

3. CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE USE OF WORDS

Generally speaking, the main function of human speech is communication. Nevertheless, human speech does not consist of communicative signs and metaphors only. As a vital means of communication, speech and words also create and nurture human relationships – or break them down and destroy them.

In a close-knit society where people live their everyday lives ‘face to face’, the proper use of words becomes a vital dimension of the good life. In addition to this, there is a certain psychological aspect in the Meru understanding of human speech that gives a special significance to the use of words.

Speech and word in Meru culture

In everyday Meru life, exchange of greetings is the most common form of speech that nurtures and strengthens communal relationships. There is a greeting for every time of the day and for almost every occasion. Living and moving around among the Meru, I got the impression that greetings do really mean something to them. Their greetings were also the very first thing the Meru taught me.

Traditional legal proceedings indirectly bear witness to the significance of greetings to the Meru. Traditionally, separation from the community has been one of the most harsh punishments. The person may still stay within the limits of the Meru area or nearby, but nobody greets him or her anymore. Nobody asks how he or she has slept during the previous night, or takes any other active interest in him or her. Such a person no longer exists to the society but has become socially dead, an outcast.

In the Meru culture, it is the idea of a human word as an extension of one's personality that makes human speech so important. A person's speech manifests his or her character. The spoken words are accompanied by the power (*finya*: see p. 95) of the speaker and have an independent existence. Once spoken, the words continue their effective existence and finally bring about or cause the thing for which they were spoken.

To the Meru, curses, blessings and different kinds of wishes are the most powerful of human words (Harjula 1969: 18–19, 37–45). But also the usual everyday speech is regarded as an extension of the speaker's personality accompanied by his or her power. According to the intention of the speaker, the words can be used for the benefit of other people or to harm them. No wonder that there are many Meru proverbs that remind people of the proper use of words and warn them against destructive speech.

❖ 30 ❖

Kana kayywa sheleka ilya kutasheleke irera.

Mdomo uliambiwa nisaidie kula, usinisaidie kusema.

The mouth was told, help me to eat, don't help me to speak.

❖ 31 ❖

Miso lla na marwi aranyia iwe kana kutaarue!

Macho tazameni na masikio sikilizeni, lakini mdomo usijibu!

Eyes, look! Ears, listen! But mouth, don't answer!

Both of these proverbs are addressed or applied to a person who is too ready to express his or her opinion about people and things. More generally, the proverbs warn not to talk too much because the more words there are the more opportunities to exaggerate things, to boast, to lie, and so on. The proverbs also remind people of the proper order of action in the use of words: Observe, listen, think and only then, if necessary, speak!

Insulting speech

A person's habit of speaking too much is often accompanied, for example, by the use of dirty and insulting words that show a lack of consideration.

❖ 32 ❖

Ee ng'wana kishabo kya kisiaa kita kishabo kya kana.

Heri kujamba kwa matako kuliko kujamba kwa mdomo.

Better to fart from the rear than to fart from the mouth.

The two vowels in the beginning of the proverb in its written form stand for the often heard Meru *eeeeeeeeee!* that usually expresses one's acceptance or agreement to a statement made in a discussion ('I agree with you at this point!'). The expression may also be a mere sign of one's attention during a conversation ('I am listening to you, just go on!'). In the proverb, however, the expression has a connotation of disapproval ('I am listening to you, but...'). The length and the tone of the *eeeeeeeeee!* vary depending on the feeling that a person puts into the expression.

The phrase *kishabo kya kana*, 'farting from the mouth', refers to dirty words or otherwise insulting speech. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who uses indecent language. The proverb is also employed by parents and older relatives as a means of teaching appropriate manners of speech to the children.

Empty promises

Speaking too much and expressing one's ideas without careful consideration often leads a person to give unreasonable promises. This is another example of an inappropriate use of words.

❖ 33 ❖

Lla itave numba ilya ya mafie itave.

Angalia isiwe kama ile nyumba ya nyani ambayo haikumalizika kujengwa.

**Be careful that it would not be like the house of baboons
which was never built.**

According to a Meru story, baboons one day made an agreement to build a house. Next morning it was raining and the baboons decided to eat some fruit first. Later they agreed to start building the next day. They also promised to bring poles, ropes and other building materials with them. Nevertheless, the baboons soon forgot their promise and agreement, and went on eating fruit everyday. This is why the baboons have neither house nor nest but they just live in the open air, in the bush and in trees.

The proverb is used as a warning to a person who lightly promises to do things that obviously are beyond his or her skills and resources. In a more general way, the proverb reminds people to take their promises seriously, not to give empty promises but to fulfil them.

❖ 34 ❖

Ifie lyayya mwana ndekuriaa mafura likandensangya na usokwa.

Nyani alimwambia mtoto nitakununulia mafuta akamwosha kwa maji.

**A baboon said to a child, 'I'll buy you some oil',
and washed him with water.**

This proverb also refers to empty promises. It is used in a situation where a person has promised to do or to give something, but there are good reasons to doubt his or her willingness or ability to carry out the promise.

Groundless accusations

A person who speaks much and without necessary consideration easily ends up in a situation where he or she presents unreasonable accusations towards or about other people.

❖ 35 ❖

Kwawara ndee mafuli imaya.

Ukimshika ndege manyoya anatoroka.

If you catch a bird by its feathers, it slips away.

The proverb functions as a warning to a person who is intending to accuse somebody of an offence or a crime. The proverb reminds people that if you want to accuse a person of something you must have adequate evidence. Otherwise your accusation carries no weight and can easily be denied. The proverb is also used as a statement of fact after such an accusation has been made and the accused person has been acquitted.

Unfortunately, the recorded material is incomplete at this point. It is not possible to determine whether the accusation is made just between two persons, in front of neighbours or clan elders, or at a court. In any case, the proverb reflects traditional Meru legal principles, and as such it belongs together with a great number of similar proverbs used in various parts of Africa (Gutmann 1923–24; Ojoade 1988; Nestor 1978). The proverb itself, however, would not seem to belong to a judicial process at a court (see e.g. Yankah 1986) but rather to certain situations in everyday life.

Ridiculing other people

Ridiculing a person in trouble is still another example of an inappropriate use of words. Ridicule is experienced as an insult, it causes troubles in human relationships and thus becomes harmful to the well-being of the whole community.

❖ 36 ❖

Ukwi lukee kai lusekaa lukee rukony.

Ukuni ulioko darini hucheka ulioko jikoni.

A piece of firewood that is in store ridicules the one in the fire.

The Meru word *kai* refers to the place where firewood is kept and dried for later use. In a Meru house, firewood has traditionally been stored next to the fireplace. Looking down from above, a piece of firewood in the *kai* can 'see' the pieces in the fire and what happens to them.

Nevertheless, the natural next place for a piece of firewood in the *kai* will be in the fire under the cooking-pot. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who ridicules someone in trouble or in a difficult situation. Perhaps tomorrow he or she will be in a similar situation. The proverb is also employed as a statement of fact by other people in reference to a person who had made fun of someone in trouble and then soon got in the same trouble.

Boasting

Boasting, too, is a common way to misuse one's words. A braggart sees himself or herself as greater and more important than he or she really is, and behaves accordingly. Or a braggart goes around boasting of his or her wealth and property forgetting that these also are a gift from God (see P 117 and 119). According to the Meru experience of life, a boaster is in danger of falling down and being hurt.

❖ 37 ❖

Kwakooya iireraa nnu nkufui ibarike.

Ukiona inalia sana karibu ipasuke.

**If you notice that it makes a loud sound,
it will soon be broken.**

The phrase *iireraa nnu* is taken from a concrete situation well known to any Meru. Before buying a clay cooking-pot or a calabash (implied in the proverb) a person examines its condition by tapping it with a coin. If the thing makes too loud a sound, it is no good but would soon break. In the proverbial use, a clay cooking-pot or a calabash that makes a loud sound is a metaphor for a boaster. The proverb is addressed or applied to such a person as a warning: the braggart is in danger of meeting with an accident or a misfortune.

Boasting often indicates a total lack of the sense of proportion, as a person boasts of doing something that is beyond his or her skills.

❖ 38 ❖

Ikurang'a lyanumbwa, litopirīaa mwana kana kakakashaa.

Hondohondo alisema, atamtengenezea mtoto mdomo akauharibu.

**A hornbill said that it will make the bill for its brood,
but spoiled it.**

The Meru word *ikurang'a*, 'hornbill', probably refers to the Crowned or the Silvery-Cheeked Hornbill. It is no wonder that a bird with the appearance and behaviour of a hornbill is used as a metaphor in the Meru proverb tradition. A hornbill is a large bird with a casqued bill. It likes to sit at the top of trees making a raucous noise, 'H-o-o-o, ho-o-o!', or 'Ho, ho-ho!'. The typical noise of the bird is reflected in its Swahili name *hondohondo* (Archbold 1966: 73–74). The most striking feature in a hornbill's appearance is the casque or a kind of horn that covers the top of the bird's bill from the forehead almost to the tip of the bill. It really looks like something has gone wrong with the bill of the bird (*Fig. 9*).



Fig. 9. A Crowned Hornbill with its 'spoiled' bill (P 38).

In the proverb, the hornbill with its funny-looking bill is a metaphor for a braggart who boasts of intending to do something extraordinary and really difficult, in fact something that obviously is impossible for him or her. The proverb functions as a warning to such a braggart: Don't boast of doing something that is beyond your skills and resources! In a more general sense, the proverb is also used as an explanation of a person's failure: He or she (or you) tried to do something too difficult.

The typical behaviour of a much smaller being, namely that of a fly, also offers a readily understood metaphor for a similar braggart.

❖ 39 ❖

Nrii yasisasisa maako ikanumbua iimboo nungu.

Inzi alisugua mikono akasema atainua chungu.

**A fly rubbed its hands together and said
that it will lift up the cooking-pot.**

This proverb also is applied to a person who boasts of doing something that obviously lies beyond his or her capabilities. The proverb is a

warning to such a boaster not to start something that he or she will not be able to complete.

A good tongue with sweet words

Most of the Meru proverbs concerning human speech presented so far deal with an inappropriate or destructive use of words. They are mainly warnings against a wrong use of human speech. In using words, a human being has a great responsibility because there is power in his or her words. A person who misuses words often also harms himself or herself, and can even become ill (Harjula 1980: 116). What, then, is an appropriate and constructive use of words like?

❖ 40 ❖

Ulumi usha luutaa shoka irineny.

Ulimi mzuri humtoa nyoka shimoni.

A good tongue drives the snake out of a hole.

In this proverb, the phrase *ulumi usha* (a 'good tongue') refers to an appropriate use of words and could be translated by the English expression 'sweet words' (Swahili: *maneno matamu*). As the spoken words are an extension of one's personality and manifest his or her character, *ulumi usha* in the last instance refers to a person with a 'good heart' (Harjula 1980: 96; 1986: 91).

As a metaphor in everyday Meru life, a snake (*shoka*) usually means something dangerous, frightening or detestable. In the proverb, the 'snake in a hole' (*shoka irineny*) is a metaphor for a selfish person who does not care for other people. Here the power of human words becomes eminent. If a person lives with other people using a 'good tongue', they will help him or her whenever a need arises. A person with a 'good tongue' is even helped by people who otherwise like to live separated from others.

The function of the proverb is to remind people of the proper use of words in living together with others. During my eight years in Tanzania, I had many personal experiences of what the Meru proverb means in practice. For example, in the beginning of my stay in the country I once forgot to pay some taxes and got a strongly-worded letter from a Tax Officer. In the letter I was strictly warned of my negligence and threatened with a fine. As I discussed the situation with my colleagues, I learned that the Tanzanian officer was well-known for his strictness.

Following the advice of my African friends, I prepared a short polite 'speech' in Swahili and memorized it. As I entered the officer's room, I gave the 'speech' explaining the reasons for my negligence and kindly requesting the help of the officer: What should I do in this difficult situation? Could he kindly help a 'servant from far away' (refers to a foreign church-worker)? What was his advice? The officer turned out to be a sympathetic person, and I was relieved of the fine as I promised to pay the taxes the very next day and be more careful in the future.

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The proverb of the influence of a 'good tongue' crystallizes my experience with the tax officer. Afterwards, during my long stay in the country I learned many other vital things about the constructive use of words and its nature. First of all, within the Meru socio-cultural context constructive speech means considered, genuine and true words. In a transparent community, a put-on behaviour and insincere attitudes of a person are quickly disclosed and the true intentions of the person revealed (P 22–26).

Within the framework of genuineness, many kinds of words may become constructive speech from the exchange of greetings to encouragement, from words of comfort to a severe warning. But words alone, however important they may be, do not suffice for building up the good life. There is a material dimension, too, in the good life that will be discussed in the next two chapters.