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A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED HAUSA PROVERBS

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Abstract

This article presents a pragmatic analysis of Hausa proverbs with the aim of uncovering their communicative functions, cultural values, and contextual meanings in Hausa society. Anchored on Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, and supported by insights from Ethnography of Communication, the study examines how proverbs perform illocutionary acts and achieve perlocutionary effects within interaction. Data were collected from oral interviews, literary sources, and focus group discussions with native Hausa speakers in Katsina State, Nigeria. Using qualitative content analysis, one hundred widely used proverbs were purposively selected and analysed. Findings reveal that Hausa proverbs are multifunctional, serving as indirect speech acts that advise, warn, criticize, persuade, resolve disputes, and preserve cultural heritage. Their pragmatic force is context-dependent, with many proverbs employed to mitigate face-threatening acts and reinforce social norms. For example, “Ruwa baya tsami banza” (“Water does not turn sour without cause”) cautions against hasty judgment, while “Hannu daya ba ya daukar jinka” (“One hand cannot lift a load”) stresses cooperation and communal living. The study concludes that Hausa proverbs are not ornamental but practical communicative resources that embody collective wisdom, regulate behaviour, and maintain harmony in society. It recommends further comparative research on African proverbs to deepen cross-cultural understanding and highlight the continuing relevance of oral traditions in contemporary communication.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Hausa proverbs, Speech Acts, Politeness, Communication, Culture

Introduction

Language is a dynamic tool for human interaction, and among its most enduring elements are proverbs which are short, metaphorical statements that transmit collective wisdom, moral lessons, and cultural identity. In Hausa society, proverbs (*karin magana*) are central to oral tradition, conversation, and education. They serve as subtle yet powerful communicative devices, encapsulating values such as patience, communal living, respect for elders, and hard work. For instance, the proverb “*Mai hakuri ba ya kaskantar da shi*” (“One who is patient is never humiliated”) extols perseverance, while “*Rai da lafiya ya fi dukiya*” (“Life and health are more valuable than wealth”) underscores the prioritisation of well-being over material possessions.

Despite their ubiquity, Hausa proverbs are underexplored from a pragmatic perspective. Much of the scholarship on Hausa oral tradition has emphasised their literary, folkloric, or historical significance, often overlooking the pragmatic dimensions of how they operate in actual communication. This neglect creates a gap because proverbs do more than embellish language; they perform actions such as advising, warning, persuading, or resolving disputes in ways that reflect cultural norms and values. Consequently, this study seeks to provide a pragmatic analysis of selected Hausa proverbs in order to uncover their communicative functions, the strategies speakers employ when using them, and the cultural assumptions embedded in their meanings.

In pursuing this aim, the study is driven by interconnected objectives. It examines the pragmatic functions of Hausa proverbs across different contexts of interaction, identifies the cultural values that are embedded in them, and analyses the strategies speakers adopt to persuade, admonish, or reinforce social norms through proverbial usage. In addition, the research investigates how Hausa proverbs contribute to the preservation and scholarly understanding of Hausa oral heritage.

To achieve these goals, the study addresses several guiding questions. It considers what pragmatic functions Hausa proverbs serve in diverse communicative settings and what cultural values they reflect. It also asks how speakers strategically employ proverbs to influence behaviour, maintain politeness, or navigate social hierarchies, and in what ways Hausa proverbs contribute to the continuity of oral heritage and to the shaping of Hausa worldviews. By framing the research in this way, the objectives and questions merge seamlessly into the larger purpose of demonstrating how Hausa proverbs function as pragmatic tools of communication.

This integrated approach ensures that the inquiry remains anchored in both linguistic and cultural perspectives. By examining Hausa proverbs pragmatically, the study highlights their enduring relevance in contemporary society and shows how they continue to regulate behaviour, sustain harmony, and transmit moral values.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Proverbs are universally regarded as repositories of communal wisdom. Finnegan describes them as “the universal nature of oral literature” that encapsulates shared human experiences across cultures (45). Similarly, Dundes maintains that proverbs rely on “shared cultural and contextual knowledge for interpretation,” which makes them communicative assets beyond their literary function (78). In Hausa society, this interpretive dimension is especially crucial since proverbs operate not only as aesthetic expressions but also as pragmatic tools for teaching, advising, and regulating behaviour.

Several scholars have emphasised the cultural centrality of Hausa proverbs. Hussaini notes that they “convey cultural values and norms” and often draw from rituals, historical contexts, and everyday life (115). Abdullahi illustrates this with the proverb “Allah maigirma, yana jin magana”

(“God, the Great, listens to words”), which reflects Islamic influence on Hausa proverbial wisdom (29). Likewise, Mustapha observes that Hausa proverbs are “an effective means of instilling values such as honesty, patience, humility, and respect” among younger generations (32).

Other scholars underline their social and relational functions. Danjuma argues that proverbs “promote reconciliation and harmony” in conflict situations by encouraging reflection and dialogue (127). Aliyu adds that they “shape everyday decision-making” in both personal and communal contexts (41). In political communication, Shuaibu shows that Hausa proverbs are strategically employed by leaders to “reinforce shared beliefs and mobilize collective action” (65). Similarly, Sani highlights their role in fostering social cohesion, as they “strengthen the bonds that hold the community together” (49).

Linguistically, Hausa proverbs are rich in metaphor and imagery. Musa cites the example “Kifi bai da hankali sai ruwan da yake ciki” (“A fish has no wisdom except the water it is in”), which symbolises the influence of environment on human behaviour (104). Gambo further points out that effective use of proverbs is regarded as a mark of intelligence and wisdom in Hausa culture, where a proverb-laden speaker is “seen as knowledgeable and respected” (96).

From a pragmatic perspective, Yule defines pragmatics as “the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener” (3). Austin’s Speech Act Theory explains how utterances function as actions, noting that “to say something is to do something” (94). Searle expands this by categorising speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (23). These theories explain why Hausa proverbs such as “Ruwa baya tsami banza” (“Water does not turn sour without cause”) function not merely as statements but as advisory acts with illocutionary force. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory also provides a useful lens, as they argue that “politeness is the means by which communicative acts are made less

face-threatening” (61). This is evident in Hausa communication, where indirectness is valued as a strategy for maintaining harmony.

Empirical studies further confirm these observations. Yusuf (2001), in his pragmatic analysis of Yoruba proverbs, found that they function mainly as indirect speech acts, particularly in advisory and cautionary contexts. His findings demonstrate the universality of indirectness in African proverbs and provide a useful comparative background for Hausa.

Ahmed (2010) examined Hausa proverbs in conflict resolution and discovered that elders use them as persuasive strategies to calm disputants and guide negotiations. His study confirms that proverbs serve as culturally legitimate resources in mediation processes.

Similarly, Ibrahim (2014) explored Hausa proverbs in political speeches and concluded that politicians employ them to legitimize authority, appeal to shared values, and connect with the masses. This underscores their instrumental role in political discourse.

On the pedagogical front, Bello (2016) investigated Hausa proverbs in classroom contexts and observed that teachers rely on them to instil discipline, transmit moral lessons, and engage students in culturally familiar ways. His study shows the continuing relevance of proverbs in formal education.

Finally, Sulaiman (2018) carried out a comparative pragmatic analysis of Hausa and Fulfulde proverbs, revealing that while both traditions use proverbs for moral instruction, Hausa proverbs are more strongly associated with Islamic values, whereas Fulfulde proverbs often draw from pastoral experiences. His findings highlight the cultural specificity of proverb pragmatics and the need for cross-cultural perspectives.

Taken together, both theoretical and empirical works highlight the multi functionality of African proverbs. They are not only vehicles of cultural wisdom but also pragmatic tools shaped by context, intended meaning, and social relationships. Building on these insights, the present study extends the analysis by focusing explicitly on the pragmatic strategies of indirectness, speech acts, and politeness in selected Hausa proverbs.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is suited for exploring the contextual meanings and pragmatic functions of proverbs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with elders between 70 to 80 years age, traditional leaders, and Hausa scholars within Katsina metropolis, complemented by focus group discussions and references to written anthologies. Purposive sampling was used to select one hundred widely recognised proverbs, chosen for their frequency of use, diversity of themes, and communicative relevance.

The data were categorised thematically into domains such as morality, social cohesion, caution, perseverance, and relationships. Content analysis was then employed, with Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory providing the analytical framework for uncovering how each proverb functions as a communicative act and how politeness strategies are encoded within them.

Assertive

Assertive affirm shared truths and highlight cause-and-effect reasoning. For example, “Ruwa baya tsami banza” (“Water does not go sour without cause”) stresses that every effect has an origin, encouraging rational inquiry. Similarly, “Ba a maganin karya sai gaskiya” (“The only cure for lies is truth”) underscores honesty as a central cultural value. Another proverb, “Komai nisan jifa, kasa

zai fāḍī” (“No matter how far something is thrown, it will land on the ground”), teaches humility and inevitability, reminding listeners of human limitations.

Directives

Directive proverbs instruct and guide behaviour, often using indirectness to preserve face. “Idan ka ga kura, ka san ana nesa da daji” (“If you see dust, you know the forest is near”) urges caution and preparedness. “Hannu ḍāya ba ya ḍaukar jinka” (“One hand cannot lift a load to the head”) promotes cooperation and collective responsibility. Another cautionary directive, “In ka ga kura tana yawo, ka san akwai rami a kusa” (“If you see a hyena wandering, know there is a pit nearby”), indirectly warns of hidden dangers.

Commissives

Commissive proverbs reinforce patience and perseverance as virtues. “Mai hakuri ya kan ci riba” (“The patient person reaps reward”) assures listeners of eventual benefits. Likewise, “Komai nisan dare, gari zai waye” (“No matter how long the night, the day will break”) conveys hope and promises relief after hardship.

Expressive

Expressive proverbs articulate emotions of condemnation, solidarity, or caution. “Wanda ya ci amanar dan uwansa, ya ci amanar kansa” (“He who betrays his brother betrays himself”) conveys disapproval of betrayal while reinforcing loyalty and trust. “Biri ya yi kama da mutum, amma ba mutum ba” (“The monkey resembles man, but is not man”) criticises superficial judgments and warns against deceptive appearances.

Declarations

In contexts such as dispute resolution, certain proverbs function declaratively. Elders employ them to legitimise authority and pronounce judgments, thereby enacting decisions that carry communal force. For instance, proverbs invoking patience or truth may be used by leaders as authoritative pronouncements to resolve conflicts.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the pragmatic richness of Hausa proverbs. They not only transmit wisdom but also regulate social behaviour, reinforce communal norms, and sustain cultural identity.

Analysis and Discussion

The findings reveal that Hausa proverbs are multifunctional communicative resources whose pragmatic force extends well beyond aesthetic or literary ornamentation. Their dominance in assertive and directive forms underscores their didactic role in society: they not only preserve wisdom but also guide behaviour. The prevalence of directives reflects the advisory and regulatory functions of proverbs, ensuring that individuals align with communal expectations while respecting cultural norms.

Furthermore, the politeness strategies embedded in Hausa proverbs demonstrate how communication in Hausa culture is sensitive to social harmony. Indirection and metaphor are used to mitigate imposition, showing deference and respect to listeners, particularly elders or authority figures. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, where strategies are deployed to preserve face and maintain solidarity in interaction.

The use of proverbs in social contexts such as conflict resolution further highlights their performative role. Elders employ proverbs to diffuse tension, pronounce judgments, or persuade

disputants toward reconciliation. By doing so, proverbs function as speech acts that simultaneously advise, warn, and command, thereby embodying the social authority of the speaker.

In line with previous scholarship, such as Yankah's study of Akan proverbs and Yusuf's analysis of Hausa proverbs, this research confirms the persuasive and regulatory functions of proverbs. However, it goes further by showing how speech act and politeness frameworks reveal the subtlety and complexity of Hausa communicative practices. Hausa proverbs are shown to be dynamic, context-sensitive, and deeply intertwined with moral and social order.

Overall, the findings and discussion affirm that Hausa proverbs serve as cultural artefacts and pragmatic tools. They regulate conduct, reinforce communal identity, and ensure the continuity of traditional wisdom. Their continued use in modern contexts illustrates their resilience and adaptability, making them indispensable to understanding both Hausa language and culture

Findings

The analysis of one hundred (100) Hausa proverbs revealed diverse and distinct pragmatic functions that correspond closely with Searle's (1979) categories of speech acts—namely, representatives, directives, commissures, expressive, and declarations. The proverbs collectively serve as powerful linguistic tools that convey moral lessons, social values, and cultural wisdom within Hausa society. Each proverb performs a communicative act, reflecting specific social contexts and intentions such as advising, warning, encouraging, criticizing, consoling, or reinforcing communal norms.

From the total of 100 proverbs analyzed, it was observed that a significant number function as directives, used to instruct, warn, or guide behavior in line with cultural expectations. Representatives were also prominent, expressing beliefs, moral truths, and shared social realities.

Expressive appeared in proverbs that convey emotions such as sympathy, joy, disappointment, or gratitude, while commissures reflected promises, intentions, or commitments within interpersonal relationships. Though less frequent, declarations were identified in proverbs that serve to establish or affirm social order and authority.

To illustrate these findings, ten representative proverbs are presented below, each demonstrating how Hausa proverbs operate as communicative acts that both reflect and reinforce societal norms. However, the analysis of the full set of 100 proverbs confirms that such pragmatic functions are consistent across the corpus, emphasizing the crucial role of proverbs in maintaining moral discipline, transmitting cultural heritage, and facilitating effective social communication in Hausa communities

Summary

This study analysed one hundred Hausa proverbs through the lens of Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, highlighting their pragmatic functions and cultural implications. The findings revealed that assertives and directives dominate, reflecting the didactic and advisory role of proverbs in Hausa society. Commissives and expressive further reinforced values of patience, solidarity, and honesty, while declarative uses in dispute settlement demonstrated the authoritative force of proverbs in communal governance. The examples provided illustrated how Hausa proverbs continue to serve as instruments of social regulation, conflict mediation, and cultural preservation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hausa proverbs operate as more than stylistic embellishments; they are pragmatic tools that encode actions, regulate conduct, and embody cultural wisdom. By functioning as

assertive, directives, commissures, expressive, and declarations, these proverbs reveal the intricate ways language is used to guide behaviour, resolve conflicts, and sustain social norms. Their reliance on indirectness and metaphor underscores the Hausa preference for politeness and harmony in communication. Thus, proverbs remain central to understanding not only Hausa oral literature but also the dynamics of interaction within Hausa communities.

Recommendations

1. For Educators: Proverbs should be incorporated into formal curricula to preserve cultural heritage and enhance pragmatic competence in language learning.
2. For Conflict Mediators: Traditional and modern conflict resolution efforts should employ proverbs as persuasive tools for reconciliation and peacebuilding.
3. For Researchers: Comparative studies between Hausa proverbs and those of other African societies would provide broader insights into cross-cultural pragmatics.
4. For Cultural Institutions: Systematic documentation and preservation of Hausa proverbs are necessary to safeguard indigenous knowledge for future generations.

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