

The Pragmatics of Tiv Verbal Insults

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Abstract:

Insults exist in every culture and serve a variety of purposes. They may shock, entertain, or amuse. They are a perennial product and indicator of human conflict. Like other forms of speech, insults are a product of the society in which they are constructed and used. Thus, they serve as a rich resource for understanding the complexities of the social

contexts in which their speakers construct and use language. This paper addresses the pragmatic import of Tiv verbal insults. It takes the view that often, what hurts is not the lexicalization or mere verbalization of the expression that is termed insulting. Rather, it is the societal stigmatization of the expression, along with the speaker's and the victim's psychological orientation to it, that puts the bite in the insult. The paper agrees with Garrioch (1987:104) that "words spoken in private may be acceptable, whereas the same words used between the same people, but publicly, become insulting." In other words, the social context of performance is a crucial factor in evaluating insults. The main argument then is that, given the lexical meaning of most Tiv verbal insults, it is clear that what makes them insults is not their lexical or semantic import per se, but their pragmatic force, which force is occasioned by the performance of the insults. It examines three main types of insults in Tiv. These are performative insults, assertive insults, and evaluative insults. Some of these are extant, and others are contemporary. These classifications are only meant to serve as a guide in the analysis, they are not meant to be discrete paradigms. The essay is based on data collected mainly at two locations at Zaki-Biam in Benue State over a period of three months in 2004. The sites are the Zaki-Biam main Motor Park, and a popular pub in the same town.

1.1 Introduction – The Tiv People:

The Tiv are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some sources list them as the seventh largest ethnic group in Nigeria. One source (ISHR West Africa Committee, February 3, 2005, <http://www.ishr.org/sections-groups/wac/tiv.htm#wac>) even lists them as the fourth after Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. Tiv country is an undulating plain sweeping down from the peak of the Koloishe Mountain near Obudu, just south of Tiv country, to the broad basin of the Benue. The Tiv inhabit what is today known as the Middle Benue Region, an area stretching from about 6° 30' N to 8° 10' N latitudes, and 8° to 10° E longitude. (Rubingh 1965; Bohannan, Paul and Laura 1968; Tseror 2002) From the 1600s they have lived in the Benue valley and in surrounding areas that now comprise four of Nigeria's 36 states namely: Cross River, Kogi, Nasarawa, and Taraba.

Tiv population figures remain provisional and often controversial (as are the national figures). Some have estimated their population as slightly above 2 million (Tseror 2002), but more recent estimates place the Tiv population at 8 million (ISHR West Africa

Committee. February 3, 2005. <http://www.ishr.org/sections-groups/wac/tiv.htm#wac>).

1.2 The Tiv Language:

The Tiv language is classified as part of the Bantu group. It is often described as Tiv-Bantu, within the sub-group of the Bantoid branch of the Benue-Congo subdivision of the Niger-Congo. (Malherbe 1931; Abraham 1940; Guthrie 1962; Voegelin and Voegelin 1977; Pulleyblank 1988) This classification has remained largely unquestioned, uncontested and unchallenged in linguistic literature.

2.0 The Performative Impact of Tiv Insults:

Clark observes that –when people talk face to face, they rely not only on speech, but on gesture—manual, facial, ocular, postural, and vocal gestures|| (379). Many Tiv verbal insults are of the performative type. Their meaning is fully realized only when the one addressed both hears the insult and sees the accompanying gestural signal. Most of such performative insults are descriptive in nature and relate to the shape, size, or strength of various body parts. It could be the head, the eyes, the mouth, the legs, or the anus. Of these, the anus appears to be the commonest target of performative insults in Tiv. *Tswar fitii* (literally tiny anus hole) *Tswar feng* (large anus hole) *Tswar tusuu* (protruded anus hole) *Ikpongu tswar* (stuffed anus hole) *Tswar wou* (your anus) *Kape ú lu tswar je ne* (this is how your anus is, or your anus is like this, usually accompanied by a descriptive gesture with the hand to indicate the size or shape claimed) *Jen tswar* (your anus is like a ball) *Ambi ken tswar* (you have faeces in your anus) *Aniwa tswar* (dog +diminutive anus=something like, you are a small dog, and you are nothing but anus: hardly makes sense outside of this specified performative environment.)

The Tiv language has two words for the buttocks, each of which when used in context, can be understood to refer to the anus. The first, *ityô*, is unbiased, colourless and is simply considered as a biological word describing a body part. It is not branded, so it seldom forms part of Tiv insults that describe this body part. The second word is *tswar*, and is considered vulgar and improper in decent talk. It is this stigma that makes it attractive for use in insults. All the *tswar*-related insults appear merely descriptive, except the expression, *kape u lu tswar je ne* (your anus is like this, or this is how your anus is) which is explicitly demonstrative. However, irrespective of the lexical particularities of the

specific *tswar*-based insult, each is usually accompanied by a demonstrative signal, is indexed by the speaker's show of the right (or sometimes the left) hand, with the fingers wide open and facing the direction of the one addressed. Clark (2006) calls this type of gesture a collateral signal. According to him, –speakers . . . use gestures for collateral signals, performing them at the same time as, or in parallel with, the primary utterances. In this case, gesture and speech are concurrent, even coordinated|| (380).

Admittedly, insults targeted at the human anatomy, whether of the addressee or of that one's kit and kin, would appropriately be offensive because most parts of the human anatomy are considered taboo words in Tiv. However, looking at the lexical load signalled by Tiv insults in general, it is not clear what specifically they contain that could offend, since such insults as *tswar wou*, (your anus) *aniwa tswar* (dog +diminutive anus=something like, you are a small dog, and you are nothing but anus) etc., are structurally and semantically incomplete. They are not even premised on any ellipsis based on linguistic context, or any recoverable phoric reference. However, in the case of performative insults, it is their iconic signification that conveys the load, which is interpretable as objectionable, and sometimes even sanctionable as an insult. Schegloff (1984) and McNeill (1992) explain that such iconic or indicative gestures deal with issues of performance. Because their potency lies in the performance potential, they lose their force if uttered in *absentia*, that is, if they have to be conveyed to the addressee by means of reported speech, except of course if the one reporting performatively impersonates the speaker, or in the words of Tannen (1989) *'reconstructs'* it. She argues that –both the meanings of words and the combinations into which we can put them are given to us by previous speakers, tracts of whose voices and contexts cling inevitably to them|| (100). Indeed, there is a dynamic relationship between reported speech and the reported context; the meaning of the reported speech is inevitably transformed by the reporting context. And because Tiv insults are demonstrative, their performance has the same effect on a sightless victim as it has on one who has the privilege of sight. But if insults were insulting merely on account of what they said, why would a blind person take umbrage at the utterance of a visual demonstrative insult such as *tswar wou nahan* (your anus [is] like this)? Evidently, the insult in this case, seems to lie in the performative force of the utterance and in prior discourses that have culturally framed it, not in its lexical or semantic content.

The pattern of insults in a language may suggest the cultural values of its speakers. They also indicate what is considered as muted, unmentionable or taboo. For instance, whereas Hausa insults are routinely directed at the anatomical features of addressees as well as those of their parents, similar insults are rare in Tiv. One of the commonest Hausa insults relate to a threat by the speaker to –eat up the penis of the addressee or his father’s. || It is rendered in various forms: *Ka ci bura ubanka* (you have eaten your father’s penis) *Za ka ci bura ubanka* (you will eat your father’s penis). *Za in ci bura ubanka* (I will eat the penis of your father) or simply *ubanka* (your father’s [own]).

3.0 Evaluative Insults:

In Tiv, such insults as are directed at the anatomical features of victim’s parents are rare, as mention of such anatomical features is considered taboo. But there are insults of an evaluative or comparative kind, and these often involve the parents of the addressee. The typical pattern of these insults is –Your X is like Y. || Again, these focus mainly on body shape, size, texture, or parts thereof. Some of these are mild, others even humorous and meant to amuse. But quite a few can be termed serious. Animals, reptiles, and even inanimate objects are prime candidates of prejudicial association in insults of a comparative or evaluative kind. The simile-type insults include:

ityough kpetee er kapu/kwese
(your head is like a calabash)

Ityough gbôndôô er orvannya kou igyô
(your head is like a visitor’s when [the visitor] is greedily eating a meal of caterpillar).

A tiligh ityough er iniun gbev
(the shape of your head is like the virgin of the bird called *gbev*)

A tsaam ato er ikyatu fa iyou
(your ears are spread like a wily monkey’s when it discovers a honeycomb).

A hoo ityough er ú nyer zwa
(your head is long like you live in a hole).

Here again, the insults seem to find their force, not in what is said, since in many cases, what is said makes no rational sense whatsoever. Rather, their potency seems to lie in the very fact that they are said,

also in who, where and when they are said, as well as how they are

said. This is the contextual view, as advanced by Leech (1983), according to which, context includes –relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance|| (13). It includes any background knowledge assumed to be shared by *s* and *h* and which contributes to *h*’s interpretation of what *s* means by a given utterance. Why this is so is explained by relevance theory (RT). This holds that

we home in on an interpretation which is relevant to the occasion when we conjoin what is actually said in the text with existing assumptions in the context and draw a meaning from the conjunction, a contextual effect, which could not be inferred from either text or context on their own (45).

The use of content-empty adjectives along with disparaging nouns to serve as comparative or evaluative insults is consistent with the pattern of Tiv speech. Much of the language is comparative. Moreover, insult-making adjectives such as *kpetee* (in *ityough kpetee*), *gbôndôô*, *tiligh* (in *tiligh ityough*) *hoo* (in *hoo ityough*), defy any precise translation into English. And even in Tiv, all they manage to convey is an imprecise image, sometimes vaguely onomatopoeic. Widdowson (2004) puts this in perspective when he says that –meaning is a function of the interaction of code and context so that the significance of what people say transcends the signification of the words they use to say it|| (45).

In Tiv, insults that extend to the addressee’s parents or that one’s agnatic line are viewed as serious, even if their pragmatic force is mild. But they can also be viewed as a complement, depending on the other relevant factors (such as who said it, where, when and why). Thus an insult such as *ú vihi ka* (roughly: you are ugly so, or see how ugly you are) can be considered mild, but sanctionable. On the other hand, its comparative form can be complementary; especially if the addressee’s maternal agnatic clan is the basis of comparison. Thus, *ú vihi ka er mba igba youwe* (you are as ugly as your mother’s relatives). This may sound odd, but viewed within the Tiv social context it is consistent with cultural norms. In Tiv, the family or even clan of a person’s mother is a source of pride to him. Thus, such forms of association or comparison with the mother’s family line as above can only be viewed in positive light and thus as a complement. The only exception would be if the family line of the addressee has become famous for something evil or shameful (such as armed theft, armed robbery).

Another set of Tiv verbal insults are those that, according to Bolinger (1980) hide the bias in a noun, and thus make them more potent. Bolinger argues that

the main power of the noun is that it objectifies in a way the adjective cannot. A quality may come and go. If we are disappointed at Jane's lack of appreciation we can call her ungrateful, or solidify it a step further and call her an ungrateful person. But if we call her an ingrate we put the brand on her: the noun implies that the world puts people like this in a class by themselves (79).

Some Tiv verbal insults do not consist of explicit comparisons in the shape of a simile, rather, they –objectify|| the one referenced, thus branding him. These types of insults are quite potent but not many in the language. The biased nouns that carry heavier load are most visible with names of animals. *Aniwa* (diminutive+dog) *Anigyo* (diminutive+pig) *Anbagu* (diminutive+monkey), *anjôugh* (diminutive+spirit belonging to the *Mbatsav*). Calling someone a dog is considered very offensive in Tiv, but it is not clear what quality of a dog is referenced in the insult. The others are more predictable. If one is called a pig, what is meant is that such a person is dirty. Thus it is the porcine sanitary habits that are targeted. Similarly, the monkey may denote many things, but used as an insult, the connotation is that the one addressed is ugly, because in Tiv worldview, the monkey is considered to be an ugly creature. All four insults have something else in common; they are accompanied by diminutives as prefixes. Thus, the interpretation is not that the addressee is a dog, a pig, or a monkey, but that he/she is a small dog, pig or monkey. When used in insults, this diminutive does not refer to the infant class of the species named (so *anigyo*=small pig for example, is not piglet as in baby pig); it is used as a downtoner to further intensify the diminishing value of the addressee in the eyes of the speaker.

Bolinger observes that in the English language, the noun *Jew* has been degraded to the extent that speakers often rephrase a sentence to use *Jewish* instead. It is as if, being the sign of a _quality,‘ the adjective makes it possible for one to be, say, _just a little bit Jewish,‘ whereas *a Jew* has to go all the way. In Tiv, when speakers really want to be insulting, they produce disparaging nouns, using diminutives. Thus *orukpar* (a man from the part of Tivland so named) becomes *anwanukpar* (*an* is a diminutive prefix that serves as a downtoner). Similarly, *Origbo* (an Igboman) becomes *anorigbo* or *anwanigbo*.

Thus, whether we take the rather strong view of the British statesman and writer Lord Chesterfield (1694-1775) that –an injury is much sooner forgotten than an insult,|| or a more liberal view captured in an anonymous Bemba proverb, that –insults do not cause a sore,|| one thing we cannot deny is that they provide a rich resource for gaining insight into a people’s social function of language. And in this case they also help us to understand better the cultural norms of the Tiv people.

4.1 Discussion:

It is easy to focus on the performative force of insults when we take the Speech Acts theory as propounded by J.L. Austin (1962) and developed by J. R. Searle (1969). According to this view, when you say something you are doing something: thus talking is action on several levels. These acts of doing which are achieved through the act of saying are called illocutionary acts. According to Austin, and as elaborated by Searle, illocutionary acts are divisible into locutions, illocutions and perlocutions. Sadock (2006) explains the three components of illocutionary acts, as stated below:

Locutionary Acts:

These are acts **of** speaking, acts involved in the construction of speech, such as uttering certain sounds or making certain marks, using particular words and using them in conformity with the grammatical rules of a particular language and with certain senses and certain references as determined by the rules of the language from which they are drawn.

Illocutionary Acts:

Are acts done **in** speaking (hence **illocutionary**), including and especially that sort of act that is the apparent purpose for using a performative sentence: christening, marrying, and so forth. Acts of stating or asserting, which are presumably illocutionary acts, are characteristic of the use of canonical constatives, and such sentences are, by assumption, not performatives. Furthermore, acts of ordering or requesting are typically accomplished by using imperative sentences, and acts of asking whether something is the case are properly accomplished by using interrogative sentences. The conclusion, according to Austin, is that the locutionary aspect of speaking is what

we attend to most in the case of constatives, while in the case of the standard examples of performative sentences we attend as much as possible to the illocution.

Perlocutionary Acts:

This is a consequence or by-product of speaking, whether intended or not. As the name is designed to suggest, perlocutions are acts performed **by** speaking. They consist in the production of effects upon the thoughts, feelings, or actions of the addressee(s), speaker, or other parties, such as causing people to refer to a certain ship as the Joseph Stalin, producing the belief that Sam and Mary should be considered man and wife, convincing an addressee of the truth of a statement, causing an addressee to feel a requirement to do something, and so on (54-55).

These three acts are further divided into a five-way taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Austin believed that illocutionary acts could always be made explicit through the use of performative sentences; hence a taxonomy of illocutionary acts could be couched in terms of an analysis of the various potentially performative verbs of English. The five classes are as follows:

1. **Verdictives:** these acts consist of delivering a finding, e.g., *acquit, hold* (as a matter of law), *read something as*, etc.
2. **Exercitives:** these are acts of giving a decision for or against a course of action, e.g., *appoint, dismiss, order, sentence*, etc.
3. **Commissives:** acts whose point is to commit the speaker to a course of action, e.g., *contract, give one"s word, declare one"s intention*, etc.
4. **Behavitives:** these are expressions of attitudes toward the conduct, fortunes, or attitudes of others, e.g., *apologize, thank, congratulate, welcome*, etc.
5. **Expositives:** acts of expounding of views, conducting of arguments, and clarifying, e.g., *deny, inform, concede, refer*, etc.

Of the five classes, it would appear that performative insults of the type discussed here belong to the class of expositives. They are assertions implicating the addressee to a view held of that one or his associate as held by the speaker.

This means that we interpret indirect speech acts with reference to the situations in which utterances are made. The interlocutors (the speaker and the addressee) must share certain conventions, called

–felicity conditions|| for the utterance to be potent, or to be –felicitous.|| In other words, both speaker and addressee must share similar linguistic and cultural conventions relevant to the interpretation of the utterance and must share the same or similar beliefs about the thing(s) expressed. For example, if we know that a person does not really want us to disappear forever, we do not interpret the expletive –Oh, get lost!|| as an actual request. Thus, expressions such as –get lost|| may, appropriately contextualized, be termed formulaic insults. Such formulaic insults may, in certain cultures even be achieved through silence, for as the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said,

–Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn.|| This view is strengthened by another expression, an anonymous Egyptian proverb:

–Silence is the best answer to the stupid.|| Looked at in the proper perspective then, it means that insults can be contextually insinuated by silence and other non-verbal means. But these other means are not significant to our present discussion. Besides, it is difficult to evaluate when silence is meant to insult and not to show respect. Also, how silences are interpreted would differ from culture to culture. Even in Tiv culture, each occasion of silence would have to be analyzed on its own merits. It will not be possible to make a general classificatory statement to the effect that this or that form of silence is necessarily insulting. What cannot be denied is that insults can be signalled in forms other than those involving verbal accompaniment, whether that verbal accompaniment is overt or elliptical. But that is a subject for another study. This paper concerns itself only with such insults that may be termed verbal (for a fuller discussion on silences, see Dooga,

J.T. (2008) –Grammaticalizing Silence|| in Bayero Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies Vol. 1 Number 1 December 2008. Duze M.C. et al. (eds) pp. 123-133).

Humour is often linked to insults, it being a milder form of insults. Humour apparently developed as a result of the need to be polite, which sometimes includes obliquity in order not to cause offence or to threaten the face of interlocutors in discourse. It is possible therefore to link the pragmatic and discursal principles of politeness and face acts in part, to the need to avoid sounding insulting. According to Johnstone (2002) –politeness is one of the main reasons for which people are often indirect, not saying what they mean but implying it in more conventional (or sometimes novel) ways||

(125). In the majority of man's linguistic interactions, effort is made to be polite, or put differently, to observe the rules of politeness, which according to Lakoff (1973; 1974b) include Formality (Distance), Hesitancy

(Deference) and Equality (Camaraderie). Negative face occurs when a speaker uses a negative politeness strategy. Along the descending scale of the politeness spectrum, the closest to an insult is the –bald on-record strategy. In this strategy, the speaker makes no effort to mitigate his/dispreferred action in any way, does not attempt to cushion the effect of his/her disaffiliative action on the hearer’s face. Direct Tiv verbal insults use this strategy too.

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