

The Semantic Functions of proverbs in African Languages: A Comparative Study of Wolof and Igbo

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Abstract: This research explores the semantic functions of proverbs in two African languages Wolof and Igbo with the aim of revealing how they express shared cultural beliefs and worldviews. It investigates how proverbs, as elements of oral tradition, convey moral, social, and didactic meanings within their respective societies. The study adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing ten (10) selected Igbo proverbs from F. C. Ogbalu's (1965) collection alongside Wolof proverbs drawn from daily use. These proverbs are compared based on their semantic similarities and contextual functions. The findings highlight that both Wolof and Igbo proverbs serve as vehicles of collective wisdom, reflecting the social norms, values, and philosophical perspectives of African societies. Despite differences in linguistic structure and origin, the two languages display parallel communicative strategies rooted in a shared African worldview characterized by solidarity, morality, and observation of human behavior.

Keywords: Wolof proverbs; Igbo proverbs; semantic analysis; African oral tradition; cultural beliefs; comparative linguistics; African languages; proverbs and communication; sociolinguistics; cultural wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

African discourse often draws its strength from the use of proverbs. The effectiveness of rhetoric in African culture is measured by the significance of these proverbs, which support rhetorical statements. This illustrates a language that is tailored to the speaker's environment, with understanding rooted in context that enhances semantic meaning. Therefore, we will define proverbs as essential tools within the lexicon used in effective discourse. This analysis of proverbs, along with idioms in African languages, enriches the overall meaning of sustained discourse. This study will focus on this perspective, which aims to explore further ideas.

Definition

In the Larousse, the proverb is defined as a 'short statement expressing a popular advice, a common sense truth or an empirical observation and which has become commonly used'.¹ Thus, some say: «proverb cannot lie».

In the African Context

The meaning of proverbs has been explored through various lenses, including literature, anthropology, and linguistics. Our focus is on the linguistic aspect, particularly semantics, which seeks to understand meaning within specific contexts. African proverbs, crafted by the wise elders of the continent, have gained significant recognition over time, drawing the interest of

many who appreciate these concise expressions. These proverbs are especially vibrant, as they convey vivid imagery and reflect a rich tradition of eloquence in speech. Additionally, the functions of these semantic maxims are diverse; they serve purposes such as education, promoting intelligence, shaping behavior, and upholding values like honesty, dignity, and togetherness.

Indeed, Proverbs have been highly and significantly used in most cultures, more especially, African cultures. Ruth Finnegan makes it clear that proverbs, in many African cultures, make known the expression of abstract ideas and the feeling for language and imagery.²

The Research Problem

This research focuses on how proverbs have been strategically infused into conversations to convey specific meaning related to cultural beliefs.

The study of proverbs in African languages focuses on their semantic significance rather than symbolic analysis with a narrative aspect. It examines the strategies and techniques of communication rooted in the cultural values and beliefs of the speakers, adapting to the needs of their environment. The absence of written scripts in many African languages has emphasized the role of orality as a substitute for written communication. Consequently, oral tradition plays a crucial role in the use of proverbs, serving multiple functions within African languages.

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<https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/proverbe/64642#:text>

² Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 379-412.

This research seeks to explore how proverbs in the Wolof and Igbo languages fulfill similar semantic roles in expressing popular wisdom and reflecting African cultural realities. It aims to provide a comparative semantic analysis of proverbs in these two languages, revealing how each language conceptualizes the world, society, and human relationships. This research main objective is to analyze and compare the semantic functions of Wolof and Igbo proverbs in order to highlight their linguistic, cultural, and social roles in the expression of African thought.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper outlines a qualitative method analysis of data from daily use. As Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln state: “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them.” (2008,38)

Indeed, the qualitative approach to research must be planned and ordered, based on experience, and researchers must try to appreciate how others make meaning out of their experiences. This research paper agrees with Denzin and Lincoln’s views as it focuses on analyzing proverbs as part of a natural setting, bringing similar meanings and functions in different languages.

The data for this research have been collected from F. C. Ogbalu (1965), who studied Igbo proverbs. Among a sample of 390 Igbo proverbs, 10 have been selected based on semantic similarities with Wolof proverbs from daily use. The selected ten (10) Igbo items are used as comparative elements with Wolof. The main purpose is to set some comparative features in the semantic views of two different African societies. The researcher selected ten (10) proverbs, even though there were more. The reason for this selection is to provide specific comparative data in semantic views. The analysis is based on the content and context in which these proverbs have been used to bring about similar meanings and functions across different languages.

Research Hypothesis

Wolof and Igbo proverbs serve similar semantic functions, including didactic, moral, and social purposes. The structure and images used in the proverbs reflect the daily realities, beliefs, and value systems specific to each society. Thus, the comparative study reveals a common philosophical basis for African cultures, grounded in wisdom, solidarity, and an observant approach to the world. Indeed, the semantic similarities result from

identical sociolinguistic contexts of distinct Wolof and Igbo peoples and different language families.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the absence of a written language, the oral language is powerful to maintaining cultural and traditional practice. African elders have mainly educated people from talks, proverbs, riddles, storytelling, etc., to convey particular meaning in particular context, from generation to generation. This explains the reasons that socio-cultural and traditional relationships highly impact on upbringing and education. One would keep in leading such valuable heritage for the aim at solving problems that are more accessible in communicative pedagogy. In this particular purpose, language is a vector of tradition and culture. Thus, the metacognitive language related to proverbs or quotations plays prominent roles in communication.

“Language is a manifestation of cultural identity, and all learners, by the language they speak, carry within them the visible and invisible elements of a given culture.” G. Zarate and A. Gohard Radenkovic (2003, 57).

Achebe (1959) incorporates idioms, proverbs, and concepts that evoke Ibo tradition and culture into his writing style.

“Nigerian communities used storytelling as oral discourse, since writing was unknown to most of the populace Achebe” (1958).

« Achebe uses proverbs to construct a guess sense in the Ibo language. In this way it creates a bridge between non-Igbo readers and the Ibo language. A language that reflects culture, because it always has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a vector of culture. »

Between these lines, Achebe also shows that the people of Umuofia speak a complex language, full of proverbs and literary and rhetorical devices. Proverbs are part of a living tradition; they reflect the attitudes of society in emphasizing its need for physical survival and individual achievement, as well as the perception of man as connected to nature.

Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten (1958, 7).

Prior to understand the Ibo language, to understand its culture. The cultural elements are specific to languages, requiring to be deeply involved such a

cultural context. In the same lines, In the process of translation or our work, we discovered that the translator had a lot of problems translating Igbo cultural elements into French. » ANYABUIKE, Cyril (2017, 34-43). Soyinka gives ultimate meaning to the culture in which the environment must be conducive to learning. This explains why Soyinka is inspired by its culture and tradition, which he measures with value in his quotes. "I grew up in an atmosphere where words were an integral part of culture." Wole Soyinka.³

In the same lines, Mandela, N. quotes:

"Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry, or savor their songs." N. Mandela (2018)⁴

Wolof's proverbs act as semantic mediators in Aminata Sow Fall's novels:

"they carry cultural and pragmatic networks of meanings that are not reduced to a simple lexical equivalence in French, forcing the French text to create strategies (loans, notes, transposition) to render these values and these implications." (Niang, 1992)

As Monye has rightly stated, when people use proverbs there is always some relationship between two situations being compared: the proverb statement and its referent in the social context. It is the concatenation between the human experience and another which gives proverbs their relevance. (1990).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Proverbs' numbers Igbo WolofEnglish Translation

- Aka oru mmadu ka eji ama ya Jëf du say, nit jëfam moy fésal mën-mënam A person is known by their handwork.
- Aku bu iro, nwata kpata aku o kpata iro: Bu teraanga wokkee noon yokk. Wealth is enmity, when a child gains wealth they gain enemies.
- Aku na-esi obi ike: As gor day goor ci dara Wealth makes the heart strong.
- Aku ruo ulo amalu onye kpatara ya: Am-am du umpe
- When wealth reaches home, the wealthy person will be known.

³ <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/wole-soyinka-quotes>

⁴ <https://borgenproject.org/nelson-mandela-quotes-about-education/>

- Anaghi eji maka mgbaghu aghara ugu: Bu bésuh dee jotee ku dund doo gor
- One does not abandon a battle because of fear of being killed.
- Anaghi ekpuchi afo ime aka Suul ker du ko teree feeñ.
- A pregnant stomach cannot be covered with the hand.
- Anya furu ugu, kiri e ugu na ada afu ugu kwa mgbe, kwa mgbe: Bul naagu ci sa am-am, ndax ñakk du wees.
- The eye that beholds the Eagle, should admire the eagle. You don't see the Eagle daily.
- Emee nwata ka emere ibe ya, obi adi ya mma: Gor soo ko teralee tëral ko. When a child is treated as their mates, they become happy.
- Enu uwa bu olili, onye nosia onaba:
- Àddina du kër, ndax kenn saxu fi! The world is a grand vacation experience, after enjoying it, we return home.
- Eze puo eze anochie: Ku tukki nu reer sa ginnaaw

When a king leaves another king will replace him.

Igbo proverbs are accumulation of Igbo experiences throughout the history of the Igbos. In absence of any written history, they serve as the medium through which much can be learnt about the Igbos. Their past history, their philosophy of life and family structure, their politics and religion can best be learnt through the proverbs. F. C. Ogbalu (1965, p.5).

Similarly, Wolof proverbs are teaching materials that serve numerous functions in societies like conflicts resolutions between people, teaching morality, imparting knowledge, tying and renewing human relationship, etc. since they allow young generation to follow the paths of wise and elder people, to maintain Proverbs are also taken as communicative referents in daily conversation and comprehensive communication, while preserving cultural heritage through oral tradition. Social, religious and political values are apprehending through these communicative referents to make them memorable.

In this respect, 10 proverbs are selected both in Wolof and Igbo to set according to their similarity in meaning.

Each proverb has each own meaning, and semantically similar in both languages. The next

lines discuss about the meaning of these selected proverbs as translated into English for wider understanding.

- The proverb “A person is known by their handwork” teaches that an individual's true value is revealed through their actions, efforts, and achievements, rather than through their words or outward appearance. This principle emphasizes the importance of hard work, integrity, and responsibility. A person who works diligently and produces positive results earns respect and trust from others.
- when a child gains wealth they gain enemies. This proverb highlights an important social truth about the dual nature of prosperity. It points out that while wealth is often seen as a source of security and respect, it can also lead to jealousy, resentment, and conflict. The reference to a child underscores innocence and youth, suggesting that even those who are inexperienced or lack power can provoke hostility simply by gaining riches. This highlights the corrupting influence of envy within human relationships and communities. “More money, more problems”
- Wealth makes the heart strong.
- This proverb illustrates a powerful semantic convergence between Wolof, French, and English worldviews. In Wolof view, the equivalent expression “Alal moy doole” (“Wealth is strength”) captures the idea that material possessions provide not only comfort but also social and moral authority. In Wolof culture, the term “heart” (xol) represents inner courage, faith, and dignity rather than just emotion. An English rendering of the idea is, “Wealth makes the heart strong.” This proverb maintains the original theme of empowerment but takes on a psychological aspect, linking wealth to emotional confidence and self-assurance. This change emphasizes how proverbs serve as cultural mirrors, reflecting the values and priorities inherent in each language.
- “When wealth reaches home the wealthy person will be known.”
- This proverb suggests that true wealth or success is impossible to conceal; when prosperity comes, everyone will notice. When someone becomes rich, those around them will inevitably find out. Just like light, wealth cannot remain hidden; it visibly changes one's lifestyle, home, and relationships.
- “A rich man needs no introduction.”
- “One does not abandon a battle because of fear of being killed.”
- A true warrior or committed fighter does not back down simply because of the risk of death. In life, one should not abandon challenges or goals just because they appear risky or difficult. This highlights the importance of integrity and steadfastness. Fear should not dictate one's actions when duty or purpose calls.
- “A pregnant stomach cannot be covered with the hand” may sound confusing at first. While it seems incorrect to say that people often can't cover a pregnant belly with their hands, riddles often play with words. In this case, “pregnant stomach” might not refer to a human belly at all. Instead, it could metaphorically describe something that is “pregnant” or full, such as an object that is simply too large to be covered by a hand. So the answer could be: “a pregnant stomach” is not a literal human belly but something large and “full,” like the moon or a big balloon.”
- “The eye that beholds the Eagle, should admire the eagle. You don't see the Eagle daily.”
- The “eye” sees the eagle, a rare and majestic creature, and should take a moment to admire it. On a deeper level, this serves as a reminder to appreciate rare or extraordinary things when they appear in life, as they do not come often. This can apply to people, opportunities, experiences, or moments of insight.
- Additionally, the message encourages mindfulness and gratitude. Instead of taking things for granted, we should recognize and honor what is special.
- “When a child is treated as their mates, they become happy.”
- “Being treated as their mate” means being regarded as an equal, with respect, and treated as a peer rather than just a subordinate or someone to control. The phrase “they become happy” indicates that this respectful treatment cultivates positive emotions, boosts self-esteem, and fosters a sense of belonging.
- Essentially, the concept aligns with contemporary educational and parenting methods: when children are listened to, involved in age-appropriate decisions, and treated with respect, they tend to exhibit greater happiness, cooperation, and confidence.
- “The world is a grand vacation experience, after enjoying it, we return home.”

- The world is a temporary and wondrous place filled with experiences, sights, and lessons, much like a vacation. In contrast, “home” symbolizes our true essence, soul, and the permanence we ultimately return to.
- It conveys a subtle duality: joy in exploration, yet an awareness of impermanence. One could also interpret it philosophically: life is meant to be enjoyed, but the ultimate destination goes beyond the pleasures and distractions of the external world.
- “When a king leaves another king will replace him.”
- This doesn’t specify a literal king; it could be metaphorical.

One classic interpretation relates to chess: when a king is checkmated, removed, or leaves the board, the game ends, but a new game can begin with another king.

Another interpretation involves a deck of cards: if a king is removed from the deck, another king can take its place in the game.

Given the wording, my best guess is that it refers to a chessboard or card deck scenario, where “king” is not permanent but can be replaced.

Analyzing these ten proverbs, one can conclude that they primarily celebrate hard work, the merits of earned wealth, and a form of quiet courage. This reflects the classic idea that it is not enough to merely speak; one must also take action. The true value of a person is recognized in their actions, especially those they do not boast about.

The text has a biblical quality and evokes thoughts of Durkheim and his analyses on the social role of work, which offers structure and a sense of dignity. This connection often arises when one reads these proverbs. Upon closer examination, a subtle admiration for wealth becomes evident: prosperity is a benefit that can never remain concealed; it eventually reveals itself. This notion provides reassurance to those who value action over ostentation.

After considering these various perspectives, I believe that the true wisdom of proverbs, if we accept their ongoing relevance, lies in their inherent ambiguity: nothing is absolute. While it is possible to find integrity in action, it is crucial, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, to recognize that any “good attitude” depends on multiple social contexts. Wealth does not always isolate; at times, it can be subtle and unobtrusive.

We must move forward despite our fears, but we should also pay attention to our sense of danger. This balance requires a careful interplay between courage and social awareness—between respecting others and ourselves. We should also embrace the healthy uncertainty that circumstances, much like fortune, can change unexpectedly.

Each proverb provides not an absolute truth but rather a guiding compass, though one filled with uncertainties, to help us navigate our vulnerabilities. As Georges Canguilhem (1992) might have observed, this guidance allows us to thrive amid life’s fleeting cycles, reminding us that what truly matters will endure.

All of this prepares a mind that is humble yet resolute for the intense experiences of today. Finally, these ten (10) proverbs collectively explore themes of work, wealth, courage, humility, and the transience of life. They teach that a person’s true worth is shown through hard work and deeds, not words; that wealth, while empowering, can also bring envy and social tension. True prosperity cannot remain hidden; it naturally reveals itself. They emphasize courage in adversity, reminding us that fear should never deter purpose or duty. Some proverbs highlight universal truths: what is evident cannot be concealed, rare things deserve admiration, and respectful treatment; especially of children brings happiness. Others adopt a philosophical tone, viewing life as a temporary journey and leadership as ever-changing. Together, they reflect a deep moral and cultural wisdom that values integrity, awareness, humility, and the acceptance of life’s cycles.

Thus, these proverbs reflect a shared African moral philosophy rooted in community, respect, hard work, and the awareness of life’s impermanence. Although expressed through different linguistic and cultural symbols, both traditions converge on the same ethical and social values.

A striking thematic convergence appears in the proverbs of both the Wolof and Igbo cultures. Both languages express a moral universe where hard work brings honor, wealth tests a person’s character, truth ultimately reveals itself, and both life and power are fleeting. However, the metaphors of each culture highlight distinct nuances: The Wolof perspective often links morality with social balance and dignity, while the Igbo outlook focuses on individual effort,

community recognition, and destiny. Together, these proverbs affirm a shared African humanism rooted in wisdom, moderation, and respect for the cycles of life.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of these selected Wolof and Igbo proverbs reveals shared African values grounded in community such as: dignity, hard work, and the transience of life. Despite their distinct linguistic and cultural expressions, both traditions uphold similar ethical values. Honor through effort, the testing nature of wealth, the triumph of truth, and the fleetingness of power and existence. While Wolof wisdom emphasizes morality as the foundation of social harmony and respect, Igbo thought highlights personal responsibility, communal esteem, and the role of destiny. Together, they embody a common African humanism that celebrates wisdom, moderation, and reverence for life's realities.

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