand your status.
- c) The proverb can also be used to warn not to wish other's property instead of using the opportunity one has at hand.

#### Case e. Buuqay caala kadhee.

→ **Stinky despises vinegar.**

- a) When the speaker wants to state that a person with weaknesses magnifies the weakness of others, the proverb can be used to mean you also are with defects. It can also mean you are worse than the person you despise.
- b) The proverb can be used to teach the people indicating that everyone has a weakness of different forms. One may be good at one thing but weak at another. Generally, it discourages despising others with a meaning you also have a weakness of different forms.

Some proverbs can be uttered without engaging in any long conversation in the right context and are understood without any difficulty. For example, assume there is complete silence and a man who is lazy for work but always makes trouble is passing by. If somebody uses a proverb:

‘Goshsha dareenna booray oshaa daree’ which means

‘Lazy ox excretes more’ pointing to the man, everybody can understand that it is to criticize or to blame a man without any more explanation of the proverbs.

Therefore, meaning of proverbs depends on the contexts. The proverb has full meaning when it is used in a right context.

## 6. Conclusions

Proverbs are the representatives of the culture, tradition and custom of Dawro people. They are more powerful and acceptable than the ordinary speech because they are frequently used and everybody accepts them as true. They are also condensed and more meaningful statements which can have implied meanings. Because of this, proverbs can have different meanings in different contexts. The way a proverb is performed is determined by the context of the speech and the tone of the speaker. Unless a proverb is used according to the context, it breaks the communication and doesn't meet the intended function. The speaker also assimilates the tone of performing a proverb to the tone of the whole speech. Otherwise, a proverb can have different meanings than the whole speech and the purpose of the speech may be misunderstood.

Generally, meanings of a proverb and the context are interrelated. Proverbs are performed in a particular context to meet a particular meaning. No proverb can carry an intended meaning without following the right context for the right performance, and the alteration of the context results in the alteration of the meaning.

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