

A Universal Pragmatic Analysis of "The Last Sermon" of the Prophet Muhammad(SAW)

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Abstract

The efficacy of a message is usually promoted by how much relevance the message has for the people to which it is directed. The relevance of a message to a people is determined by how far the message addresses issues that are paramount to solving or addressing their problems or needs. Nigeria is at present undergoing a terribly trying period comparable only in its bloodiness with what she went through during a thirty-month civil war that consumed many lives and properties. Nigerians are daily inundated with news of violent occurrences in virtually everywhere in the country. If it was not about Boko Haram insurgency, it would be about Niger Delta militants' attacks; or it could be about armed robbery, kidnapping for rituals, or sexual harassment. Every day in Nigeria has its own array of horrendous criminal activities, the mildest of which are money laundering, usury, seemingly institutionally induced or protected embezzlement of public funds and official recklessness. Against this background, this paper examined the contents of the last sermon of Prophet Muhammed (pbh), using Herbasmas (1979) Theory of Universal Pragmatics, to see the extent to which it is adequate for solving Nigeria's problems and rescuing Nigerians from their present predicaments. Our analysis revealed "The Last Sermon" as having met the validity claims set forth by Herbasmas, and it is thus considered suitable and appropriate for tackling Nigeria's problems. The paper therefore recommended that Nigerian Government and her agencies and Nigerians in general, should study, imbibe and apply the contents of "The Last Sermon" to solving their problems if Nigeria and Nigerians must have peace.

Key words: universal pragmatics, Last Sermon, message, Prophet Muhammad

1. Introduction

The profundity of a message often hinges on a number of factors which include:

- i) the trustworthiness of the originator of the message
- ii) how topical the message is, that is, its relevance in tackling the problems facing those to whom the message is addressed
- iii) the appropriateness of the audience to which the message is targeted
- iv) adequacy of the medium through which the message is conveyed.

With the foregoing at the background, this paper analyzes Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) last sermon, otherwise called "The Farewell Sermon", using Habermas (1979) Universal Pragmatic theory, to see the extent to which non-adherence to the contents of the message by Nigerians has been responsible for the myriads of problems of insecurity presently confronting Nigeria, and determine how far the observance of the maxims in the message would go in helping Nigeria solve these seemingly intractable problems.

Nigeria is at present undergoing a terrible trying period, which, if not handled carefully, sincerely and determinedly, may spell the demise of her corporate existence, with only fit-to-be-imagined dire consequences. Nigerians are daily inundated with news of violent activities taking place almost everywhere in the country. While Boko Haram dominates the northern part of the country with their orgy of violence, the Niger Delta militants daily threaten the nation's economic life-line,

oil, through pipeline vandalization and high profile kidnappings for ransome. In virtually all parts of the country, armed robbery, kidnapping for rituals and blatant brigandage have become routine occurrences. Each day in Nigeria has its own share of horrendous criminal activities, the mildest of which are money laundering, usury, seemingly institutionalized embezzlement of public funds, highly compromised judicial system and other forms of official recklessness.

This paper, therefore, examines the contents of the “Last Sermon”, employing Habermas (1979) Universal Pragmatic theory, to highlight the extent to which the adhering to the teachings in the sermon could help Nigeria in tackling her problems. According to Habermas, (1979, p.1), human competition, conflict and strategic action are attempts to achieve understanding that have failed because of modal confusions. It therefore implies that coming to terms with how people understand or misunderstand one another could lead to a reduction of social conflict. The fundamental principles of Universal Pragmatics are that anyone acting communicatively cannot avoid raising the following validity claims:

- (i) uttering something understandably;
- (ii) giving the hearer something to understand;
- (iii) making himself understandable and
- (iv) coming to understanding with another person.

This paper will subject “The Last Sermon” to these validity claims with a view to establishing the extent to which it meets them. This is as a step towards establishing how far its adoption can give Nigeria and Nigerians a clean break from their current trauma.

1.1 Research Questions

This study will address three broad research questions:

- i) How comparable are the Prophet’s primary audience with the present Nigerians, whom we shall refer to as his secondary or wider (universal) audience?
- ii) To what extent does “The Last Sermon” conform with Habermas (1979) postulations?
- iii) What recommends “The Last Sermon” as an appropriate solution to the Nigerian problems?

The paper is in five sections: Section One gives the general background to the study, presents our research questions, discusses, briefly, the Prophet’s personality, his primary audience as well as his wider or universal audience, particularly Nigerians. Section Two discusses the theoretical background to the study. In this section, Habermas (1979) Universal Pragmatics is discussed and its relevance as an analytical model for handling “The Last Sermon” is highlighted. In Section Three, the datum for this study, which is an English edition of the Prophet’s “Last Sermon” or “Farewell Message/Sermon”, is presented and analyzed, using Habermas (1979) Universal Pragmatic theory. Section Four presents our findings and recommendations, while Section Five summarizes and concludes the study.

1.3 The Primary Audience of the Prophet’s Last Sermon

For the purpose of effectively establishing the relevance or otherwise of “The Last Sermon” to solving Nigeria’s problems, it is necessary that its primary audience is discussed, so as to see if any parallel or similarity can be established between it and the present Nigerians. We would start by briefly looking at the people of Mecca before Prophet Muhammad’s calling and

later look at the people that constituted the Prophet's audience at the time he delivered "The Farewell Sermon".

Muhammad was born in Mecca on Monday, 2nd August, 570A.D (Ibn Kathir, 1996, p.363). He was described as "doubly orphaned", having lost his father before he was born, and his mother when he was six years old. He therefore had to live first with his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, and later with his uncle, Abu Talib, upon the former's death.

The time before Muhammad began his Prophetic calling in Mecca was referred to as the period of *Jahiliyya*, a period of darkness or ignorance (Doi, 1979, p.76). At this period, the Quraish, the tribe into which he was born, was made up of idolators and worshippers of al-'Uzza, al-Lāt and Al-Manāt, whom they regarded as the three daughters of Allah. The idols representing these gods were placed in the Ka'abah, together with several others (Doi, 1979, p.75). According to Doi (ibid), this was a period when Arab women used to dance naked before their men, some of whom, as poets, used to compose poems concerning every part of the women's body. It was also a period when female children used to be buried alive, and blood feuds were so common among the people such that when a father was dying as a result of a feud with another tribe, he would instruct his son to avenge his death.

As explained by Ibn Kathir (1996, p.365), in the Arabia of the time before Muhammad's prophetic calling, "though family relations afforded some degree of protection to citizens, yet strangers were frequently exposed to persecution and oppression". Not only were people robbed of their goods, but they were also robbed of their wives and daughters. The kind of people that the Arabs were before Muhammad's prophetic calling has been aptly summed up by S.A. Maududī, in his book, *The Prophet of Islam* (1967), cited in Doi (1979, p.78):

In fact, whatever notions they had of morals, culture and civilization were primitive and uncouth. They could hardly discriminate between pure and impure, lawful and unlawful, civil and uncivil.

They were described as lawless and cruel people "sunk in barbarism and addicted to the observation of rites and superstitions" (Ibn Kathira, 1996, p.367). These were the people to whom Muhammad directed his initial divine preaching, a pre-occupation that engaged him for twenty-three years.

However, it was in 632 AD, the tenth year of the Hijrah, that Prophet Muhammad delivered his last sermon, but this time around, it was to a reformed audience made up of between 90,000 and 140,000 faithfuls that performed the pilgrimage with him (Ibn Kathir, 1996, p.438). They were people that shunned idolatry, with its nameless abominations, people that were united in one bond of faith, hope and charity. They had become, through the Prophet's persistent influence, a people that were united together by the ties of brotherhood rather than people that hitherto cherished perpetual wars. They had become people who were constantly being summoned by something "much higher, purer and diviner, calling them to the practice of charity, goodness, justice and universal love" (Ibn Kathir, 1996, p. 438).

If critically compared with the entire contents of Prophet Muhammad's prophetic mission, "The Last Sermon" was a recapitulation of what the Prophet had been engaged in among his people for twenty-three years. The message was more or less a way of reminding the people for the last time,

what the Prophet had been telling them over the years. As a man of incomparable divine foresight, the Prophet knew what the world would turn to after his departure, and he decided to leave behind a thought provoking message to serve as a guidance to people.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Habermas (1979, p.1), the task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding. He described language as the specific medium of understanding at the socio-cultural stage of evolution, while assuming that other forms of social action like conflict, competition and strategic action in general, are derivatives of action oriented to reaching understanding. However, the focus of Universal Pragmatics is explicit speech actions as against what he calls “non-verbalized actions and bodily expressions” (ibid).

Habermas (1979, p.2) is of the view that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise what he calls universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated or redeemed. His universal validity claims, which are four, are:

- (i) Uttering something understandably;
- (ii) Giving the hearer something to understand;
- (iii) Making himself thereby understandable;
- (iv) Coming to an understanding with another person.

In other words, part of communicative competence is that the speaker must be comprehensible by choosing a comprehensible expression that will facilitate a correspondence between her and the hearer. In essence, the speaker must choose expressions that would make the hearer understand her. In addition, the speaker must have the intention of being truthful - she must communicate a true proposition, and must not set out to intentionally deceive the hearer. The hearer should be able to share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must also have the intention of expressing herself truthfully in order that the hearer can believe whatever the speaker says. The speaker must be trustworthy and be seen by the hearer to be so. Also, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance to facilitate an agreement between the speaker and the hearer with regard to a recognized normative background (Habermas, 1979, p.2-3)

Commenting on Habermas (1979) theory of Universal Pragmatics, Doughty (nd) described it as the “supreme, absolute moral law of rational self-determining beings”, which simply put, means: act according to the principles that would remain ethical even if they were elevated to the status of universal law. As pointed out by Doughty, the difference between Kant’s and Habermas’ propositions is that while Kant made his own a private enterprise for the individual, Habermas made his own a universal project.

The goal of Habermas in universal pragmatics is the possibility of reaching a consensus that must be premised on a speech situation in which all participants must be free to make up their own minds, possess communicative competence and be free from coercion. Difficult as it is to attain this type of goal, which Doughty describes as utopian, it is still desirable for the attainment of a peaceful society. Habermas, observes Doughty, “is offering a model of wellness for the polity. He has (more or less) successfully diagnosed the pathologies of contemporary public life, and offers a course of political therapy”.

In the next section, aspects of Habermas' theory of universal pragmatics will be used to analyze the Prophet's last sermon with a view to suggesting it for the resolution of Nigeria's security and other related problems.

3. "The Last Sermon"

3.1 Introduction

The Prophet's last sermon analyzed here is an English edition translated from the original Arabic text and printed and distributed by Muhammad Taofiq Islamic Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria.

As pointed out by Ibn Kathir (1996, pp 438-439), on the return of the sacred month of pilgrimage, the Prophet, "under the presentiment of his approaching end", undertook a farewell pilgrimage to Mecca. The Prophet left Mecca in February 632 with a concourse of his faithfuls estimated to number between ninety thousand and one hundred and forty thousand. Just before completing all the rites of the pilgrimage, and seated on top of his camel on Mount Arafat, the Prophet delivered "The Last Sermon", which Doi (1979, p. 81) calls "a noble sermon in which he laid emphasis on man's duties to his fellow beings". The sermon was said have been repeated five times by the Prophet to demonstrate its importance:

3.2 Data Analysis

"The Last Sermon" would be subjected to Habermas seven idealized presuppositions which, according to him, a speech act must fulfill before it could have the desired illocutionary force potentials and be regarded as meeting universal validity claims. As Doi (1979, p.82), points out, "The Last Sermon" touched about fifteen social aspects that concern the life of everyone in her or his human relationships. It emphasized issues that had a bearing on human relationships which could help in establishing peace among human beings and security in the world. Such issues include sanctity of human life, fairness to others (since no evil-doer will go unpunished), commitment to spiritual obligations to promote universal peace, fairness to women, fulfilling obligations to fellow human beings, abstinence from usury and covetousness. We should recall that the essence of Habermas Universal Pragmatic theory is the promotion of understanding among human beings through communication to ensure peace. In this regard, "The Last Sermon" is a communicative action aimed at alerting people to their responsibilities to one another so as to live together in peace.

The sermon opened with a call: "O people, lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year, I shall ever be amongst you again". This is a requestive speech act asking for people's attention. The purpose of this opening part of the sermon was for the Prophet to ensure that his speech act had a generative power, that is, to ensure that his speech could influence his audience such that they could take up an interpersonal relation with him. The Prophet wanted to make sure that his speech had the necessary illocutionary force potentials in order for it to have the intended perlocutionary effect on the people. The Prophet emphasized his mortality by emphasizing to his audience that he might not be with them as to speak with them again. This had the effect of foregrounding the sincerity of the Prophet in what he was about to tell the people, to let the people know that his message was not meant to benefit him but the people themselves. By this, the opening of the sermon has met one of Habermas' idealized presuppositions, which is that a participant in a communication should be open- she/he should not suppress or exclude any relevant argument. The Prophet had made it clear that his sermon might be the last to the people.

The fact that the Prophet addressed his audience in Arabic language has made the sermon as a whole to have satisfied the first of Habermas' idealized presuppositions, that is, participants in a communicative exchange should use the same linguistic expression in the same way without ambiguity. The Prophet's requestive speech act, that opened his sermon, is followed by another: "Take these words to those who could not be present here today". This shows that the Prophet did not intend his message for his immediate audience alone. He was reported to have followed this second requestive speech act by an invocation of God's blessing for whoever spreads the message and an explanation of the reason he had for making it:

May God bless the person who after having heard me, guards my words and takes them to others... It is possible that you do not understand the importance of my words here, but there are people in the world who would understand the meaning of my words better than you. Therefore, understand that you should take my words to others who are not present here today, for it happens often that the messenger does not know the importance of the message he is carrying (Doi, 1979, p. 82).

The prophet's request that his message should be taken to others who were not present on Mount Arafat demonstrates that it is meant not only for his primary audience, but humanity at large, as "there are people in the world who would understand the meaning of my words better than you". This shows the message to have met the fifth of Habermas' idealized presuppositions that required participants in communication to expand their validity that is understood to have significance beyond the specific context of discourse. This means that contributions in a discourse should be capable of universal application. The Prophet was sure that the contents of his last sermon would have universal application.

After opening a line of communication and establishing a basis for communicative intersubjectivity with his audience, as Universal Pragmatic theory demands, the Prophet then dwelt on issues that were paramount to the life of the people around him, and which he was sure would be paramount to the life of every human being (as enumerated on page 12 of this study). All the areas touched by the Prophet in the sermon met the other aspects of Habermas' idealized presuppositions. For example, the message did not use any persuasive force beyond talking about issues that could promote internal and societal peace (presupposition III). The contents of the sermon were inclusive, as they left nothing out that is necessary for peaceful human co-existence which should be of common interest to every human being (presupposition II). Since the sermon relates primarily to human social life, it is enough motivation for a common concern by the people for a better argument. The personality of Prophet Muhammad, which was subjected to critical analysis by different commentators, was enough (and still is) to confer validity claims on the contents of the sermon. By this, the sixth idealized presupposition that requires all validity claims to be subjected to critical evaluation in argumentation has been met.

Having established that "The Last Sermon" met all of Habermas' idealized presupposition conditions, we shall now examine the sermon against Habermas' four universal validity claims. The first universal validity claim requires anyone acting communicatively to utter something that is understandable. The contents of "The Last Sermon" were expected to be understandable to

Prophet Muhammad's primary audience, since the sermon was rendered in Arabic, the language of his primary audience. The second universal validity claim expects any participant in a speech action to give her/his hearers something to understand. The contents of "The Last Sermon" were things that the Prophet's primary audience would understand, as they were a recap of their past lives which the Prophet did not want them to go back to. "The Last Sermon" should also be meaningful to the current population of human race, as it touches on the ills that have bedeviled their society. The third universal validity claim has also been met by "The Last Sermon" as, by giving the sermon in Arabic, the language of his primary audience, and on issues relating to their social life, the Prophet had paved the way for people to understand him. The message retains its profundity even when translated to other languages for other people to have access to it. This is because it addresses issues that are pertinent to their peaceful co-existence. The fourth universal validity claim requires the speaker to come to an understanding with other people. Prophet Muhammad's last sermon showed him to have understood not only his primary audience, but even human race at large. Otherwise, how could he have requested that his sermon be spread to people all over the world? His divine knowledge showed him that the humanness in human beings is a universal attribute present in all human beings and is, therefore, curable by common injunctions, regardless of time and space.

Another aspect of Habermas' universal pragmatic theory that we want to subject "The Last Sermon" to is Habermas' remark that a successful utterance must satisfy three additional claims if it wants to have any claim to comprehensibility. One of the claims is that the utterance must count as true for participants in so far as it represents something in the world. To the extent that "The Last Sermon" addressed issues relating to the lives of humans, it has satisfied Habermas' truth condition. "The Last Sermon" was an expression of issues that were intended by the Prophet. He was reported to have devoted his life time to serving his people, and he demonstrated his concern for what would happen to them after he was no more through the contents of the sermon. The third condition is that the utterance must be right in so far as it conforms to socially recognized expectations. "The Last Sermon" conformed, and still conforms, to socially recognized expectations, coming from a divinely ordained Prophet addressing humanity at large on issues crucial to their survival.

4. Findings and recommendations

Our findings will be based on our three research questions:

- (i) How comparable are the Prophet's primary audience with Nigerians?
- (ii) To what extent does "The Last Sermon" conform with Habermas' (1979) validity and presupposition claims?
- (iii) What recommends "The Last Sermon" as an appropriate solution to Nigeria's problems?

A critical comparison of Prophet Muhammad's audience when he delivered his last sermon with the present population of Nigerians shows that the difference between them is only in time and space. Majority of the present population of Nigerians are as degenerate as those of the pre-prophetic era of Prophet Muhammad. All the vices that the Prophet cautioned his followers against at that time are very much endemic in the present Nigerian society. Muslims kill one another, as they do other people, kidnapping for ransom and rituals abounds, armed robbery, which is akin to Carmel hijacks common in Arabia in those days, is the order of the day, indecent exposure of

bodies by females is a common site, usury and perversion of justice by those in power rule the day, just as raping and other abuses of womanhood have become part of our normal behaviour. These thus confirm our first research question. On whether “The Last Sermon” meets Habermas’ (1979) universal validity and presupposition claims, our finding confirms that it does.

Finally, we found that “The Last Sermon” cautions against all the social ills that are currently prevalent in Nigeria, and so, a strict adherence to its contents could reform Nigerians and save the country from tipping over and disintegrating. That Prophet Muhammad himself recommended the contents of the sermon to the entire world seems to have given weight to our recommendation. If it can work in Nigeria, then it can work anywhere in the world where social and security challenges confront the people, and thus have a universal application.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This paper is an analysis of Prophet Muhammad’s last sermon, otherwise called the “Last Sermon” in this paper, using Habermas’ (1979) theory of universal pragmatics. The paper examined the present social and security situations in Nigeria and observed that the Nigerian situation is worrisome to all Nigerians and a drastic and sincere solution must be found to it. The paper examined the personality of Prophet Muhammad, the author of “The Last Sermon”, and concluded that all commentators agreed in proclaiming him to be a man of impeccable character. The people of Mecca before Prophet Muhammad’s calling to prophet hood were discussed and they were found to be as degenerate then as the present crop of Nigerians are. Habermas’ (1979) theory of universal pragmatics was reviewed and used to analyze “The Last Sermon” and it was discovered to have met all of Habermas’ (1979) universal validity and presupposition claims and was therefore, on this basis, found suitable for confronting Nigeria’s problems and those of any human society.

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