

TAROK INSULTS

Social and Linguistic aspects of insulting expressions in Tarok

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ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Abusive language and insults are presumably as highly developed and as widespread in Africa as elsewhere in the world. Despite this, there has been little serious investigation of the nature, social context and linguistic aspects of insults. What literature there is usually concentrates on insults in ritual contexts beloved of anthropologists. A valuable discussion of the linguistic aspects of insults is given in Samarin (1969).

The inception of this paper was the discovery of a large class of ‘badly-behaved’ adjectives in the Tarok language of east-central Nigeria. Tarok is usually classified as an East Benue-Congo language, falling in the general group of Platoid, and heading a small group of languages known by the unlovely name of Tarokoid. All the published linguistic literature on the Tarok is listed in the references. The Tarok people are centred on Langtang and number a minimum of 100,000. Despite a large number of clan groups there are only very minor dialectal differences between different regions.

The paper describes the social context of insults among the Tarok and then the different means of expressing various levels of insult and in particular the differences with ordinary sentence structures. It concludes by suggesting that these are probably more widespread in Central Nigeria and that the reason they are little known is simply that linguists have not been aware of their existence.

2. Social contexts of insulting behaviour among the Tarok

2.1 Introduction

Insults can be heard among the Tarok in four major contexts;

- a. interpersonal insults
- b. songs of the **ovan gi bil** herdboys
- c. joking relationships, especially at funerals
- d. insults traded between men and women during **izan daməŋ** songs

2.2 Personal insults

Personal insults correspond to those characteristic of European society, except that speakers have to take care about their effect on the person insulted. A man who insults another man can provoke violence relatively easily. Most insults, except those considered mild can only be uttered behind a speaker’s back. It is also common for parents to use abusive expressions to recalcitrant children.

Numerous Tarok people are descended from Ngas people, especially the Ice clan. The following is a typical abusive expression.

a	ḥəŋ	‘fu	wa	aDuk
he	stingy	like		Ngas person

This corresponds to the sort of stereotypical English characterisation of the Scots as mean. It is regarded as very insulting to them in particular.

The following insult can be used by any other clan against the Zini. It is based on a real incident many years ago when a Zini man fell out of a tree and covered up his embarrassment by claiming he had simply taken the ‘quick way down’.

a	dakuluŋ	wa	aZini	kə	nru	kə	pal	iko
it is	near	like	Zini man	like	fall	like	from top	mahogany
Falling out of a mahogany tree is simply a Zini man’s quick way of climbing down								

This has become a semi-proverbial rebuke to an adult who does something foolish and tries to cover it up.

2.3 Herdboys’ songs

The second category refers to the songs of the **ovan gi bil** or herdboys, a phase of Tarok adolescence. Still today, in remoter areas and formerly throughout the region, boys between about 7 and 18 years were sent to a semi-permanent camp far away from the settlement to watch over the livestock. This evolved into a virtually complete sub-culture of its own, with elected leaders, games, songs and musical instruments. Part of the musical culture involved the competitive singing of abusive songs, mostly referring to the female relatives of the other boys. These songs were usually grossly anatomical and adults pretend to disapprove of them, although almost all adult males

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also went through a phase of singing them. In addition, it was common for boys from one village to sing songs abusing those from another in order to provoke them to a fight.

EXAMPLE

2.4 Joking relationships

The third category refers to joking partners. Joking relationships are known as **ijām** in Tarok society and are still taken very seriously. Each of the clans has a joking partner-clan and individuals from your partner-clan can shout out grossly abusive insults when they meet you, make sexual comments about men's wives and disrupt clan rituals. In the most extreme case, joking-partners will turn up at the funeral of a respected elder, insult the dead man and then jump in the grave and say that he only died to escape their insults. Despite this, it would be an even worse insult to the one who died if they did not appear and to insult the dead in this way is part of honouring them. The worst insults in Tarok can be publicly expressed in these contexts without any consequences for the insulter.

In Tarok, joking relations are exchanged between clans and these are focused on certain stereotyped traditional insults. The Tumwat clan, usually considered to be original inhabitants of the area when the Tarok first came, are remembered as having ceded rights to the incomers for a piece of meat. This is treated as **iboli**, a generic term for lizards and the Tumwat can then be insulted;

ùTəm̀wàt	yáp	kà	m̀bin	kakúl	iboli
Tumwat	give	against	land	because	lizard
The Tumwat exchanged their land for a lizard.					

These verbal insults can take on aspects of practical jokes. In 1996 the chief of Tumwat died. Representatives of the Bwarat clan, attending the funeral, brought with them hundreds of live and cooked agama lizards. They released the live lizards on the grave and handed the cooked ones to the Tumwat to eat.

2.5 Izan idaməŋ

A practice that has almost disappeared at present is the performance of **izan idaməŋ**. Ceremonial songs performed every evening for someone wounded by a leopard until they are healed. Part of the healing process is that there is no sexual intercourse during this period. Men and women trade songs between them that are often harsh and insulting and these are intended to damp down their sexual urges.

EXAMPLE

3. Types of insult

From the linguistic point of view the most intriguing aspect of insults in Tarok is the dislocation of syntax and the hijacking of ordinary words in special constructions. These can be broadly divided into three classes;

- a) preposed adjectives that do not show concord
- b) predicative verbs with copied head-noun
- c) comparative expressions

3.1 Adjectives

3.1.1 Invariable preposed adjectives

Some of the most common insults in Tarok use special adjectives that usually have a pejorative context. These are usually placed before the noun and do not show concord with it, in contrast with the more normal types of adjective. They can also be used in predicative constructions as in Table 1;

Table 1. Tarok insults using invariable preposed adjectives

Qualifier	bóláp anùŋ' anùŋ' abólápbólàp	thin mouth 1 thin mouth	insulting descriptive
Predicative	anuŋ' fa a bóláp k_a na	'mouth is very it thin with him' 3	insulting
Comparative	anùŋ' p_a bóláp wa x	a mouth as thin as x 2	insulting

The predicative construction is considered to be softer or less insulting than the use of a bare qualifier, but neither would be used to someone's face except in an argument. This construction is considered more descriptive than insulting.

Insulting adjectives can usually only qualify a specific noun, although occasionally, as in the case of **bóláp** they have two applications. All these words appear to be unanalysable in Tarok. Common insulting adjectives are given below together with the noun to which they apply. Examples are given where adjectives apply to more than one body part. A complete list is given in the Appendix (Table A1).

This insulting/descriptive contrast is very distinct in some words of this type. For example;

gálák open too wide (eyes)

This is considered an insult in the expression **gálák iwu**

However, when reduplicated and placed after the noun as an adverb the meaning is that an individual is nosy.

iwuwu p_a gálákgálák ko nva n-ya atak k_at

his eyes are so clear that nothing is hidden to him

The reduplicated concordial adjectives such as **-gúlúkgùlùk** are considered purely descriptive. They have a distinctive tone-pattern, HH(H)LL(L). and can also be used in the adverbial construction;

-guluk	describes a cavity that is deeper than expected
acwán'	ear with a deep cavity
agúlúkgùlùk	
acwán' p_a gúlúk	ear with a deep cavity

kpəkəp thick, usually applied to the mouth, hands and leg in insults

le a mi k_a co kpəkəp ashar! Go away with your thick leg!

-kpəkəp, thick, usually applied to the mouth, hands and leg

can also be reduplicated. **le a mi k_a co ka anuŋ' akpəkəpkpəkəp**. Go away with those thick lips of yours!

3.1.2 Comparative construction

There is a comparative construction **p-...wa**. This is realised as **p_a** with adjectival forms and **pe** with verbs.

These adjectives can be used in a construction normally considered adverbial, i.e. with the particle **p_a**;

ifáŋ'	pá	gbífi	wa	aturet
fingers	part.	short	like	rizga
your fingers are short like rizga				

It is possible to reduplicate the head noun after the insultative;

anuŋ (pe) cogo anuŋ wa icalolo

your mouth is as protruding as a mudfish

ishi pá taktai wa adakdai

his head is as flat as a shallow calabash

Where the head-noun is reduplicated indicating possession it cannot be copied after the adverb

afufu	pá	zhigor	wa	izəmbər
his belly	part.	swollen	like	blacksmith's bellows
his belly is swollen like a blacksmith's bellows				

In one song text one of these adjectives follows the noun; this is taken as a construction with **pá** where the **pá** has been deleted;

anùŋ'	thick-lipped	mouth	(but	implies
gbəŋ'laŋ' ⁺	vagina)			

One adjective, **damashiri**⁺, can only be used in this type of construction.

asal-wú pá damashiri⁺ shapeless face

Damashiri cannot be reduplicated. This word may be from Hausa, explain the irregular construction.

3.2 Verbs

Apart from this special class of adjectives, certain ordinary verbs have been hijacked for use in pejorative constructions. The most common construction is marked by the repetition of the head-noun at the end of the phrase. Sometimes the head-noun can then be omitted at the beginning of the phrase.

acè	mwal	pe	acè
penis	be fat	that	penis
big penis			

The verbs use in these expressions are;

ɓak	be piled up
bál	be wide
dák	be dirty
gbàŋ	be deep
mwal	be fat
mwap	be dented
nij	smell
ret	??
waŋ	be long

Common examples;

Table 2. Insults using a repeated body part

Tarok	Gloss
ace mwal pe ace	big penis
adək bál pe adək	wide waist
adək ret pe adək	narrow waist
anun' mwal pe anun'	big mouth
ashar bál pe ashar	webbed feet
icikpar waŋ pe icikpar	long back of the head
igun mwal pe bəŋ'gar'	fat navel
inyin ɓak pe inyin	impacted teeth
ishi mwal pe ishi	big head
iwu gbəŋ' pe iwu	deep eye sockets
iwu mwal pe iwu	big eyes
izir dák pe izir	body dirty
izir niŋ pe izir	body smells
njaŋ' mwap pe njaŋ'	cheeks pressed inwards
nkulyaŋ'gu waŋ' pe nkulyaŋ'gu	long elbows

The insult is compounded in terms of intensity when a comparison is to a concrete item, usually an animal;

ɓótcó narrow (mouth like a bird)

anunun' pa ɓótcó wa anun' inyil
his mouth introd. narrow like mouth bird

ishi ɓan na ngembu
head red it ngembu
your head is as red as an **ngembu** insect

or

ishi ɓan pe ishi na ngembu
head red like head it ngembu
your head is as red as an **ngembu** insect

This expression is found in a children's song.

ipəŋ mwal pe ipəŋ wa mpwakap
your throat ? your as big as toad
Your external throat is as big as a toad's

adək ret pe adək wa inaŋbule
your waist like your like hornet
your waist is as narrow as a hornet's

izir niŋ pe izir wa iyù your body smells like sorrel-seed cake

izir dak (pe izir) wa ità ʔəŋgum your body is as dirty as the vagina of ʔəŋgum

ace mwal pe ace wa aShinshin
your penis is as big as that of Shingshing (a former, now proverbial, madman)

The following descriptive form would not be insulting.

adək ret wa adək inaŋbule your waist is as narrow as a hornet's

These forms can be adapted in comparative expressions. For example;

iwu gbaŋ' pe iwu wa ace idak
 eye deep-set comp. eye to be like hole mancala board
 his eyes are deep-set like the cavities in a mancala board

nkulyaŋ'g waŋ' pe nkulyaŋ'g wa icikpar inyalu(k)
u u
 elbow be long comp. elbow be like back of head hammerkop
 your elbows are as long as the back of a hammerkop's head

In one case an 'adverbial' construction similar to that used for **gbífi** above is combined with the repetition of the head-noun.

atak pa kpakpa atak the 'place' (part of body unspecified) is shapeless

3.3 Comparative constructions

In English, a common type of abusive expressions among children compare parts of the body of something undesirable, for example; 'a face like a squashed tomato'. This pattern is also common in Tarok, although it requires considerable cultural knowledge to know what is considered undesirable.

yar alur cer ngbat ka
 carry nose put pot with
 your nose is as big as a pot

myàndàr ijili

to walk or run with an exaggerated buttock movement, implying great effort without actually moving fast. Used by a speaker to insult someone moving away from them.

ikírâm ikírâm n. 1. pointed-faced black monkey, probably the black colobus *Colobus polykomos* 2. derogatory reference to a man who thinks he is clever and can outwit others

4. Conclusion

4.1 Beyond Tarok

The Nupe and Gbari languages, in the west-central Nigeria, have a variety of abusive expressions, directed against both individuals and animals. A particularly interesting expression in Nupe is;

eyé kodo lit. 'eye deep-set'

This is considered very insulting and is usually only shouted at pats monkeys seen at the edge of a field of crops. This notion corresponds to Tarok **iwu gbaŋ' pe iwu** although the form of expression is quite different. Adjectives in Nupe and Gbari always follow the noun, so insulting expressions are not marked in the same way as Tarok.

Further research

It seems unlikely that this is a full representation of Tarok insults; the expressions of the **ovan gi bil** herdboys have barely been touched, and the insulting expressions of joking partners is still under investigation. Even, so the present study has revealed a rich field, both in terms of the lexicon and in terms of specific syntactic structures that differ widely from normal patterns. This suggests that other African languages may well have much to offer in this area.

Table A1. Insulting adjectives with the nouns they usually qualify

balambu⁺ acwáŋ'	wide ears
baraŋ'gaŋ'⁺ ishí	mis-shapen head
ḃátál ijili	protruding buttocks
ḃátál ishí	protruding back of the head
bəŋ'gaŋ'⁺ igum	large navel
bototo⁺ alúr	wide nostrils
ḃákáp anuŋ'	ducklike mouth with projecting lips
ḃákáp ashar	wobbling leg (i.e. s.o. who walks like a duck)
ḃóláp anuŋ'	thin mouth
ḃófó anuŋ'	narrow mouth
ḃótcó anuŋ'	narrow mouth (like a bird)
cágá ishí	long head
cóbét anuŋ'	narrow and long mouth
cógó anuŋ'	narrow mouth
ḃáptál ikoksok	slightly protruding chest
ḃúktúl ijili	small buttocks
fíŋ'gúm iwu	half-open eyes
fukturok⁺	shortish and unattractive*
fyályáŋ' igwál	thin arms
fyángwúl icikpar	protruding back of the head
gálák iwu	open too wide (eyes)
gbakaka⁺ anuŋ'	long mouth
gbalar⁺ iwu	big, reddened eyes (like a witch)
gbəŋ'laŋ'⁺ anuŋ'	thick-lipped mouth (but implies vagina)
gbífi ifáŋ'	short fingers
guḃəl⁺ isu	protruding forehead
kakrak⁺ ijili	desiccated buttocks
kapsal ishí	unkempt hair (lit. head)
kpáŋ'fít ijili	porridge-like (i.e. hard) exposed buttocks
kpaŋ'gum⁺ isu	hard forehead
kpakkpəlák⁺ anuŋ'	thick (lips)
kpəkəp ashar	thick leg (also hand, mouth)
mwákáp anuŋ'	lips pressed inwards
myalalyaŋ'⁺ awò	thin arms
nyímkwí acè	small penis
pákkón ishàk	short neck
pandaŋ' ishi	flattened head
rápjaŋ' ashár	thin legs
ryákḃól afú	small stomach
ryákḃól ijili	small buttocks
shiwuli⁺ asal-wù	small and swarthy face
súkswí mmyâr	bushy female pubic hair
swágá ashár	long legs
swálát awó	long and thin hands
táktái ishí	flat head
tálám ishí	shiny head
tálám isú	shiny forehead
tíŋ'gyáŋ' afú	round, swollen belly
vuntur⁺ ijili	big buttocks
zháplák ijili	flat buttocks
zhígór afú	baglike belly

mújúr adv. short as in the insult: **mújúr anuŋg**

*only in **fukturok⁺ x** where x is the name of a person

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