

Sociolinguistic Analysis of Yorùbá Conflict Resolution Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is an intrinsic aspect of human contact; nonetheless, cultures vary greatly in the approaches they use to manage and resolve disagreements. Within the Yorùbá community in southwestern Nigeria, traditional knowledge, especially proverbs, has historically functioned as a primary tool for mediation and social governance. Despite the growing dependence on formal legal systems, the practical use of Yorùbá proverbs in dispute resolution has garnered little academic scrutiny. This research examines the role of Yorùbá proverbs as sociopragmatic instruments for dispute resolution and the preservation of societal peace. The study used a qualitative, text-based research approach to analyze purposively chosen conflict-related Yorùbá proverbs sourced from recognized literary and scholarly materials. Utilizing Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, the research demonstrates that Yorùbá proverbs serve essential communication purposes, including warning, advising, persuading, and reconciling, while also maintaining dignity and interpersonal connections. The results indicate that these proverbs function as nuanced but potent tools for peacebuilding, often bolstered by the moral authority of elders and community principles. The research indicates that Yorùbá proverbs are not only ornamental language constructs but vital cultural assets that persist in providing pertinent frameworks for dispute resolution and enduring social cohesion in modern cultures.

Keywords: Yorùbá proverbs, conflict resolution, sociopragmatics, indigenous knowledge systems, peacebuilding

INTRODUCTION

The way and manner human being interact often lead to disagreement, making conflict an inevitable part of human interactions. In most African nations, disagreement or dispute often seen as destructive but an avenue that allows growth, negotiation and restoration of peace and tranquility. In South Western part of Nigeria, which is predominantly Yoruba ethnic region, resolution of dispute or disagreement has for long been guided by indigenous wisdom, with proverbs serving as one of the important tools for managing disagreement. According to Gbaje(2005); Ademowo and Balogun (2014), proverbs are not just witty saying, they are aged long philosophies, signifying deep cultural values, moral teachings and pragmatic approach to harmony.

Yorùbá sees social life as deeply communal, that is guided by values of cooperation, respect for others and balance. In this type of system, proverbs play an important role. The roles played by proverbs range from offering of guidance, respect for elders, justice, forgiveness, and restraints, which are seen as driver of a stable society (Akin Makinde, 1988; Bamikole, 2013). For instance, the idea of àṣuwàdà, which is the ideal for social harmony and cohesion, is always backed with proverbial expression, which reminds individuals of their role in upholding peace and unity (Fayemi, 2009). In Yoruba society, elders are trusted which harnessing proverbs for conflict resolution, because their wisdom and knowledge carry not only moral weight but also social authority (Ajisafe, 1946; Arowosegbe, 2017).

Existing studies recognise that proverbs could be symbolic, they also perform a very active communicative function. According to Adeyemi (2009), proverbs may serve as warning, a form of persuasion, or a means of saving face during delicate exchanges.

Registering one's displeasure indirectly prevent disputants from unnecessary shames. As opined by Adeyemi & Salawudeen (2014), the way of indirectly expressing one's grievances do not only preserve relationship with

people but also depicts the role played by Yoruba philosophy which emphasizes moderation and tract. This means proverbs are rhetorical tools that embody not only moral teaching but also linguistic diplomacy (Ademowo& Adekunle, 2013).

The role played by Proverbs in conflict resolution cannot be overemphasized. Notwithstanding the undue influence of legal system from the western world and their modern court, a lot of Yoruba communities still make use of the traditional methods of resolving disputes. In the process of resolving disputes, proverbs play a central role, particularly, at local, communal and family level (Olaoba, 2004; Arowosegbe, 2017). At these levels, proverbs play a language of reconciliation that appeals to cultural identity and shared heritage, something that not obtainable in formal legal structures. As opined by Olarinde (2010), proverbs and other conflict resolutions resources serve as tools for peace and repositories of cultural survival in the face of modern pressures

This research investigates the role played by Yoruba proverbs in conflict resolution. The study also seeks to examine the communicative strategy, their thematic categories, and the cultural values they embody. By breaking down the content of some selected proverbs via sociopragmatic theories like Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, the research aims to investigate further on how proverbs go beyond ordinary meaning to performing social actions like advising, warning, uniting and persuading. With this, proverbs add to ongoing wider discussion on African indigenous knowledge system, showing how traditional wisdom keeps on providing relevant and effective model that are needed for peacebuilding in the modern world (Bamikole, 2013; Bascom, 1969; Ofuho, 1999).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In every society, there are ways of speaking that extend beyond mere exchange of information. Among the Yoruba people, proverbs are one of the key ways of speaking that goes beyond mere exchange of information. Proverbs perform actions, carry weight and help in shaping relationship. In order to comprehend how proverbs helps in resolving conflicts, the study adopted two key theories such as Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory.

Speech Act Theory and Yoruba Proverbs

The Speech Act Theory was originally explained by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969). The idea behind this theory is that, words can also be backed with action. The theory explained that, speaking must not just be mere rhetoric. It must be backed with actions. For instance, to utter statement like " I apologise", is not only to describe an apology but must be backed with actual action. That is, it must be performed.

This theory depicts the function performed by proverbs in conflict resolution. In conflict resolution, proverbs could serve as warning, an appeal or a form of advice. For instance, the proverb that states “Ìbèrè ogunlà á mò, ẹnikankì í mojaparirè” (The beginning of a fight is known, but no one knows its end), means more than just describing conflict. It sends stern warning to disputants to ruminate well before escalating issues. As Adeyemi (2009) puts, such proverb functions as a directive act, urging restraint and reflection.

Another instance is seen in “Òrò pẹ́lẹ́ yó obi l’ápo” (Soft words bring kola nut from the pocket). This proverb performs the functions of politeness as well as persuasion. It urges disputants to always make use of calm speech, which aids resolution of conflicts. The Proverbs, as opined by Addeyemi&Salawudeen (2014), becomes part of conflict resolution process.

According to Searle (1996), proverbs may perform what he described as 'commissive acts-words', which depicts commitment or promise. For example, in the proverb "Tí a bájojeun, kájọ sun” (If we eat together, we should also sleep together), which means social obligation. This proverb goes beyond rhetoric, it depicts collective responsibility, unity and shared values (Ademowo& Balogun, 2014).

By seeing proverbs as a speech act, it reinforces their function as important tools in communication. Proverbs do not only describe the core cultural values, but also directly shape attitudes, influence behaviours and encourages conflict resolution.

Politeness Theory and Yoruba Proverbs

Conflict is very sensitive. Most time, people defend their views without sounding offensive or losing respect. This is where politeness theory which was developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), comes in. Politeness Theory emphasised the idea of "face", that is, the sense of dignity, social value and respect that an individual upholds during interaction. In any conflict related matters, saving face is key and Proverbs in Yoruba really help in that aspect.

There are numerous Yoruba proverbs that emphasized saving facing during conflict related matters. For instance, the proverb “Àìmòkanàìmòkanniekuse ñ pèologboníjà” (It is ignorance that makes a rat challenge a cat to a fight) directly addressed it. This proverb uses metaphor to indirectly call someone a foolish fellow. This critic looked so soft and the person's dignity is preserved. Yet, the message passed by the proverb is very clear: the action is unwise and should cease (Agbaje, 2005)

Yoruba proverbs always merge positive politeness, which builds oneness and unity, with negative politeness, thereby respecting the independence of others. For instance, “Àgbájoowó la fí ñ sòyà, àjoseponiagbára”(It is with joined hands that we lift a load; unity is strength). This proverb promotes inclusiveness and cooperation without any form of direct commands. Instead of commanding people to cooperate with others, the proverb invites them politeness to view unity and cooperation as a better path (Bamikole, 2013).

Another proverb is “Agbàkì í wàl’ójà, kíoríomotuntun ó wó” (The elder cannot be present in the market while the child’s head bends wrongly). This saying depicts how elder in Yoruba society use proverbs to correct bad behaviors without sounding too harsh. The proverb preserves for others while still making it know that docility is unacceptable (Fayemi, 2009).

Therefore, proverbs could be regarded as an important tool of linguistic diplomacy. Proverbs do not only correct misbehavior without harshness, it also persuades people for good action without threatening and remind people of shared values without any form of confrontation (Ademowo& Adekunle, 2013).

Linking the Theories

The two theories; Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory explain the effective use cases of Yoruba proverbs in conflict resolution. With the application of Speech Act theory, we noticed that proverbs carried out functions such as warning, advising or committing to peace. Politeness Theory helped us to see how actions are carried out tactfully, preserving dignity and relationship. In this regard, proverbs are not mere rhetoric, but they are important and active instruments of peace that balance firmness with respect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Proverbs have always been important approaches used by the African in resolving conflicts and in Yoruba society, they are really valued. Proverbs are not just ordinary saying, they are practical tools used for persuasion, guidance and social control. Scholars in different fields like law, education, linguistics, philosophy and anthropology testified to the roles played by proverbs in guiding human behavior, help in maintaining peace and stabilizing the society. This literature reviews revised works from these fields, to show how Yoruba proverbs help in conflict resolution.

Proverbs as Carriers of Values and Morality

In Yoruba society, proverbs are often tied to moral lesson and the preservation of community values. Agbaje (2005) argues that proverbs represent the key part of Yorùbá philosophy, reminding people the need for patience, respect as well as moderations. Practically, proverbs are always used to discourage conflict or feud and to call people to order and remind them of their responsibilities within the community. Proverbs aids in passing down key values that refines behaviours, thereby serving as moral compass used in moment of disputes (Ademowo and Balogun,2014). This depicts the ways and manners elders in Yoruba society harness proverbs to stress virtues such as tolerance, humility and respect for authority.

Another study by Adeyemi and Salawudeen (2014) bring out the educational role played by proverbs in Yoruba society. They posited that, since proverbs help in resolving conflict, it could be taught in schools as part of peace education. They also suggest that, teaching proverbs as part of peace education in school curriculum prepares on how disputes could be handled in a non-violent manner. This views stress that proverbs are not limited to traditional gathering but are also modern teaching.

Proverbs in Conflict Resolution

Many scholars have directly examined how proverbs are used in resolving conflict. Adeyemi (2009) defines conflict-related proverbs as rhetorical strategies that help disputants to reflect and avoid escalation of conflicts. For instance, the proverb that states A well-known example is “Ìbèrè ogunlà á mọ, ẹnikankì í mọ iparirè” (The beginning of a fight is known, but no one knows its end). This proverb reminds people of danger of conflict and encourage them to see peace as alternative to conflict.

Bamikole (2013) explains proverbs as an important and a wider part indigenous model of conflict resolution in Yorùbáland. He posits that mediation depends so much on oral performance, and proverbs are important for persuasion without force. By drawing on shared cultural wisdom, mediators can guide disputants without direct confrontation.

Fayemi (2009) outlines the authority of elders in this process. Elders are given special respect in the society because they are seen as custodians of wisdom. Elders have special recalling ability and apply the right proverb at the right time thereby giving them legitimacy when mediating disputes. In this case, proverbs are not seen as ordinary words but carry the weight of social authority.

Law, Justice, and Social Order

Proverbs have strong connection with law and justice in Yoruba culture. According to Ademowo and Adekunle (2013), traditional Yorùbá law is inseparable from cultural expressions such as proverbs, which acts like unwritten codes of conduct. Similarly, Arowosegbe (2017) posited that proverbs reflect the ideas of justice of the community which often emphasise harmony and restoration over punishment. For instance, proverbs that encourage forgiveness or patience depicts preference for reconciliation in society.

Other scholars connect proverbs with taboo and traditional practices. Afe (2013) and Ojerinde (2010) explain that a lot of proverbs are used as warning people against actions that cause disorderliness in the society. In this sense, proverbs are not just rhetoric, they assist in regulating behaviour and keeping peace.

Comparative and Historical Perspectives

Looking back historically, Ajisafe (1946) explained that Yorùbá judges and elders always relied on oratory enriched with proverbs to enforce justice. Olaoba (2004) adds that before colonial courts were established, oral performance was the main tool for resolving disputes, and proverbs were at the centre of that process. This shows that the role of proverbs in governance and justice has deep roots.

Comparative studies make it clear that the use of proverbs in mediation is not limited to Yorùbáland. Gluckman (1956), Ofuho (1999), and Muhammed (2000) all report similar practices in other African societies. Yet, the imagery and themes in Yorùbá proverbs are distinctly tied to Yorùbá culture, with their strong focus on family unity, the authority of elders, and the dangers of unchecked anger.

Gaps in Existing Studies

Despite all different views examined in this literature, some gaps still remain. Majority of the studies focus on the actual content of proverbs without explaining how they are used in actual mediation sessions. Scholars such as Fayemi (2009) outlines the role of elders in conflict resolution, but there is limited study on how women and young people make use of proverbs in resolving disputes. Another gap identified is in the modern setting: with the rate of urbanisation and different digital platforms such social media, little or no attention has been given to how proverbs are adapted to new forms of dialogue and conflict resolution.

The literature depicts that Yorùbá proverbs is key in conflict resolution because they help in transmitting values, serve as rhetorical strategies, and reinforce social order. They are at once cultural heritage and practical tools for building peace. However, there is still a need for more research into how they function in present-day situations, including urban and digital contexts, to ensure that their wisdom continues to guide society in moments of tension.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explained the methods that were used to examine how Yorùbá proverbs serve as tools for conflict resolution. The study adopted a qualitative and text-based approach to gather data, since the research focuses on the actual meanings and cultural functions of proverbs. This approach allowed the researcher to carefully explore proverbs as social instruments rather than just treating them as a separate linguistic item.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach because it aims to comprehend how Yorùbá proverbs work in real social situations. Proverbs are part of everyday life and culture, so their meaning depends on how people use and understand them.

The study is based on document analysis. This means it uses written sources where Yorùbá proverbs have already been recorded and explained. This approach makes it possible to study the meanings and uses of proverbs carefully while still respecting their oral background. This approach respects the oral and historical depth of proverbs while making use of the wealth of documentation already available (Ajisafe, 1946; Olaoba, 2004).

By making use of qualitative approach, the research focused on proverb interpretation, context and cultural significance rather than descriptive trends. This approach was the most appropriate for the study because proverbs in conflicts resolutions are best explained and understood via meanings, the situation of their usage and the value they give (Agbaje, 2005; Ademowo & Balogun, 2014).

Data Collection

The data for this study were from secondary sources such as published collections of Yoruba proverbs, academic journals and cultural studies. They were all harvested from search engines such as Google, Google scholars and ResearchGate. Study such as Olatunji (1984), Owomoyela (2005), and Fayemi (2009) provided authentic proverbs and contextual examples. These sources were selected because they represent genuine, credible and well-documented accounts of Yoruba oral tradition. The proverbs that were gathered focused mainly on conflict, reconciliation, negotiation, or social harmony. Proverbs that focused on general sayings such as luck, farming or religion were exempted from the study unless they explicitly address themes of peace, unity or dispute settlement (Adeyemi, 2009; Bamikole, 2013).

Each proverb was recorded in three parts:

1. the original Yorùbá form
2. its English translation
3. its meaning in context

To make sure the proverbs were correct, they were checked across more than one source where possible.

Sample Size and Selection

Purposive sampling technique was used. Proverbs were carefully selected based on their relevance to dispute resolution as well as their cultural weight. The aim was not to collect as many proverbs as possible but to focus on those most frequently used in mediation and social regulation. A total of thirty Yorùbá proverbs were selected

for the study. The aim was not to collect many proverbs, but to focus on those that clearly relate to conflict resolution.

The proverbs were chosen based on:

1. how well they relate to conflict, peace, or social behaviour
2. how often they appear in academic work
3. how clear their meaning is in context

Proverbs that deal only with other topics such as farming or religion were not included, except where they also suggest ideas about unity, caution, or cooperation.

This selection ensured that the chosen proverbs reflected different aspects of conflict resolution: persuasion, caution, politeness, unity, and authority (Ademowo & Adekunle, 2013; Arowosegbe, 2017).

Method of Data Collection

The process involved searching scholarly databases, cultural archives, and published anthologies of Yorùbá proverbs. Sources were cross-checked to ensure consistency and reliability. For each proverb, the Yorùbá text was recorded, translated into English, and noted with its context of use. This careful collection process ensured that the proverbs were both authentic and representative of their social functions (Adeyemi & Salawudeen, 2014; Olarinde, 2010).

Method of Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using socio-pragmatic principles which is supported by the study's theoretical framework; Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory. Proverbs were examined for their communicative functions whether they advised, warned, persuaded, or consoled. For instance, Speech Act Theory helped to identify whether a proverb was performing a directive (giving advice), an expressive (showing emotion), or a commissive (securing commitment to peace). In the same vein, Politeness Theory helped to comprehend how proverbs aided speakers to correct or caution others without direct offence (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Adeyemi, 2009).

The collected proverbs were grouped into different themes, such as persuasion and mediation, face-saving and politeness, indirect warning, advocacy for peace, and reinforcement of authority. This thematic approach revealed the patterns and strategies through which proverbs maintain social balance (Agbaje, 2005; Fayemi, 2009).

The study looked at how the message is expressed. Yorùbá proverbs often speak in an indirect way, especially in sensitive situations. The analysis therefore considered how proverbs:

1. avoid direct offence
2. protect people's dignity
3. help to keep relationships peaceful

Categorisation of Proverbs

After the analysis, the proverbs were divided into an obvious categories based on their roles in conflict situations. These include:

1. proverbs that encourage dialogue and persuasion
2. proverbs that warn or advise caution
3. proverbs that promote reconciliation and peace
4. proverbs that protect dignity and reduce tension
5. proverbs that support authority and wisdom, especially that of elders
6. This grouping helps to show the different ways proverbs are used to manage conflict.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure credibility of the research, all the proverbs were carefully cross-referenced with at least two credible sources such as Google and Google scholar. Contextual notes from existing studies were harnessed to affirm interpretations (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Arowosegbe, 2017). The selection and analysis processes were documented clearly so that other researchers could replicate or extend the work.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study depended only on published materials as source of data, ethical standards were adhered to. All sources of data were properly credited, respecting the intellectual work of earlier scholars. Since proverbs belong to a living tradition, interpretations were handled with cultural sensitivity, avoiding distortions that might misrepresent Yorùbá values (Adeyemi & Salawudeen, 2014; Olarinde, 2010).

Introduction

This chapter examines how Yorùbá proverbs are harnessed as tools for conflict resolution. In the Yorub worldview, proverbs are not seen as just ordinary sayings, but are regarded as living instruments of communication. Yoruba proverbs are used to stearlimebehaviours, calm anger and call disputants to order and also protect dignity. By analysing them via the lenses of e lenses of Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, we can comprehend how they function as action-warning, advising or reassuring and as strategies that soften confrontation while encouraging reconciliation.

The proverbs have been divided into five key themes: persuasion and mediation, face-saving and politeness, indirect warnings and caution, advocacy for peace and unity, and reinforcement of authority and wisdom. Each of the theme shows how traditional wisdom acts as a subtle but powerful force in resolving conflicts.

Persuasion and Mediation

Persuasion and dialogue are the main part of conflict resolution in Yorùbá culture. One common proverb says: “Òrò síṣọ̀ni à ñ fi tújà” (It is through speaking that we settle disputes). This proverb stresses that silence, sometimes worsens wound while dialogue opens the door to healing. As speech act, the proverb functions as a directive to disputants, urging them to say whatever they may have in mind. The proverb is polite enough because it frames speech as solution rather than confrontation

Another proverb, “Ènibagbó t’eni, ilè á sà̀n” (Whoever listens to another will have a better situation), outlines listening as an important part of healing. As speech act, it serves as both directive and expressive. it directs disputants to listen while showing empathy. In practice, elders use this to remind people that listening prevents escalation.

Another proverb that also fit this them is “Oro pẹ̀lẹ̀ yó obi lápò” (Gentle words bring out the kola nut from the pocket). This is a clear persuasive proverb that shows the power of kind speech. Instead of demanding, it proposes that diplomacy and courtesy achieves more than force. It reflects positive politeness, affirming goodwill and encouraging generosity.

Similarly, “Bi a bá ñ bẹ̀bẹ̀, a kìfẹ̀bẹ̀tánkámádúpé” (When we plead, we must also show gratitude) teaches that apologies must be followed with appreciation. It performs a commissive act, signalling sincerity and commitment to peace. Without gratitude, reconciliation appears hollow.

Put together, these proverbs shows how persuasion in Yorùbá culture relies on both reason and courtesy. They perform speech acts that open space for conversation while respecting the humanity of all involved.

Face-Saving and Politeness

Conflict often injures pride, so proverbs help to save face while correcting behaviour. The saying “Bí a básò̀tító, kásó ọ̀ lónà̀tódára” (If we speak the truth, let us say it politely) is a classic face-saving device. Truth must be told, but with tact. This proverb reflects politeness strategies, ensuring that honesty does not humiliate but heals.

Another, “A kii fi ọwọ òsìjuweilé baba eni” (One does not point at their father’s house with the left hand), urges respect even in heated moments. It reinforces dignity by reminding disputants to maintain cultural courtesy.

The proverb “Kámábaàdojúṭini, a kiisogbogboohuntá a rí” (To avoid shame, we do not reveal everything we see) calls for discretion. It recognises that public exposure can worsen conflict. By advocating restraint, it protects both sides from humiliation.

Equally important is “Ènití a báránńíṣé, a kíńíkówánínúewu” (We don’t send someone on an errand only to endanger them). This safeguards the dignity of subordinates. It performs a directive to leaders, warning them against exposing others to harm.

Taken together, these sayings embody negative politeness, which avoids direct confrontation, and positive politeness, which reinforces respect. They help disputants walk away with their pride intact, which is essential for lasting peace.

Indirect Warnings and Caution

Yorùbá proverbs always caution against reckless actions without any direct accusations. The proverb “Tíoríbá n runni, a kíígé e kúrò” (If one’s head aches, one does not cut it off) warns against extreme responses. It functions as a directive urging calmness and a metaphorical caution against destroying relationships in anger.

Another proverb, “Bí a báriẹ̀jòtí a kíi pa, a kíi fi ọwọ gbá a” (If you see a snake you cannot kill, do not touch it), encourages careful judgement. It also advises disputants not to provoke situations beyond their control.

“Ọ̀rò tí a básò lẹ̀rìn-ín, ònniyòò pa wálójú” (The words spoken in jest often cause embarrassment) is a reminder that careless words can inflame conflict. It performs an expressive act, warning people to weigh speech before speaking.

Similarly, “Àgbàkìṣubúmẹ̀jì, àfibiṣenipé ó n seré” (An elder does not fall twice unless pretending) teaches the importance of learning from mistakes. This prevents repeated quarrels and encourages maturity.

These indirect warnings show that Yorùbá preference for soft rebuke over direct criticism. They deliver correction in a way that preserves respect while urging wisdom.

Advocacy for Peace and Unity

In Yoruba conflict management, unity is key. The proverb “Ọwọ kan ò gbẹ́rú” (One hand cannot lift a load) reminds people that collective effort is needed. As a commissive act, it binds people to cooperation.

“Àjọṣepò niagbára” (Unity is strength) is often applied in family and communal disputes. It serves as positive politeness by appealing to shared identity and collective good.

Another, “Ó dárakí á jomáagbéjúkí á máajọṣòtá” (It is better to live together than be enemies), promotes reconciliation over bitterness. It functions as an expressive act, valuing harmony over grudges.

Likewise, “Bí a báfẹ̀ lówọ arawa, a kíi fa arawaléyìn” (If we want to support each other, we don’t pull each other back) condemns hypocrisy and hidden sabotage. It encourages sincerity in unity.

All these proverbs show how the Yorùbá community sees peace not just as the absence of quarrel but as a shared commitment to cooperation and harmony.

Reinforcement of Authority and Wisdom

The role of elders in conflict resolution is deeply embedded in Yorùbá culture. Proverbs emphasise their authority and wisdom. “Ohuntíagbàbáriníjòkó, ọ̀mọ̀dékìirínígbàtí ó bá gun igi” (What an elder see sitting, a child cannot see even from a tree) reinforces the value of experience. As speech act, It performs an expressive act, affirming wisdom, and a directive, reminding the young to respect guidance.

“Òrò àgbàkìṣẹ̀ pètélẹ̀” (An elder’s word does not fall flat) underscores the authority of their pronouncements. It is a declarative act, marking closure in disputes.

Another, “Àgbàkìwànilẹ̀, kí á paèṣúmólé” (Elders cannot be present while evil is harboured), calls on elders to intervene actively. It functions as a directive, urging them to maintain social order.

“Bíolówóbákú, òunnìkanlókú; bílógbónbákú, gbogboilúlókú” (When a wealthy man dies, he alone dies; but when a wise man dies, the whole town dies) highlights the communal importance of wisdom over wealth. It strengthens the respect accorded to elders as peacemakers.

Through these proverbs, elders are positioned as the custodians of peace. Their words are not just advice but binding acts that carry authority in dispute resolution.

This analysis demonstrates that Yorùbá proverbs are active tools of conflict resolution. Using Speech Act Theory, we see how they perform functions such as warning, advising, consoling, or commanding. Through Politeness Theory, we understand how they save face, soften rebuke, and maintain dignity. Together, these proverbs show how language, wisdom, and culture work hand in hand to resolve disputes and sustain social harmony in Yorùbá communities.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

The study examined how Yorùbá proverbs function as sociopragmatic tools of conflict resolution. The major findings arising from the analysis are given below:

- i. Proverbs as persuasive devices: Many proverbs emphasise the value of dialogue, listening, and gentle speech in resolving disputes, such as “Òrò síṣoni à n fì tújǎ” (It is through speaking that we settle disputes). These sayings encourage disputants to embrace communication rather than silence, reflecting the cultural belief that words are capable of healing (Adeyemi, 2009).
- ii. Face-saving strategies: Proverbs like “Bí a básoṭító, káṣo ó lónàtódára” (If we speak the truth, let us say it politely) reveal the Yorùbá concern with maintaining dignity. These sayings protect the self-esteem of disputants, making resolution possible without humiliation (Ademowo & Adekunle, 2013).
- iii. Caution and restraint: Proverbs often deliver indirect warnings that discourage rashness, such as “Bí a bárijòtí a kíi pa, a kíi fì ọwọ̀ gbá a” (If you see a snake you cannot kill, do not touch it). This reflects a cultural preference for caution and wisdom over impulsive action (Arowosegbe, 2017).
- iv. Unity and cooperation: Sayings such as “Ọwọ̀ kan ò gbẹ́rú” (One hand cannot lift a load) highlight communal responsibility and interdependence. Conflict resolution is seen as a collective duty rather than an individual struggle (Bamikole, 2013).
- v. Authority of elders: Elders are central mediators, with their wisdom validated through proverbs like “Òrò àgbàkìṣẹ̀ pètélẹ̀” (An elder’s word does not fall flat). Proverbs affirm their responsibility to intervene in disputes and preserve order (Fayemi, 2009).
- vi. Overall, the findings reveal that proverbs are more than stylistic expressions; they perform speech acts that guide, warn, soothe, and instruct while upholding values of respect, restraint, and communal peace.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that Yorùbá proverbs are deeply connected to the values and way of life of the people. They are not just used to describe situations. People use them to guide behaviour, especially when there is conflict. When a proverb is spoken, it often serves a purpose such as giving advice, warning someone, or calming a tense situation. In this sense, language becomes a practical means of settling disputes.

Speech Act Theory helps to explain this clearly. Proverbs are not passive statements. They do something. For example, when a proverb warns against anger, it is not simply stating that anger is bad. It is encouraging people to stay calm and think carefully before acting. This shows that proverbs take part in the process of resolving conflict, not just talking about it.

Politeness Theory also helps us to understand why proverbs are effective. In Yorùbá culture, speaking too directly can lead to offence or resistance. Proverbs allow people to pass their message in a softer way. A person can correct another without sounding harsh or disrespectful. This helps both sides to keep their dignity, which makes it easier to settle disagreements peacefully.

The findings also agree with earlier studies. Researchers such as Adeyemi (2009) and Ademowo and Balogun (2014) explain that Yorùbá proverbs are important in mediation and reflect values like patience, respect, and cooperation. In the same way, Fayemi (2009) and Bamikole (2013) show that elders play an important role in this process. Their use of proverbs carries weight and helps to guide others during disputes.

Recent studies support this view as well. Afolayan (2021) notes that African oral traditions, including proverbs, are still important even as society changes. Ogunsiji (2018) and Adegbiya (2019) also show that communication in African settings often focuses on keeping good relationships rather than confronting people directly. This explains why proverbs continue to work well in both traditional and modern situations.

Another key idea is àṣùwàdà, which reflects togetherness and shared responsibility. Proverbs that stress unity remind people that conflict should not break relationships. Instead, people are encouraged to think about the well-being of the whole community.

Yorùbá proverbs work well because they bring together meaning, cultural values, and respectful communication. They help people correct behaviour, reduce tension, and restore peace without creating more problems. This makes them useful not only in traditional settings but also in present-day society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Incorporate proverbs into peace education: Proverbs are of many forms. Proverbs that promote dialogue, respect, and unity should be included in school curricula as part of moral and civic education. Adeyemi and Salawudeen (2014) have shown that proverbs carry values that can strengthen peace education in Nigeria.
- ii. Strengthen traditional mediation practices: Policy frameworks on conflict resolution should recognise the enduring role of elders and traditional leaders. Proverbs can serve as culturally legitimate tools that complement formal legal processes (Arowosegbe, 2017).
- iii. Document and preserve proverbs: Many proverbs are going to extinction due to modernisation (Afolayan, 2021). Community archives and digital platforms should be developed to preserve them as resources for both cultural heritage and conflict management.
- iv. Adapt proverbs for contemporary mediation: While rooted in tradition, these sayings remain adaptable. For example, in inter-religious or political disputes, proverbs can still serve as neutral, culturally respected tools for dialogue.
- v. Further research: Comparative studies could examine how other African cultures use proverbs in conflict resolution. This will highlight shared strategies while showing the uniqueness of the Yorùbá approach.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, this study has shown that Yorùbá proverbs embody a sophisticated system of conflict resolution. Through persuasion, politeness, caution, advocacy for unity, and reinforcement of authority, proverbs transform conflicts into occasions for learning and healing. By making use of Speech Act and Politeness theories to explain the proverbs, we see them not as mere sayings but as performative acts that preserve dignity, sustain relationships, and uphold communal peace.

Far from being relics of the past, these proverbs remain relevant tools for managing conflict in contemporary society. Their wisdom continues to remind us that peace, respect, and unity are not just ideals but practices rooted in everyday language.

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