

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF MANIPURI PROVERBS

J A H KHATRI¹ & LUCINDA LAISHRAM²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Science & Humanities, BITS Edu Campus, Varnama, Vadodara, Gujarat, India

²Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics, The MS University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat, India

ABSTRACT

Proverbs are the specified speech genres, which play an important role in the cultural system of the given community. People exhibit their linguistic proficiency and the eco-cultural knowledge by using appropriate proverbs whenever the need be. Present paper tries to investigate the cultural embedded-ness of the proverbs from Manipur, a small state in North-East India. Various aspects of the Manipuri culture have been represented through the handful of proverbs. Paper also tries to understand the cognitive foundation of the proverbs being used, by comparing similar proverb from four different languages.

KEYWORDS: Proverbs, Anthropological Linguistic, Manipur (i), Encoding

INTRODUCTION

There has been number of studies on Proverbs, though very few are available on Indian languages from Linguistic or Anthropological perspectives. Proverbs are the forms of language which are directly connected with cultural aspects of the society. Proverb is traditionally categorized as a special Genre in the Ethnographic studies (cf. Fasold 1990: 46). The following section will provide a brief introduction to Manipuri language. Section two provides an introduction to the concept of Proverb. Third section introduces the area of Anthropological Linguistics and clears the methodological approach for the study. Fourth section provides the analysis of the data. Fifth section discusses the conceptual basis of the proverbs. And sixth section provides the general conclusions.

MANIPUR & ITS LANGUAGE

Manipuri language is known as Meiteilon (meiteiron or meeteilon) spoken basically in the state of Manipur in the North-eastern India. It is the only medium of communication among the speakers of 29 different mother tongues so it is regarded as lingua franca of Manipur state. It belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language; Manipuri is placed in kuki-chin Proper separately by Grierson-Konow. (quoted in Singh 2011: 02) They call themselves as Meitei which belong to the Mongolian stalk, having affinity with the people of east and South East Asia. Manipuri is a tonal language. Majority of Meitei follows Hinduism. Meitei are matrilineal people but they acknowledge the existence and importance of womenfolk. For Meiteis, as for any other speech community, proverbs play a very significant social function.

WHAT IS PROVERB?

Proverb is a general truth, short term saying of life, experienced by people or a community that has a witty expression with a piece of evidence. It is also short term saying which state a general truth or piece of advice. Proverb corresponds to the Manipuri word “*Paurou*” which means ‘a term or a word that has some message locked in it’ (Betholia 2008: 04). Proverbs are regarded as something that is always true and time tested and repository of ancient wisdom. Its use arises from a context of ‘cultural species’ from which it can’t be ‘abstracted’ without serious distortion. Proverbs are

fossils to utilize in the reconstruction of the long buried past; they give us facts instead of fancies. Words became archaism in proverbs and contain lots of humor and satire. They are related to the common people of the community.

Some authors make the distinction between proverbs and sayings. But, theoretically there is no such difference; actually a saying takes the form of the proverb in the matter of time. Sayings come from stories and myths, when these stories and myths are wiped out in the stream of time; it comes to be known as proverb.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTIC

Anthropology is a study of culture, in Anthropological Linguistics; we try to relate the language and culture. Duranti (1997: 02) defines this field as, “*the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice.*” (Italics in original) In the field, the speakers are primarily conceived as social actors (Ibid: 03), who are acting through the language itself. Language is considered to be an important part of the Speech Community. Duranti stresses on three important concepts from theoretical perspective which are: Performance, Indexicality and Participation. As he puts, “In Anthropology, meanings are seen as located not only in language, but in social values, beliefs, social relationships, and larger exchange and support systems, including family structure and the social organization of the community.” (Duranti 1997: 277) The field of linguistic anthropology takes linguistics practices to be culturally significant actions that constitute social life.

It becomes crucial to see the proverbs from this perspective, as the proverbs are highly cultural linguistic units. Their comprehension and performance decide the membership in the speech situation. Adequate cultural understanding is required in order to comprehend the proverb correctly and completely.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

- *chairen chaphubu kainaba yeibra?*

Name of place pot break beat

Are the pots beaten to break?

In English the similar proverb is ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’. In Manipuri, the proverbs literally relate to village women of *Cheiren* or *Thoubandong* whose main occupation is pottery. While making the pot they beat the pot to have a good shape. The meaning of this proverb is that the parents beat or punish their child for their misbehavior so that they can become a good person in future. Important part here is the particular encoding of the proverb in *Meiteilon*. They talk about the pots of a particular place of Manipur; that is *Chairen*. This “*Chairen Chaphubu*” is a metaphor used in the given speech community to talk about the very general phenomenon; that is the idea that the children are beaten to make them obedient. This encoding and message is comprehensible for the members of this community but not by the outsiders. If you take up some other language, the encoding would be different, like in English which gives the same meaning.

- *watonna wanglaga kuwakna phamdek-e?*

Bamboo high crow sit

Though the bamboo is tall or high, the crow sits on it.

In English the proverb is, “Pride has a fall”. In Manipuri, it means that though the height of bamboo is high the crow sits on them as a result it bends down its head. People who consider themselves as best there comes someone better than them.

Important part in this proverb is that it talks about bamboo and crow. In north east, bamboo has high growth and crow is associated with negative beliefs in the mythology of this community. This proverb can be valid only in this region. The meaning in this speech is that however proud a person is, there will be a person who is better than him or some worse thing will over surpass him. The metaphor used in this utterance is bamboo and crow to proclaim a very universal message like one should not fly high for any reason.

- *Cheng charging amana chengkok ama*

Rice rice one container one

mangye?

wasted

Single rice (tested) spoils the whole rice in the container.

The proverb in English says, 'the rotten apple spoils the barrel'. Important part in this utterance is that they have used rice since North East people eat rice in everyday meal. This proverb means a single person creates difficult situation for the entire group encoded here as the rice and the pot. Thus the proverb uses a concrete and observable entities involving particular rice, in a container, under prescribed conditions to enable the user to understand a wide variety of group interaction. The metaphor used in this proverb is *Cheng* which means rice. Here, the container is metaphorically used for the society and the rice is for an individual. A bad person spoils the reputation of entire family or society.

- *thajadaba pukhrida nga lei?*

Unexpected pond fish there

The pond where we thought there might be no fish has maximum number of fish.

It means that the pond where we thought there might be no fish has maximum number of fish. Important part in this encoding is that most of the people of North India are fond of fish; it is one of the important parts of their food. The metaphor used in this proverb is fish and pond. The fish plays a very important role functionally. People eat fish; fishing is one of the important occupations in Manipur. As a result, fish and pond give them a particular effect. The proverb talks about a very general idea that what we believe is not always the truth; there can be some hidden truth. This fact is conveyed by the metaphor of pond as a container and fish as a thing inside.

- *pena semlingeida samurou*

Instrument like fiddle making place name

yuba?

reach

One can reach the temple of Samurou in the time taken for tuning Pena.

It's a satire on the person who takes more time in doing not so important things. In Manipuri, it means that while tuning the Pena the person has taken so much of time that he could have reached Samurou temple during that time. Important part of this proverb is that they used a particular region of Manipur that is Samurou located in the South where there is a temple in this place. They also used an instrument called Pena used for religious purpose. The Pena is used in prays, Manipuri people play Pena during festive worship. The tuning is required for good music, but after all worship is

primary and Pena is secondary. Thus, this proverb again uses a very culture specific terms and processes to talk about the very general idea.

CONCEPTUAL BASIS OF PROVERBS

Proverbs are a kind of conceptual metaphors. Lakoff (1993: 233-235) also discusses the proverb in his discussion of metaphors. There are proverbs in various languages which can be taken as an equivalent to some of these proverbs. Let us see an example; the proverb we have discussed at third number has its equivalence in other languages. In English, similar proverb is, "The rotten apple spoils the barrel." In Gujarati the proverb is,

- *ek keri aakhaa toplaane bagaade.*

one mango whole basket spoil.

Single mango spoils the entire basket.

And in Hindi the proverb is,

- *ek machhali pure taalaabko ganda*

one fish entire pond spoil

karti he.

do is

Single fish spoils the entire pond.

In all these proverbs from different languages, the encoding differs but the meaning remains the same. More important aspect is, it is not just meaning but the conceptualization of the idea and its representation, though through different metaphors, remains the same. The case of English is slightly different; apples are used to make beer. If one apple is rotten, then it will spoil the taste of the beer of entire barrel. In all the four languages, the proverb is encoded with an edible entity, which is rice in Manipuri, apple in English, mango in Gujarati and fish in Hindi. Principally because the aspect of getting spoiled is best understood in edible entities, because once it gets spoiled, it becomes useless and there is no other option but to throw it away. Another important aspect is, it is contagious in edible items. A rotten fruit will spoil the other fruits kept in the same place, which means the rotten edible thing must be removed immediately; otherwise it will harm the others.

Another important aspect is the relationship between container and the content. All the four languages maintains this way of encoding for this particular proverb. The barrel, basket and the pond are the containers, metaphorically representing the society as a container. On the other hand, rice, apple, mango and fish are content representing an individual in the society. Following these two analogies, it becomes quite easy for the person to comprehend the meaning. Single spoiled content is harmful for the contents in the container. When we look from the perspective of society, the spoiled individual is harmful for the reputation of the society.

CONCLUSIONS

"A community's antiquity and culture can be traced from the proverbs of that language. It reveals the social life and its influence on language. Proverbs are epigrammatic expressions which have their roots in the ancient culture and

customs of a society”. (John 1987: 07) Above mentioned proverbs reveal a lot about the cultural practices of the given community. The metaphors are closely related with the society, and it becomes very important from the perspective of Participation. The comprehensibility of proverbs ensures the communicative competence of a member of the speech community. Culturally and socially, it is very important for a member to recognize the speech acts and various act sequences to be in the group.

REFERENCES

1. Betholia, Chandam (2008) “Manipuri Culture seen through Proverbs”. *Indian Folklife* (30). 04-05.
2. Fasold, Ralph (1990) *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
3. John, M. S (1987) *A Sociolinguistics Study on Malayalam Proverbs*. Unpublished dissertation MSU, Baroda.
4. Lakoff, George (1993) “Contemporary theory of metaphor” in *Metaphor and Thought* (ed.) Andrew Ortony: 202-251. Cambridge: CUP.
5. Singh, Chungkham Yashwanta (2011) *Manipuri Grammar*. New Delhi: Rajesh Publications.

