

Epistemes, Etiquette, Praxis and the Anglo-African Cultural Experience

*Lekan Oyegoke**

Abstract

Reflected in culture are patterns of behaviour which are classified as correct or wrong and therefore acceptable or reprehensible. Acceptable behaviour occupies such an important role in human experience that the society formulates codes of conduct which are enshrined in language in a given culture. The proverb is studied today as a literary form associated with Orature or oral literature; its genesis in the oral traditions is closely connected to its functional value in communicating precepts that regulate human behaviour. It also contains wisdom based on the observation of experience which sheds light on certain aspects of human life. Like everything else, these codes of behaviour change with time and circumstances. This essay examines some of the ways in which the attitudes to some of the codes of conduct which emanated from the Renaissance Age, and whose ripple effects spilt into the Victorian Age and were felt by postcolonies such as Nigeria, have been affected by changing times and circumstances.

Keywords: epistemes; etiquette; patterns of behaviour; proverbs; Renaissance Age

Introduction

This essay plays discursively with ideas and some changeable behavioural terminologies. For the discussion, epistemes are defined as capsules of knowledge specific to experience. *The Chambers Dictionary* defines etiquette as “forms of civilized manners or decorum; ceremony; the conventional laws of courtesy observed between members of the same profession, sport, etc.” The same dictionary describes praxis as “the practice or practical side of an art or science, as distinct from its theoretical side; customary or accepted practice; (an example or a collection of examples serving to provide) a practical exercise.” The “African cultural experience” as a concept is less easy to define. A part of the objective of this discursive exercise might be an outcome that sheds some more light on what is always construed as “the African cultural experience”. This might take the shape of epistemological reflections on the pre-colonial, colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial phases of the experience of Africa as a geo-political entity, or continent, or a fluximal spiritual experience.

Etiquette has its uses in society and culture and because literature is an expression of experience, it also has a place in literature. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* examines, among several other concerns, the definition of moments of society according to the dictates of etiquette. Scholars note that apart from the details of etiquette which serve to reinforce realism in the novel, the work was considered revolutionary at its first appearance on points of authorial deliberate violation of literary conventions described as decorum. For example, the choice of a poor, rustic, uneducated teenaged girl as protagonist and narrator in the novel in a man’s-man’s world was contrary to existing practice. Not only that, but the girl is also pitted, or rather, pits herself in a patriarchal setting against an affluent lettered young man from a higher socio-economic class than herself. Pamela is from a lower social class while her “antagonist” is a product of a higher, polite class, and a man. The difference between them is huge from the viewpoint of decorum, and it is registered and reflected in their use of English (Doody 1980).

* Lekan Oyegoke, formerly Professor of Literature in English, University of Botswana Email: lekanoyegoke@gmail.com

Abrams and Harpham (2012:82) describe decorum as a term in literary criticism that designates “the view that there should be propriety, or fitness, in the way that a literary genre, its subject matter, its characters and actions, and the style of its narration and dialogue are matched to one another”. The doctrine is said to have its roots in classical theory and exemplified in the versified essay *Art of Poetry* by Roman Horace in the first century BC. Decorum was upheld by the writers of the neoclassic age, but it received short shrift from the writers of a successor Romantic Age characterised by an attitude of antitraditionalism and disrespect for convention and that was more attuned to innovation and experimentation in literary creativity.

Epistemes

Epistemes are capsules of knowledge. The codes of behaviour in proverbs and etiquette are nuggets of wisdom. The one is conceptual (epistemic speech) and the other practical (epistemic conduct). The relationship between epistemic speech and epistemic behaviour seems comparable to the connection between an object and its shadow. The wisdom coded in speech is expected to unravel at the level of action for the smooth running of society. Epistemes also deliver personal benefits which vary from society to society and impact individuals in diverse ways. Among the Hebrew is the observation “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is valued by what others say of him. Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him” (Proverbs 27:21-21). The word-picture in the proverb, fool-pounded-in-a-mortar, makes for wit and amusement, the accompanying humour has a regaling effect on the witticism that is comparable to that of a perfume which leaves a lingering residual effect on memory. A comparable saying in Yoruba is “eefi ni iwa” which translates as “character is like smoke” – which means the truth about a person’s real character will always out (to borrow a phrase from an English saying “the truth will always out”). It can’t be hidden, be they a Pharisee or a Pecksniff.

What others say of a person is value-adding speech, according to the proverbial wisdom of king Solomon. What others say of a person in society is the product of a demonstration of social etiquette. Social etiquette itself is indwelt by sheer paradox. *DON’T: A Manual of Mistakes* (Censor 1953) opens with the following preface:

Courtesy books, which taught social etiquette, were popular during the Renaissance up until the Victorian Age and managed to make it into the twentieth century with diminishing influence on the reading public. What does the twenty-first century reader make of these excerpts from *Don’t* (a little book dealing frankly with mistakes and improprieties more or less common to all) by Censor (obviously a pseudonym) London: Ward, Lock & Co. Ltd, 1953? Tick off the precepts that you consider relevant to social interaction today (np).

From the quotation, what others say about a person is not only value-laden; it is also time-bound. But the paradox first that was alluded to earlier. Courtesy books that taught etiquette like *Don’t: A Manual of Mistakes* were rife in an age(s) notorious for patriarchal hegemony, yet encouraged behaviour described as gentlemanly if the man opened a door, house door, car door, for the woman, or more appropriately, the lady. It was courteous for a man to rise up when a woman entered the room and resume his seat only after the woman has sat down; to give up his seat for a woman in a crowded commuter vehicle, to allow the woman serve herself first before the man at meal time, and so on and so forth, which pattern of behaviour was summed up in the catchphrase “ladies first”. The scenario(s) is a monumental paradox in a society that spun women’s liberation movement and subsequently

feminism. For all the gentlemanly behaviour put up, the woman was effectively disenfranchised in most parts of Europe in the period in question and could only vote at the turn of the twentieth-century.

Etiquette

As for etiquette and the time factor, what do men say about women today? Answer: “Away with gender-based arbitrary, one-sided, discriminatory classifications that favour men and disadvantage women!” For example, before, the man was rational and the woman emotional, the man was bold and the woman timid, the man was self-controlled and the woman lacked self-control, etc. The binaries are grounded in fallacy. What is closer to the truth and reality is that both men and women are adequately represented in the class of the rational and that of the emotional, the class of the bold and that of the timid, the class of the self-controlled and that of the undisciplined, and, moreover, both may be found on the pedestal of the wise as well as the “mortar” of the foolish. In the Hebrew proverb, the male-fool-in-a-mortar is substitutable with a female-fool-in-a-mortar. By such substitution or arrangement the one is the equal of the other.

The fallout of this development is that nowadays there are no gentlemen and ladies, except as the labels for public conveniences. In the absence of human gentlemen and ladies, a woman opens the door to let herself into a building or into a car after the man in her company has entered and shut the door on himself, a man continues in his seat in a crowded commuter vehicle while the woman stands, at dinner table the man helps himself to the food first and afterward hands the serving spoon to the famished woman in his company. The phrase “ladies first” seems now clichéd.

Epistemes are capsuled in speech. Every language changes with time for good or bad, in respect of which “good” and “bad” denote relative values. This is amply illustrated by the experience of English that has changed, according to sociolinguistics, in many respects in its historical voyage from the Anglo-Saxon period (500-1100) through the Middle English period (1100-1500) and the constantly changing Modern English period (1500-present). It is also demonstrated in this language’s geopolitical and technological exploits of colonialism and computer age networking, which factors, among others, have led to making English effectively a global language. The courtesy book titled *DON’T: A Manual of Mistakes* has the following instruction on good speaking etiquette:

Don’t speak ungrammatically. Study books of grammar, and the writings of best authors.

Don’t pronounce incorrectly. Listen carefully to the conversation of cultivated people, to radio and television announcers, and, if in doubt, consult a good dictionary.

Don’t mangle your words, or smother them, or swallow them. Speak with a distinct enunciation.

Don’t talk in a high, shrill voice, and avoid nasal tones. Cultivate a chest-voice; learn to moderate your speech. Talk always in a fairly low register, but not so low as to make the voice resemble a growl.

Don’t keep your teeth or lips closed when speaking, and so make it difficult for the person you are addressing to hear distinctly what you say. If addressing someone hard of hearing, speak slowly, and turn your head in his or her direction.

Don’t use slang. There is some slang that, according to Thackeray, is gentlemanly slang, and other slang that is vulgar. If you do not know the difference, avoid slang altogether, and you will be safe.

Don’t use profane language, or exclamations of surprise in which the sacred name is employed.

Don't multiply epithets and adjectives. Don't be too fond of superlatives. Moderate your enthusiasm.

Don't use meaningless exclamations such as "Oh, my!" etc. Don't inject *sir* or *madam* too freely into your conversation. Never say *ma'am* at all. *Sir* is right towards superiors, but it must, even in this case, be sparingly used (Censor 1953:28-29).

A truism in linguistics is that currency and commonality validate a given language usage as correct or otherwise. For instance, for a long time, the traditional grammarian forbade the splitting of infinitives in English speech and writing. It was almost a heinous crime to make the blunder in speech or writing as a learner of English. And then American English users, mainly, started to split infinitives in speech and in writing in their variety of English as a mark of innovation and distinction from British English; this happened in the spirit that made American English to retain an older orthography that spelt words differently from modern British English. The Americans and others broke the rule of grammar not to split infinitives long and willfully enough for the error to validate itself as acceptable and correct, or popular and therefore correct. At the turn of the millennium, an editor of the authoritative Oxford dictionary series pronounced on BBC radio, world service, that it was grammatically acceptable thenceforth to split infinitives. Nowadays, it appears that not much respect is accorded the rules of grammar in speech and in writing. Social media, which has replaced television in popularity and prestige, has been instrumental and been exceptionally effective in the process of recycling grammatical errors and entrenching them. Social media has leveraged on the unprecedented high level of gullibility stirred up in people by an addictive, largely fulsome, cyber age culture. Fake news, for example, thrives on it.

DON'T says to not use slang at all, if one cannot find gentlemanly slang. But there is in the twenty-first century regular recourse to ungentlemanly slang even in public discourse. Sheer vulgarity is regularly spit out by users of English sometimes in very high places. Verbiage has become sport among those who occupy positions that fit the picture of polite society in the bygone times and described in literature. For example, former president of the United States of America Donald Trump is on record with his impolitic "shit-hole countries" effusion, among several other instances of profanities emanating from the American White House. These manifestations all accord with the spirit of the times. As William Butler Yeats puts it lyrically in "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world (Yeats 1919).

The local and global climate of irreverence is captured spectacularly in speech and in literature. It is also displayed in action. The African geopolitical terrain is not spared a reign of anarchy, as Chinua Achebe explores in his bestselling novel *Things Fall Apart* which is indebted to the foregoing poem for its title. The anarchic presence is only partly a European export to the African continent through colonialism and the language of colonialism. The African terrain has its own peculiar culture of irreverence that certain epistemes endeavour to mitigate. But the epistemic nuggets of wisdom and behaviour wear different labels according to the logic of cultural and ethnic pluralism of the continent.

DON'T exhorts not to "multiply epithets and adjectives" and "not to be too fond of

superlatives” in speech and writing. A piling up of epithets and adjectives in speech and writing might be considered ill-mannered by an auditor or reader. But the reaction by an audience will depend on the cultural context of the usage. Grandiloquence was considered a mark of the user’s erudition at the initial stage of the post-colonial experience in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for example. Verbosity in English language use was celebrated by a largely uneducated African populace who were proud that the community had produced a scholar who could demonstrate mastery of the language of colonialism in this way. The manifestation of bombast in speech and writing can be a point of humour in the authorial characterization of persons in literary works. For instance, in African writing characters such as Bambulu in J Ene Henshaw’s hilarious play titled *This Is Our Chance*, Chuks in Lekan Oyegoke’s epistolary novel with the title *Broken Ladders*, and Lakunle in Wole Soyinka’s rumbustious drama entitled *The Lion and the Jewel*. A critical verdict of suitably amusing or irritatingly off-putting verbiage regarding these characters’ language use will depend on the kind of cultural background that engenders it. The critical reaction will also be shaped by whether the literary critic is operating from an Afrocentric or a Eurocentric aesthetic standpoint.

But there are parallels in the kind of language use described as malapropism the type of solecism that in English usage mistakes words based on the linguistic resemblance of the affected words. The term is derived from Mrs Malaprop a character in the play titled *The Rivals* (1775) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* describes solecism as a “mistake in the use of language in speech or writing” and an “example of bad manners or unacceptable behaviour”. The questions that arise include, is there such a thing as solecism in a postmodern age? By what standards of judgments do behaviours qualify as solecism in the twenty-first century? While the Bambulus, Chukses, and Lakunles might have enjoyed the warm approval of the African milieus of the early decades of postcolonialism, the postmodern community would consider their linguistic bearing as rather Pecksniffian. English used that way would come across as stilted and arrogant. Partly, it is the reason many African immigrants in the Anglo-American black diaspora retain a tonal accent in their use of English where, in an earlier era, the immigrants would have aspired to speak English intonationally to sound like native speakers, to impress:

Don’t talk in a high, shrill voice, and avoid nasal tones. Cultivate a chest-voice; learn to moderate your speech. Talk always in a fairly low register, but not so low as to make the voice resemble a growl.

Newscasters of an erstwhile television age could be looked up to for guidance in matters of correct English usage as advised by *DON’T* because they were often products of grooming by a strict traditional grammarian who has since been replaced by a more indulgent language teacher on social media where anything goes, as the saying goes. Social media has replaced television culture as an exciting source of news and feature items in a computer or cyber age. The issue of standards of English language use today is a sore point even among language experts and linguists. The suggestion that there are standards to be observed is being questioned, especially with respect to spoken English. Several questions have been raised. For instance, of the many varieties of English which one of them is adoptable as the standard model, and on what grounds? What must a language have before it qualifies as correct or standard? A by-product of the intellectual disputation is a proposition of “Englishes” as a label for the numerous instances and geopolitical varieties of the global language (Crystal 2004). Don’t inject *sir* or *madam* too freely into your conversation. Never say *ma’am* at all. *Sir* is right towards superiors, but it must, even in this case, be sparingly used.

Careful observation reveals a near impossibility among Yoruba users of English to respect the injunction to use the words “sir” and “madam” sparingly. The Yoruba attach considerable importance to the necessity to show respect as a demonstration of “omoluwabi” or good upbringing. Respect is culturally cherished in the Yoruba culture to a point that the language reflects it by assigning plural pronoun forms to singular subjects based on age, mostly, and societal status. A younger person must defer to an older man or woman in the said socio-cultural context. The age difference might be only of a few months. Respect is physically demonstrated in gestures of prostration by boys/men and kneeling down by girls/women to older persons. Moreover, the prostration or kneeling down is expected to be full and deliberate, that is, unhurried. This contrasts with the curtsying before royals that the English culture accommodates. A dictionary description of curtsy says it is “a formal sign made by a woman in a dance or to say hello or goodbye to an important person, by bending her knees with one foot in front of the other” as in “She curtsied to the Queen” (Oxford 2020). In the Yoruba culture, curtsying as described above before an elder, let alone royalty, would be construed as discourteous and lacking in proper home training.

At the level of language among the Yoruba, it has become common practice not only to mark age and status by using plural pronouns and verb forms to address or refer to individuals, the words “sir” and “ma” (shortened form for madam) have been borrowed from English and incorporated into the Yoruba to reinforce the cultural mechanisms of showing respect at domestic and public levels of social interaction. Those words are so lavishly used by Yoruba speakers today that one wonders at the level of this dependency on two English words in phatic and other forms of linguistic interaction. The caveat though is that the modern Yoruba speaker of the language must be wary of effusions containing these words because increasingly they have become markers of fulsome respect. The lavish inclusion of “sir” and “ma” in language use by a speaker must be evaluated alongside the accompanying paralinguistic indicators for sincerity of intention.

The display could conceal a wide range of deception, anything from backhanded compliment or brazen rudeness to irritating obsequiousness on the part of a speaker. Predictably, this pattern of linguistic dependency on the words “sir” and “ma” to reinforce a cultural insistence on politeness in speech and behaviour is present in what is increasingly referred to as Nigerian English. It is a cultural baggage exported from the indigenous language domain into that of the local variant of the English language. The bilingual speaker is himself/herself not immune to a psychological disposition to be hypocritical whenever it is convenient or expedient to be so, or as the need arises, or simply as a force of habit. The exchange of cultural materials by the two forms of language, namely, indigenous and foreign, is not as simple or straightforward as it appears. This is so because the words in question are themselves original imports from the English where, as *DON'T* indicates, they are meant to be used sparingly. Another reason for the avid linguistic acquisition might be because “sir” and “ma” do not appear to have direct linguistic equivalents in the Yoruba language adequate to expressing the cultural sentiments highlighted. In the event, the “new English” of Nigeria is susceptible at a colloquial level to an overuse of those words.

Prognosis

Naturally, a lot has changed since the scenario presented in *DON'T*, in general the attitude to English rather fundamentally. To illustrate the point, further excerpt from the popular book advises in respect of an ill-used letter “h”:

DON'T omit the correct use of the letter “h”; but pronounce it with a slight aspirate, and

with a full breath from the chest. To sound it at the back of the mouth gives force enough for correctness. There is no greater mark of real vulgarity than an obtrusive effort to make other people understand that the speaker is not to be numbered among the common people who do not know where to use “h’s”. In this as in other matters, correctness should appear to be natural and instinctive.

DON’T, on the other hand, put an “h” where that valuable letter should be omitted. It is very unpleasant to the cultivated ears of others to hear of “a horange” or “a hanimal”. Consult a pronouncing dictionary if you are at all uncertain whether that tricky eighth letter of the alphabet should be silent or sounded (Censor 1953:29).

The letter “h” can be problematical with second language users of English who sometimes get confused about its correct usage. Partly, the difficulty is a product of the sometimes rather erratic ways of the grammar of English that makes rules which do not cover certain instances of use. While only mainly the unlearned in English might be prone to saying “a horange” or “a hanimal”, a trained second language user of English may have real difficulty with pronouncing the words “honest” and “honour” correctly. It can be irritating indeed to hear a speaker sound the “h” in those words. Similarly, the “b” in such words as “bomb”, “comb”, “tomb” may be inadvertently sounded by both uneducated and educated users of the language. English has so many rules and exception to rules that must be mastered by a learner of the language to be able to sustain intelligible communication.

The injunction by *DON’T* that learners consult books of grammar and pronunciation for competent and confident use of English has today been overtaken by certain socio-political developments. Reading and writing are complementary activities, hence the truism that if you can’t read you can’t write. Technology is one of the factors that made English global and ironically it has become an engine of this language as well as other languages’ undermining in an Internet Age. A vibrant reading culture began to decline in the mid-twentieth century at the advent of the Television Age (before the Cyber Age) as the reading populace shifted their time, energy and attention from reading a good book to sitting endlessly in front of a television screen with the result that there has been a corresponding fall in the capacity to master English. Social media is the current culprit.

There is a campaign in certain circles of social media that the users of English should be at liberty to use the language in whichever way they pleased or felt able to do without deferring to the rules of grammar. They describe grammar as being made up of tyrannical rules that infringed on a user’s sense of freedom and that in consequence there should be no pass or failed grades in formal English language studies in schools. A serious language student might be tempted to dismiss the foregoing grouse against the formal testing English as rather fanciful and unserious. But that would be a mistake given the tendency to over-democratisation of society in many parts of the world today where anything goes or is accepted as “acceptable” in the name of democracy. The prognosis is that English will continue to be orthographically, phonetically and grammatically “mangled” in the Internet Age which has led to an erosion of reading culture in the postcolonies especially. These days, not many students of English have the time for books of grammar or phonetics or for reading literature out of curiosity to see how the language has been used creatively and for entertainment. Students of English tend to learn the language cursorily from social media use of the language which cannot always be guaranteed to be orthographically, phonetically, and grammatically correct.

Conclusion

The deduction is inescapable that much that is in the epistemes and behavioural codes contained in *DON'T* have been overtaken by existential conditions. Even within the linguistic provenance of the English language, a lot of the propositions have become outdated, not excepting in royal circles. Many of the don'ts (observance to avoid within society) highlighted in the publication are sufficiently reoriented to be deemed acceptable behavioural codes nowadays. The degree of change is such that the book's title may be revised with profit to render it more ambiguous and read: *DON'T: A Manual of Undecidable Errors*. Such a revision will, moreover, be suitably postmodernist in spirit.

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