



JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

ISSN : 3122-0479

DOI – <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18036818>

Volume 1 No 1 December (2025): Journal of English Studies

**MORAL INSTRUCTION AND IDENTITY IN HAUSA PROVERBS: A
SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY**

<https://joesfudutsinma.com.ng/joes/index.php/one/article/view/16>

joesfudma@gmail.com

BY

SAGIR YUNUSA

Dept. of Language and Communication School of General studies

Federal college of Education (Technical) Bichi

&

Dr. Solomon oreoluwa Abraham

Dept of English Faculty of Arts

Federal University Dutsin-ma

Abstract

This study titled "Moral instruction and identity in Hausa proverbs: a sociolinguistic study" explores the sociolinguistic functions of Hausa proverbs, focusing on how they convey moral instruction and shape cultural identity. Due to the fact that, there are rapid cultural change, traditional forms of expressions as a result of globalization may easily be regarded as outdated language use. The research, adopts a "speaking Model" framework for the analysis of the data collected from various respondents based on qualitative design approach. By analysing a selected corpus of proverbs, this study demonstrates the enduring relevance of oral tradition in reinforcing moral values and social norms. Using a sociolinguistic lens, the research highlights how language serves as a vehicle for cultural continuity, education, and identity formation.

Keywords: Hausa proverbs, moral instruction, cultural identity, sociolinguistics and oral tradition.

Introduction

Proverbs are succinct, metaphorical expressions that encapsulate collective wisdom, values, and social norms. In Hausa culture, proverbs serve not only as linguistic artefacts but also as pedagogical tools, cultural signifiers, and instruments of social regulation. They are embedded in everyday discourse and are often used in storytelling, teaching, conflict resolution, and governance. The central concern of this study is to carry out a research on how Hausa proverbs function sociolinguistically to transmit moral lessons and shape collective identity. By situating proverbs within their cultural and communicative contexts, the research reveals their role in both reflecting and reinforcing societal values. This study also contributes to the broader discourse on language and culture by highlighting the role of indigenous oral traditions in contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship.

However, with subsequent emergence of globalization and rapid cultural changes, in one way or the other may yield to the disappearance of these traditional forms of expressions. Therefore, there is need for the careful preservation of these oral traditions such as proverbs. In the Hausa land, proverbs remained as the historical and educative means of teaching the younger ones. The study is duly committed to provide Hausa learners, teachers and any other Hausa speaking community with skills, instructions, moral lessons and other acceptable conducts that will lead them to follow the footsteps of their fore fathers through the active uses and practices of these proverbs at their various occasions.

Literature Review

The study of proverbs as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon has received considerable attention in African oral literature. Scholars such as Mieder points out that, "Proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk which contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorisable form and which are handed down from generation to generation"(3). This definition highlights how proverbs are not only linguistic expressions but also vehicles for preserving collective knowledge. Proverbs are often defined as short, commonly known expressions that convey cultural wisdom, practical knowledge, or moral lessons. According to Norrick, they are "concise, memorable statements that express general truths or advice"(78). Proverbs usually emerge from the collective experiences of a community and are used in everyday conversation to offer insights or judgments, making them integral to language and culture.

From an anthropological perspective, proverbs are considered essential artefacts of cultural expression, carrying embedded meanings that reflect a society's worldview, values, and collective identity. Anthropologists view proverbs as tools that capture the ethos of a community, distilling complex social norms and moral philosophies into accessible, repeatable phrases. Ruth Finnegan, in her influential work *Oral Literature in Africa*, argues that proverbs are crucial to oral traditions, serving as both educational tools and social regulators that are used "to reinforce social cohesion and continuity by embedding shared beliefs and values within these expressions" (54). Additionally, Lévi-Strauss a foundational figure in anthropology, considered proverbs as part of the "mythological thought" system inherent to all cultures. In his structuralist approach, Lévi-Strauss argued that proverbs operate through binary oppositions, using symbols and metaphors to communicate complex ideas about life, death, morality, and the human condition. According to Lévi-Strauss, proverbs are a form of "miniature myth," compacting the universal themes present in mythologies into bite-sized, memorable phrases that make cultural logic accessible to all (39).

From a linguistic standpoint, proverbs are defined by their fixed and formulaic nature, often relying on rhyme, alliteration, and other phonetic devices that make them easy to recall. Norrick, describes proverbs as "conventional utterances with a timeless truth," emphasizing how their structure makes them both memorable and universally applicable (29). Proverbs often rely on metaphor and analogy, linking simple images—like animals, nature, or everyday objects—to complex human situations, allowing listeners to draw meanings that resonate with their personal experiences. Additionally, proverbs are compact expressions of language that encapsulate complex ideas, social norms, and cultural values. Linguists examine proverbs as forms of figurative language, often containing metaphors, similes, and other rhetorical devices that enhance their impact and memorability. They analyse the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic structures within proverbs to understand how these elements convey meaning efficiently. Sapir an early 20th-century linguist, suggested that language, including proverbs, "reflects a society's worldview and that the structure of proverbs reveals how language shapes thought" (15).

Hausa proverbs have been studied by various scholars who underscore their pedagogical and communicative importance. For instance, in educational setting scholars like; Mustapha examines the use of Hausa proverbs in moral education, emphasizing their application in teaching and learning situations and their role in moral instruction. He went further, highlights how educators utilize proverbs "to transmit cultural values and encourage critical thinking among students" (45-48). His research reveals that Proverbs are powerful pedagogical tools that link traditional wisdom to modern education. Verily, Students learn moral and ethical lessons through the interpretation of proverbs. But, this differs with the current study in the sense that Mustapha's focus is confined to the educational context, primarily analysing how teachers employ proverbs in formal educational system. The current study, expands beyond that as it encapsulates informal educational system,

thereby teaching those community members that are not school goers as well as other various facets of life. However, as a result of this variation, this study fills the gap by investigating how proverbs function in natural, spontaneous communication beyond formal education, offering a more holistic view of their role in moral instructions. This gap underline the need for a comprehensive sociolinguistic study to explore the roles of Hausa proverbs in diverse social settings. This study will address the oversight by applying a "Speaking Model" approach to understand how proverbs teach moral lessons, resolve conflicts and reinforce cultural norms thereby educating the members of the Hausa society to beautify; self identity, showcase their indigenous language practices and other cultural attaire in contemporary Hausa society.

Theoretical Framework

From a theoretical perspective, this study adopts a "SPEAKING model" approach proposed by Dell Hymes in 1972. This theory, offers a useful framework for analyzing the sociolinguistic context of proverb usage. The model emphasizes the importance of these tenants; setting, participants, ends (purposes), act sequences, key (tone or manner), instrumentalities (forms of speech), norms, and genres. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding how proverbs operate within specific communicative events in Hausa culture. As such, the principles of this approach will be systematically applied in the analysis of data for the study under investigation.

Methodology

This paper deploys a qualitative design approach where thematic sociolinguistic analysis is conducted on ten selected Hausa proverbs out of the twenty collated Hausa proverbs from various respondents, through the observations of proverbs in their natural environments such as everyday conversations, community gatherings, and cultural activities. Additionally, the selection criteria

focused on proverbs that exemplify themes of moral instruction and identity. Each proverb is presented in its original Hausa form, followed by an English translation and interpretive commentary. The analysis draws on typological frameworks and sociolinguistic theory to elucidate the functions and implications of each proverb.

The study was conducted in Kano, Katsina, and Jigawa States, where data were obtained through systematic observation of proverbs in their natural environments of usage, including everyday conversations, community gatherings, and cultural activities. These instances were recorded to preserve both the linguistic form and the situational context in which the proverbs were employed. Supplementary insights were gathered through informal interactions with community elders, teachers, and cultural custodians, who provided clarification and contextual interpretations. The proverbs were subsequently transcribed, translated, and organized thematically. Ethical protocols were observed by seeking oral consent from participants and ensuring anonymity where requested.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Proverbs as Moral Instruction in Hausa proverbs are deeply embedded with ethical guidance. They address themes such as honesty, patience, humility, respect, and responsibility. The following data illustrate how proverbs communicate moral teachings.

The Theme of Moral Teaching

Datum 1: "Ruwa baya tsami sai da dalili." Translation: Water does not turn sour without a cause.

Interpretation: This teaches that every effect has a cause, encouraging reflection and accountability.

Using the "Speaking Model" developed by Hymes, this moral proverb is analysed as:

S (Setting): Used in family talks, conflict resolution, or moral discussions.

P (Participants): Elders, parents, or mentors usually address someone who is in conflict or confusion to provide guidance and reassurance.

E (Ends): To promote empathy, patience, and fair judgment.

A (Act Sequence): Proverb is stated, explained, and applied to real-life situations.

K (Key): Reflective, calm, sometimes cautionary in tone.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, informal or semi-formal, metaphorical style.

N (Norms): Listeners are expected to learn from the proverb and avoid rash judgments.

G (Genre): A didactic (moral teaching) proverb serves the purpose of guiding people's behavior through ethical instruction.

Datum 2: "Mai hakuri shi ke dafa dutse ya sha romon." Translation: It is the patient person who cooks a stone and eats the soup. Interpretation: Endorses patience and perseverance even in seemingly impossible situations. This proverb is analysed based the Hymes theory as:

S (Setting): Commonly used in family, social, or religious settings, especially during hardship or encouragement.

P (Participants): Elders, parents, mentors advising someone facing difficulty or frustration.

E (Ends): To teach the virtue of patience and perseverance.

A (Act Sequence): Proverb is quoted → followed by explanation → applied to the listener's situation.

K (Key): Calm, encouraging, wise.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, informal but weighty in tone, metaphorical style.

N (Norms): Patience is culturally valued; success is seen as a reward for endurance.

G (Genre): Moral/didactic proverb.

Datum 3: "Gani ga wane ya fi ji da kunne." Translation: Seeing someone is better than hearing about them. Interpretation: In essence, the proverb encourages people to make judgments founded on evidence instead of relying on hearsay.

S (Setting): Used in social discussions, disputes, or when correcting gossip or assumptions.

P (Participants): Elders, counselors, or peers advising someone who's judging based on rumors.

E (Ends): To encourage fair judgment based on evidence, not hearsay.

A (Act Sequence): Proverb is stated → situation is explained → moral is drawn.

K (Key): Firm, corrective, sometimes reflective.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, informal settings; metaphorical.

N (Norms): Encourages truth, fairness, and independent thinking.

G (Genre): Ethical/moral proverb.

Datum 4: "Wanda bai san dare ba, sai ya ce gizo-gizo bai da hankali." Translation: One who does not understand the night says the spider lacks sense. Interpretation: In its interpretation, the proverb advocates understanding before judgment and promotes wisdom and patience.

S (Setting): Used in reflective conversations, teaching moments, or when correcting misunderstanding or prejudice.

P (Participants): Elders, teachers, or mentors speaking to someone who has made a premature or uninformed judgment.

E (Ends): To encourage deep understanding before criticism; promote wisdom over rash judgment.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is quoted → an example is given → a moral lesson is drawn.

K (Key): Thoughtful, sometimes gently rebuking.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, often metaphorical or poetic in form.

N (Norms): Encourages humility, patience, and thoughtful reflection.

G (Genre): Philosophical and moral proverb.

Datum 5: "Goron gayya ba ya hana raina." Translation: A communal kolanut does not stop the rain. Interpretation: Suggests that collective actions should be accompanied by responsibility and foresight.

These proverbs demonstrate that moral lessons are communicated in concise, memorable forms that resonate across generations.

S (Setting): Used during communal gatherings, conflict resolution, or in discussions about responsibility and sincerity.

P (Participants): Elders, leaders, or observers addressing superficial or symbolic efforts.

E (Ends): To emphasize that real problems require real solutions, not just symbolic gestures.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is stated → linked to a situation → a call to deeper action is made.

K (Key): Cautionary, sometimes sarcastic or critical.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, metaphorical, and figurative.

N (Norms): Values sincerity, action, and realism over empty rituals.

G (Genre): Moral and critical proverb.

Proverbs function as markers of cultural identity.

They reflect values, beliefs, and social structures inherent in Hausa society. The following examples illustrate how proverbs convey identity.

Datum 6: "Komai dadin gida, ba a manta da uwa ba." Translation: No matter how sweet a home is, one never forgets the mother. Interpretation: Highlights the foundational role of motherhood and the family unit.

S (Setting): Common in family discussions, cultural teachings, or moments of moral reflection—especially when someone is thriving away from home.

P (Participants): Parents, elders, guardians advising younger ones or successful individuals.

E (Ends): To instill gratitude, humility, and family loyalty.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is shared → followed by an example or life experience → moral reflection.

K (Key): Warm, reflective, respectful.

I (Instrumentalities): Oral, often emotional, sometimes poetic.

N (Norms): Gratitude and family respect are strongly upheld in Hausa culture.

G (Genre): Moral and cultural proverb.

Datum 7: "Tsuntsu daya baya kawo bazara." Translation: One bird does not make a spring.

Interpretation: Emphasizes the importance of community and collective effort.

This proverb teaches the moral value of teamwork and collective effort. It emphasizes that no single person can achieve great success or bring about change alone—community, unity, and cooperation are essential.

S (Setting): Used in group settings—meetings, team efforts, community work, or family advice.

P (Participants): Leaders, elders, teachers, or team members encouraging unity and joint effort.

E (Ends): To promote cooperation, discourage selfishness or over-reliance on one person.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is stated → followed by an explanation → a call for collective action.

K (Key): Encouraging, wise, sometimes corrective.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, informal or semi-formal, metaphorical.

N (Norms): Teamwork and unity are highly valued in Hausa society.

G (Genre): Didactic (moral) proverb.

Datum 8: "Idan kura ta yi gudu, ba don tsoro ba ne, don tana da wani aiki." Translation: If the hyena runs, it is not out of fear, but because it has something to do. Interpretation: Reflects autonomy, pride, and purposeful identity. This proverb teaches that actions should not always be misinterpreted as weakness or fear. People often act based on personal motives or goals unknown to others. It promotes understanding, fair judgment, and avoiding assumptions.

S (Setting): Used in social discussions, self-defense, or when advising against jumping to conclusions.

P (Participants): Speakers could be elders, advisors, or individuals justifying their decisions or actions.

E (Ends): To correct misinterpretation and promote thoughtful judgment.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is quoted → an action or situation is explained → the moral is emphasized.

K (Key): Calm, reflective, sometimes defensive.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, metaphorical, often conversational.

N (Norms): Encourages fairness, open-mindedness, and thoughtful analysis of others' behavior.

G (Genre): Moral/philosophical proverb.

Datum 9: "Duk wanda ya fi kudi, shi ne uban gari." Translation: He who has the most wealth is the head of the town. Interpretation: Reflects the socio-economic dynamics of leadership and respect in Hausa society. This proverb reflects on how wealth often commands respect and influence, regardless of character or merit. It carries both a moral warning against materialism and

a realistic observation about social power dynamics. The message can be used to critique societal values or to highlight the influence of money in leadership and status.

S (Setting): Common in political discussions, social critique, or moral reflection on leadership and power.

P (Participants): Elders, social critics, or observers commenting on social inequality or behavior.

E (Ends): To highlight or question how wealth affects authority and social recognition.

A (Act Sequence): The proverb is stated → followed by examples from society → leads to a moral or critical conclusion.

K (Key): Satirical, ironic, or critical, depending on usage.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, sometimes used rhetorically or in debates.

N (Norms): Reflects an awareness of societal realities; invites questioning of values.

G (Genre): Critical/social-moral proverb.

Datum 10: "Yaro baya san darajar uba sai rana ta yi zafi." Translation: A child does not know the value of a father until the sun is hot. Interpretation: Emphasizes intergenerational respect and the importance of elders.

S (Setting): Used in family guidance, during moral instruction, or when someone takes support for granted.

P (Participants): Typically spoken by elders, parents, or guardians to children or youths.

E (Ends): To teach appreciation, especially for parental roles, and to warn against ingratitude.

A (Act Sequence): Proverb is quoted → linked to real-life example or reflection → moral lesson is drawn.

K (Key): Serious, emotional, often reflective.

I (Instrumentalities): Spoken, informal, metaphorical, sometimes in storytelling.

N (Norms): Gratitude and parental respect are cultural expectations.

G (Genre): Such a proverb is moral and didactic because it seeks to correct behavior while teaching valuable lessons.

Having analysed these proverbs under the realm of Hymes model. It is also pertinent to know that, these proverbs construct a narrative of identity that is communal, hierarchical, and value-laden. They reinforce the idea that identity is not only inherited but also performed and validated through social interaction.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that Hausa proverbs function as both mirrors and moulds of societal values. They reflect deeply ingrained moral principles while actively shaping behaviour through normative messaging. The moral proverbs guide individual conduct, while identity-related proverbs reinforce communal cohesion and self-understanding.

Hausa proverbs are pedagogically significant. They are used in both formal and informal educational contexts to teach values, discipline, and cultural knowledge. Elders use proverbs to advise the young, teachers incorporate them into lessons, and parents use them to correct behavior. Proverbs thus function as a form of moral curriculum.

In terms of identity, proverbs serve as a cultural compass. They encode the social expectations, roles, and beliefs of the Hausa people. Identity is constructed through the performance of proverbial wisdom. The frequent use of these expressions in daily conversations helps to reinforce a collective identity anchored in shared values.

The sociolinguistic relevance of these proverbs lies in their adaptability to context. A proverb may carry different implications depending on who says it, to whom, and in what setting. This contextual flexibility makes proverbs powerful tools of indirect communication, allowing speakers to convey criticism, praise, or guidance in culturally appropriate ways.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Hausa proverbs are vital instruments of moral education and identity formation. As oral texts, they preserve cultural wisdom and function sociolinguistically to regulate behaviour and maintain social harmony. In a rapidly changing world, these proverbs remain essential for cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The dual role of proverbs as moral and identity markers highlights their continued relevance in contemporary society. Their integration into educational curricula, community workshops, and cultural documentation initiatives is strongly recommended. Scholars and educators should work collaboratively to ensure that these linguistic treasures are not lost but are instead passed on as living elements of Hausa heritage.

Works Cited

Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Open Book Publishers, 2012.

Hymes, Dell. "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life." *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, Blackwell, 1972, pp. 35–71. Jibril, Umar Faruq. "A Semantic and Functional Analysis of Hausa Proverbs." *Journal of West African Languages*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 33–58. 2020.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Basic Books, 1963.

Mieder, Wolfgang. *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Muhammad, Bala. *Hausa Proverbs and Their Meanings*. Gaskiya Corporation, 2015.

Norrick, Neal R. *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*. Mouton, 1985.

Sapir, Edward. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Harcourt, Brace, 1921.