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A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF PROVERBIAL DISCOURSE ON UNITY, COOPERATION, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THREE MAJOR NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

In African communities, proverbs are among the most persistent kinds of oral expression. They serve as both active tools for social management and archives of collective wisdom. The sociolinguistic roles of proverbs in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba cultures are investigated in this study, with a particular emphasis on how proverbial discourse fosters harmony, collaboration, and dispute resolution. The study examines eighteen proverbs by native speakers of the three language traditions, using an integrated theoretical framework that combines Interactional Sociolinguistics and Cultural Linguistics. These books include: A. Kamal's *Hausaland* and *HausaBoy*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The study

shows how proverbs serve as context-dependent social acts that mediate interpersonal relationships, strengthen communal identity, and direct dispute-resolution procedures, using qualitative thematic and comparative analyses. The proverbs exhibit convergent philosophical views, despite disparities in cultural imagery and rhetorical techniques. By emphasizing the function of indigenous linguistic resources in maintaining social cohesiveness in multilingual cultures, the findings advance sociolinguistic research. According to the study, proverbs are still useful in modern Nigeria as culturally grounded instruments for civic education, peacebuilding, and mediation.

Keywords: Proverbial discourse; African oral traditions; Nigerian-languages; Unity, cooperation and conflict-resolution

1. Introduction

Language is more than just a method of communication; it is also a repository of cultural knowledge and a tool for negotiating and maintaining social order. Proverbs are among the most powerful linguistic expressions in African oral traditions, used to impart collective wisdom, regulate social behaviour, and explain human experience. Proverbial discourse has authority in many African civilisations because it is linked to community consensus and ancestral wisdom. Proverbs are compelling in social encounters because they elicit shared cultural understanding rather than personal opinion.

Nigeria provides an especially rich framework for examining the sociolinguistic roles of proverbs. Nigeria is One of the world's most linguistically diverse countries, with over 500 languages and a rich array of cultural traditions. The three largest ethnolinguistic tribes in the country are the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, each with its own rich proverbial culture that pervades daily conversation. Hausa proverbs frequently demonstrate the influence of Islamic moral theory and hierarchical social organization. Yoruba proverbs typically reference metaphysical concepts related to Ifa cosmology and communal ethics. In contrast, Igbo proverbs often encourage negotiation, individual initiative within collective frameworks, and the preservation of communal cohesion.

Recent advances in Sociolinguistics have turned scholarly focus away from proverbs as static manifestations of cultural wisdom and toward understanding them as dynamic discourse practices. According to this viewpoint, the meaning of a proverb evolves through interactional context, speaker intention, and shared cultural knowledge. Proverbs serve as speech acts that can counsel, warn, persuade, criticise, reconcile, or reinforce social values. This study investigates how proverbs serve as sociolinguistic tools for fostering unity, cooperation, and dispute resolution in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo communities. The study reveals how proverbial language reflects and reinforces the moral and social frameworks that support communal life through a comparative analysis of selected proverbs from literary sources.

2. Review of Related Literature

Scholarly interest in proverbs extends across numerous academic fields, including folklore studies, anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, and cognitive science (Finnegan, 2012; Mieder, 2008). An early study viewed proverbs as cultural products that retained conventional knowledge and moral qualities. Scholars focused on gathering, translating, and categorising proverbs as textual artifacts expressing shared belief systems. According to one influential definition, a proverb is a brief expression of customary wisdom conveyed in memorable and metaphorical form (Mieder, 2008). In this early paradigm, proverbs were considered as reservoirs of collective experience rather than active components of social interaction.

Later studies acknowledged that proverbs serve as communicative strategies incorporated in ordinary discourse (Adegbiya, 2022; Cohen, 2014). Researchers underlined that proverbs are strategically utilised in speech to convince, caution, or settle disagreements (Ademola et al., 2023; Olajuyin et al., 2019). This shift toward pragmatic analysis cleared the way for sociolinguistic approaches that view proverbs as manifestations of social action rather than static expressions. Sociolinguistics studies how language is used in social contexts to express identity, sustain relationships, and negotiate power (Holmes, 2013). According to Gumperz (1982), the interpretation of a proverb is influenced by contextual factors such as the speaker's social status, the relationship between participants, and the communicative aim of the encounter. Speech act theory reinforces this viewpoint by demonstrating that language performs acts rather than simply describing reality (Adegbiya, 2022; Egenti et al., 2016). Proverbs can serve as commands, warnings, or moral judgements during social interactions. Their metaphorical structure enables speakers to offer criticism or advice indirectly while remaining polite and socially acceptable (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Adeyanju & Akindele, 2018).

Interactional Sociolinguistics offers new insights into how proverbs function in discourse. Contextualisation signals describe how speakers signal interpretive frameworks during discourse (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 2005). The introduction of a proverb often signals a shift toward moral contemplation or collective authority, guiding listeners' interpretations of social problems (Onanuga et al., 2019). Cultural linguistics, like sociolinguistic approaches, investigates how language encodes shared cultural notions and worldviews (Sharifian, 2011). Proverbs commonly use culturally distinctive metaphors grounded in everyday experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These metaphors reflect collective perspectives on social connections, authority, morality, and collaboration (Esimaje et al., 2014).

Research on Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa proverbs in Nigeria has shown their importance in conflict resolution, political discourse, and moral education (Adegbiya, 2022; Ademowo et al., 2017; Maman, 2021; Nwachukwu, 2021; Olajuyin et al., 2019; Zajac et al., 2021). However, most existing research focuses on individual language traditions rather than comparative analysis across cultures (Bisong et al., 2019; Esimaje et al., 2014). The current study fills this gap by investigating how proverbs function in the three major Nigerian language traditions. By comparing Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo proverbs, the study reveals both common philosophical foundations and culturally unique variances in proverbial speech (Ibrahim, 2025; Rabiou et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design based on interpretive sociolinguistic analysis, which is particularly well-suited to investigating culturally rooted linguistic practices by delving deeply into meaning, context, and social interpretation. Data were collected from six culturally authentic literary writings known for their significant usage of indigenous proverbial expressions: *Hausaland* (Kamal, 2003) and *Hausa Boy* (Kamal, 2011) for Hausa; *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958) and *Wedlock of the Gods* (Sofola, 1972) for Igbo; and *The Lion and the Jewel* (Soyinka, 1962) and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Rotimi, 1971) for Yoruba. From this corpus, eighteen proverbs, six from each language tradition, were purposively selected based on their explicit engagement with themes of unity, cooperation, and conflict resolution. The investigation involved three interconnected stages: thematic classification of proverbs, contextual and cultural interpretation of each proverb's interactional function, and comparative analysis to discover cross-linguistic patterns. The study's theoretical framework

combines interactional sociolinguistics, which investigates how proverbs function discursively to manage relationships and influence social behaviour, and cultural linguistics, which provides tools for interpreting the cultural schemas, conceptual metaphors, and worldviews embedded in proverbial expressions.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section contains eighteen carefully chosen proverbs, six from each language's literary sources, organised into three thematic categories: (i) unity and collective responsibility, (ii) cooperation and interdependence, and (iii) dispute resolution and social peace. Data were gathered from six canonical Nigerian literary works: Kamal's *Hausaland* and *Hausa Boy* (Hausa); Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (Igbo); and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Yoruba). Proverbs were chosen specifically for their theme relevance, contextual richness, and representation of the cultural schemas and pragmatic functions crucial to this study. Each item includes the excerpts in the indigenous language as they appear in the text, English translation, the interactional context in which the proverb is used, and a dual-framework analysis based on Interactional Sociolinguistics and Cultural Linguistics. The proverbs are presented not just as translated texts, but also as situated speech acts, with meanings inextricably linked to the social contexts in which they occur.

Category I: Unity and Collective Responsibility

Proverbs in this category express the principle that an individual's well-being is inextricably linked to the collective's health, and that social cohesion is maintained through shared obligations, mutual recognition, and a fundamental commitment to communal identity over individual self-interest. Unity is incorporated in all three language communities not as a sentimental ideal, but as a structural requirement, a prerequisite for life, dignity, and purpose. The proverbs described here depend on a variety of metaphorical realms, including bodily reciprocity, kinship, ecological imagery, and cosmic order, but they all serve a similar sociolinguistic function: to confirm, reinforce, and, if required, repair the social links that hold communities together.

A. Hausa Proverbs: Unity

Proverb 1: "Wash my back, and I will wash yours"

Indigenous Form: Chude ni, in chude ka

Context: Deployed by Kallamu in a grains depot setting to explain and affirm the logic of mutual support between business partners.

Source: Kamal, A. (2011). Hausa Boy, p. 117.

Thematic Function: Reciprocal unity; social contract; communal interdependence.

Analysis: This proverb serves as a performative speech act, enacting rather than simply describing the notion of reciprocal obligation. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, the parallel syntactic structure of subject, verb, and object spanning two phrases creates a real-time cooperative exchange. The inclusive second-person pronoun involves both the speaker and the listener in a symmetrical social contract without the formality or rigidity of verbal agreement. According to Cultural Linguistics, the washing metaphor is based on a bodily practice that is intimate, mutual, and practically necessary: it is impossible to effectively wash one's own back, so the proverb is an embodied enactment of the Hausa worldview that individual well-being is structurally dependent on others' participation. Unity is not

optional in this context but rather a necessary component of social functioning; the proverb does not urge collaboration so much as it embodies it through the act of speaking.

Proverb 2: "You restrain others by restraining yourself"

Indigenous Form: Hana wani, hana kai

Context: Invoked by Fillo during a moment of personal reflection on moral example and the relationship between individual conduct and communal order.

Source: Kamal, A. (2003). Hausaland, p. 209.

Thematic Function: Self-discipline as communal service; moral authority through example.

Analysis: This proverb's reflexive design, which mirrors 'you' against 'yourself', enacts a dialogic collapse of self and other, presenting the speaker as both the subject and the object of moral control. From an Interactional Sociolinguistics standpoint, it serves as an indirect directive: rather than demanding activity, it repositions ethical conduct as a shared social performance, transforming moral example into a type of community address. This rhetorical style maintains interpersonal dignity while applying normative pressure. According to Cultural Linguistics, the proverb encodes *hakuri* (patient self-restraint) and *hankali* (composed rationality), two fundamental Hausa values whose practice is thought to have a social impact. Unity, according to this schema, is created not by enforcement but through the infection of disciplined selfhood; the self-regulated individual becomes a model whose behaviour implicitly sets the bar for others, preserving social order through embodied ethics rather than coercion.

Proverb 3: "Obeying superiors is like obeying God"

Indigenous Form: Bin na gaba, bin Allah

Context: Spoken by Prince Bello amid a complaint about societal insubordination, linking political compliance to divine mandate.

Source: Kamal, A. (2003). Hausaland, p. 121.

Thematic Function: Hierarchical unity; religious legitimation; social stability through order.

Analysis: The simile at the heart of this proverb serves a dual illocutionary function: it maintains a theological equivalence between political and heavenly power while indirectly directing listeners toward compliance by escalating the costs of disobedience from social to spiritual transgression. Interactional Sociolinguistics emphasises the rhetorical economy of this move: by disguising a social norm in religious language, the speaker gains directional force without appearing to command, reducing face threat while increasing persuasive impact. The parallel grammar (*bin... bin...*) provides a verbal alignment across realms, giving the political structure a cosmological sense. According to Cultural Linguistics, this proverb encodes a core Hausa sociopolitical worldview in which governance is more than just administrative; sacred leadership is a form of trusteeship under divine mandate, and deference to authority is an ethical duty based on Islamic principles of hierarchy and communal order. Unity, in this framework, is hierarchical rather than egalitarian; it is sustained through the proper observance of social roles, where each person's compliance with their position maintains the structural integrity of the whole.

B. Yoruba Proverbs: Unity

Proverb 4: "The honour of one is the honour of all"

Indigenous Form: Ọlá ẹni kan ni ọlá gbogbo wa

Context: Voiced by community members celebrating Sidi's fame, reframing her individual distinction as communal property and collective pride.

Source: Soyinka, W. (1962). The Lion and the Jewel, p. 11.

Thematic Function: Relational identity; collective honour; communal pride.

Analysis: The proverb 'ẹni kan' (one person) extends the possessive from the individual ('ẹni kan') to the collective ('gbogbo wa', all of us) to dissolve the conceptual boundary between personal achievement and communal identity. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, this is a classic alignment strategy in which speakers position themselves as co-owners of another's distinction, reinforcing solidarity through shared emotions. Cultural Linguistics explores the Yoruba notion of àṣẹ, a living energy that requires social recognition and relational personhood. An individual's identity and worth are shaped by their connection to the community network. In this concept, honour is a public good rather than a private asset; it benefits the individual through communal recognition and returns to the collective by increasing common esteem. The proverb thus represents a cyclical economy of dignity in which unity is both the prerequisite and the reward for individual achievement.

Proverb 5: "The town eats together or starves together"

Indigenous Form: Ìlú á jẹ pọ̀ ò tàbí á kú pọ̀

Context: Voiced as choric commentary in a scene of communal deliberation, asserting the absolute interdependence of community members in matters of survival.

Source: Rotimi, O. (1971). The Gods Are Not to Blame, p. 18.

Thematic Function: Existential unity; survival through solidarity; collective fate.

Analysis: The structural parallelism of this adage, 'feed together / starve together', works as what Interactional Sociolinguistics may characterise as a ritualised binary directive, enacted through the communal voice of a chorus and therefore carrying the weight of collective rather than individual speech. The proverb's use of 'the town' (ìlú) instead of 'I' or 'you' emphasises the importance of togetherness. According to Cultural Linguistics, the dichotomy of eating and starving refers to one of the most fundamental realms of human experience: food as life, and it frames communal solidarity in terms of the most basic condition of survival. This proverb encodes both material and moral realities in Yoruba agricultural social philosophy, where the distribution of food resources was a major mechanism of community reproduction: individuals' fates are structurally, not only symbolically, linked to the collectives. Unity is not an ambition, but rather an existential definition of the human state within a society.

Proverb 6: "A village does not make progress by walking alone"

Indigenous Form: Ìlú kì í dàgbà nípasẹ̀ ìrìn-àjò ẹni kan ṣoṣo

Context: Deployed by elders as a sociocultural rebuke to Lakunle's individualism, asserting that development is inherently a collective project.

Source: Soyinka, W. (1962). The Lion and the Jewel, p. 36.

Thematic Function: Collective development; critique of individualism; communal progress.

Analysis: This proverb serves as a face-saving correction to Lakunle's Westernised individualism, redirecting behaviour through metaphor rather than direct confrontation, so maintaining interactional balance while imposing communal rules. In Yoruba social theory, the phrase 'kì í dàgbà' (does not progress/grow) represents a structural reality about development (dàgbà). Interactional Sociolinguistics

emphasises the deployment context, with elders engaging in communal discourse, which strengthens the proverb's power through the social positioning of its speakers. According to Cultural Linguistics, the term 'dàgbà' connotes organic growth and maturation rather than simply linear advancement; the village, like a living body, grows via the feeding of its constituent parts working together. Progress that excludes members or relies solely on individual effort is not just inefficient; it is also ontologically incomplete, a contradiction in words in a worldview that views progress as essentially relational.

C. Igbo Proverbs: Unity

Proverb 7: "When brothers fight to the death, a stranger inherits their father's estate"

Indigenous Form: Mgbe ụmụnne ji ibe ha gbaa ọgụ ruo ọnwụ, onye mba ọzọ ka na-erite ihe nna ha hapụrụ

Context: Invoked by elders during clan disputes as an indirect warning against internecine conflict and a call to protect communal patrimony.

Source: Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart, p. 13.

Thematic Function: Protective unity; kinship solidarity; communal resource preservation.

Analysis: This proverb serves as a high-level indirect warning: it does not ban fighting, but rather emphasises the consequences of excessive internal conflict, disinheritance of the lineage, and surrender to external forces. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, elder deployment in a clan dispute context leverages the generational authority differential to exert normative pressure without direct confrontation, preserving the disputing parties' faces while redirecting attention to shared vulnerability. The idea of 'the foreigner', who benefits from internal strife, is a culturally potent image in Igbo social theory, where preserving lineage property is one of the most important tasks of kinship. According to Cultural Linguistics, the estate (ihe nna ha hapụrụ, 'what the father left') reflects familial continuity, genealogical identity, and generations of effort, rather than just material possessions. According to this adage, unity is more than just a social virtue; it is also a duty to the ancestors and a type of custodianship over collective memory.

Proverb 8: "If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others"

Indigenous Form: Otu mkpịsị aka tūrụ mmanụ, o metūrụ ndị ọzọ

Context: Employed during communal discussions of moral pollution to stress the collective implications of individual transgression.

Source: Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart, p. 89.

Thematic Function: Moral interconnectedness; collective accountability; shared contamination.

Analysis: The physiological metaphor at the heart of this proverb, fingers on a hand that are inextricably linked, embodies a structural argument about the indivisibility of collective identity. Separating one finger's activity from its influence on the rest is physiologically impossible, much as, according to the saying, one community member's moral behaviour cannot be detached from its implications for the entire. Interactional Sociolinguistics demonstrates how this naturalistic metaphor serves as a face-saving generalisation: by referring to 'one finger' rather than naming an individual, the speech avoids direct accusation while maintaining unambiguous command force. Cultural Linguistics highlights the use of oil (mmanụ) as a contamination agent in Igbo rituals and social life. Oil, especially

palm oil, is considered sacred and used in ceremonies, covenants, and meal preparation. Its ability to spread and stain makes it a powerful representation of how transgression pervades community life. The proverb thus portrays moral pollution as a physical reality rather than an abstract worry, making social accountability seem inescapable and imminent.

Proverb 9: "The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail, it soon grew another"

Indigenous Form: Obodo dī ka ngwere; ọ tūọ ọ dū, ọ na-eto nke ọzọ

Context: Used in narrative reflection on the clan's resilience following personal and communal loss, reframing vulnerability as regenerative capacity.

Source: Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart, p. 124.

Thematic Function: Communal resilience; regenerative unity; collective survival.

Analysis: This proverb introduces the idea of organic regeneration as a model for community resilience. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, it is a comforting evaluative utterance that reframes loss in non-threatening terms: the loss of a 'tail' is dramatic but not fatal, and the proverb's grammatical structure, which asserts regrowth as an unavoidable consequence of loss ('soon grew another'), performs reassurance rather than simply describing it. The simile employs naturalistic analogy, relying on general knowledge of lizard biology to portray collective resilience as a normal, expected process rather than an astonishing achievement. According to Cultural Linguistics, the lizard (ngwere) is important in Igbo cosmological symbolism because it represents adaptability, survival, and the ability to thrive in diverse circumstances. The adage thus presents the clan's ability to recover not as a metaphor but as an ontological fact, a structural aspect of collective identity. Unity is conceived of here as regenerative rather than just steady; the community is not dependent on the survival of every member, but on its ability to recreate itself after loss, a vision of solidarity that accepts mortality without submitting to it.

Category II: Cooperation and Interdependence

This category of proverbs focuses on the practical and ethical aspects of working together to achieve common goals. Whereas unity-themed proverbs tend to address the structural preconditions of collective identity, cooperation-themed proverbs are more situational and action-oriented, referring to specific instances of collaborative effort, mutual aid, and reciprocal obligation. Cooperation is portrayed as both a practical necessity and a moral value in all three linguistic groups, and proverbial discourse is responsible for creating, maintaining, and occasionally healing collaborative partnerships. Domestic work, economic trade, spiritual petition, and language itself are metaphorical domains used to expose the cultural schemas through which cooperation is envisioned and practiced in each group.

A. Hausa Proverbs: Cooperation

Proverb 10: "If you want to beg God for something, beseech Him with a big calabash"

Indigenous Form: In za ka roki Allah, ka je da babban masaki

Context: Spoken as an uncle and nephew embark on a fertilizer business venture, framing collective ambition as a form of spiritual petition.

Source: Kamal, A. (2011). Hausa Boy, p. 135.

Thematic Function: Cooperative ambition; collective scale; spiritual validation of joint enterprise.

Analysis: This proverb presents the scope of collective endeavour as a kind of moral seriousness in the eyes of the divine, fusing economic collaboration with spiritual epistemology. By framing boldness as a religious requirement ('beseech Him with a huge calabash'), the speaker simultaneously encourages initiative and repositions cooperative ambition as an act of religion rather than mere pragmatism. Interactional Sociolinguistics reveals the utterance as an indirect direction. The listener's appeal reflects both of them because the use of "you" (ka) is contextually inclusive, even though it is grammatically singular. Cultural linguistics reveals the calabash (masaki) as a culturally rich symbol: in Hausa material culture, the calabash serves as a sign of welcome, ceremony, and sustenance. A "big calabash" indicates worthiness, the ability to receive in proportion to need, rather than greed. Because God is more likely to fill a huge vessel given by devoted partners than a small one offered by a timid individual, the adage thus encodes a Hausa philosophy of cooperation in which joint undertakings are spiritually approved when pursued with shared seriousness and scale.

Proverb 11: "Arise, and I will help you"

Indigenous Form: Allah ya ce, tashi in taimake ka

Context: Nadudu's counsel to an idle nephew, framing communal support as conditional upon individual initiative.

Source: Kamal, A. (2011). Hausa Boy, p. 62.

Thematic Function: Initiative-responsive cooperation; conditional mutual aid; dignity in interdependence.

Analysis: This proverb's invocation of supernatural sanction ('Allah ya ce', 'God says') turns what may otherwise be a straightforward conditional offer of assistance into a cosmologically based cooperative ethical principle. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, this is a face-saving commissive because it creates a conditional social contract that protects the nephew's dignity while avoiding the humiliation of direct criticism by combining encouragement ('arise') with a promise of support ('I will aid you'). The order is important: "arise" comes before "I will help," which encodes the idea that individual initiative activates rather than replaces communal assistance. A fundamental Hausa value is revealed by cultural linguistics: reliance that does not start with self-effort is a kind of social imposition rather than a cooperative relationship. When assistance is provided and accepted in a way that enhances rather than replaces personal agency, it is most honourable. By incorporating this idea into divine discourse, collaboration is elevated from a matter of social desire to a sacred obligation, turning charity into a response to God's plan.

B. Yoruba Proverbs: Cooperation

Proverb 12: "The family name is carried by all"

Indigenous Form: Gbogbo omo ni n ru oruko idile

Context: Invoked by elders during discussions of royal responsibility to distribute moral obligation across the entire kinship network.

Source: Rotimi, O. (1971). The Gods Are Not to Blame, p. 24.

Thematic Function: Cooperative moral responsibility; shared reputation; kinship accountability.

Analysis: This proverb frames cooperation as an intrinsic structural fact of family membership rather than as a voluntary social act. It does this by dispersing the load and honour of reputation throughout

the entire kinship network. The inclusive subject "gbogbo Òmùge" (all children), which simultaneously addresses and constitutes the collective, is highlighted by interactional sociolinguistics as performing a unifying speech act. The verb "rú" (to carry/bear) is especially important since it conjures up bodily weight, turning reputation into a concrete burden that belongs to all members rather than just one. Cultural linguistics sheds light on the idea of orúkùge ìdílé (family name) as a sacred trust in Yoruba social philosophy. The name serves as a vehicle for social capital gathered over generations, ancestral legacy, and communal honour. Carrying the name means taking part in a continuous collaborative effort to maintain one's reputation, where each member's actions either strengthen or weaken a common heritage. Therefore, cooperation in this situation is fundamental rather than a choice; one can only decide how well to bear the family name.

Proverb 13: "The home stands or falls together"

Indigenous Form: Ilé kì í fọ̀ tábí dúró fún ẹ̀ni kan ọ̀şo

Context: Spoken by Queen Ojuola in the context of kinship solidarity, framing domestic and communal survival as an indivisible collective condition.

Source: Rotimi, O. (1971). The Gods Are Not to Blame, p. 27.

Thematic Function: Indivisible solidarity; domestic cooperation; shared fate.

Analysis: By using this proverb to discuss kinfolk, Queen Ojuola establishes household solidarity as a structural necessity as well as a social norm. Selective resilience is eliminated by the binary "stands or falls," which is represented in parallel through Yoruba coordination ('tábí', 'or'). There is no variation of this proverb in which some household members survive while others collapse. This absolute structure is strategically significant, according to interactional sociolinguistics: the proverb forecloses arguments for personal exemption by removing exceptions, thereby making cooperation appear to be a description of social reality rather than a moral ideal. This impression is enhanced by the speaker's power as queen; the adage is presented as a fact about household life rather than a suggestion. According to Cultural Linguistics, the house (ilé) is one of the most essential components of Yoruba social organization. It is not just a physical building but also an architectural representation of ancestry, accumulated memory, and communal subsistence. Saying "the house stands or falls together" alludes to the historical significance of houses in Yoruba society.

C. Igbo Proverbs: Cooperation

Proverb 14: "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten"

Indigenous Form: Ilu bụ mmanụ ji-eri okwu

Context: Introduced early in the narrative as a meta-statement about the function of proverbial language, framing cooperative communication as a form of cultural lubrication.

Source: Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart, p. 7.

Thematic Function: Linguistic cooperation; communicative lubrication; cultural aesthetics of discourse.

Analysis: This proverb is particularly reflective because it concerns proverbs themselves, making it a metapragmatic statement that frames the communicative activity as it is being performed. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, this is a classic example of contextualisation: the proverb informs listeners that what follows will be indirect, multi-layered, and require cultural competence to fully comprehend by signalling the interpretive frame appropriate for all subsequent proverbial utterances. The metaphor of palm oil is accurate both culturally and gastronomically: in Igbo cuisine, palm oil

(mmanüge) is a necessary ingredient; without it, food is dry, harsh, and unpleasant to eat. By comparing proverbs to palm oil, the proverb presents indirect, metaphorical speech as more than just rhetorical embellishment; rather, it presents it as essential fuel for collaborative discourse. The full complexity of this connection is revealed by cultural linguistics: proverbial wisdom is shaped over years of shared experience and communal thought, much as palm oil is produced through collective labour (processing palm fruits requires communal work). According to this concept, cooperative communication depends on everyone's desire to contribute the cultural knowledge necessary to make metaphorical discourse understandable and productive.

Proverb 15: "Peace must be cleaned where it is soiled"

Indigenous Form: Udo ga-emecha ebe a siri mecha ya

Context: Spoken by elders in Wedlock of the Gods during efforts to restore harmony after interpersonal rupture, insisting on localised and embodied reconciliation.

Source: Sofola, Z. (1972). Wedlock of the Gods, p. 35.

Thematic Function: Restorative cooperation; localised reconciliation; embodied peacemaking.

Analysis: This proverb favours contextually relevant, location-based healing above abstract or generalised reconciliation. Its pragmatic logic revolves around the geographical anchoring ('where it is soiled'): peace must be actively worked at the exact site of rupture rather than being repaired by remote announcements or general apologies. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, this is a restorative speech act that creates the framework for cooperative reconciliation: healing is viewed as collective labour (emecha, to clean/complete) rather than unilateral forgiveness, and participants must return to the site of conflict together. Igbo concepts of purity, balance (udo), and communal hygiene are used by Cultural Linguistics to shed light on the cleaning metaphor. In Igbo ritual thought, moral soiling is recognised as actual pollution rather than merely a social metaphor, and its restoration requires intentional, often ceremonial, activity. The term "emecha," which means "to clean/finish," conveys ideas of finality and completion; when peace is properly cleaned, it is completely and permanently restored rather than merely patched. Therefore, working together to return to and purify the shared space that conflict has contaminated constitutes cooperation in reconciliation.

Category III: Conflict Resolution and Social Harmony

These proverbs are used to defuse tension, reroute emotional energy, rephrase complaints, or set the moral parameters for resolving conflicts. They both employ the common rhetorical device of indirection, which involves using culturally authoritative imagery, religious metaphor, natural analogy, and historical consequence to steer parties toward resolution while maintaining everyone's dignity rather than directly ordering behaviour or placing blame. The following analyses focus on the cultural schemas that make this indirection understandable and compelling within each language group, as well as the interactional mechanisms through which it functions.

A. Hausa Proverb: Conflict Resolution

Proverb 16: "We can't turn back the hands of the clock"

Indigenous Form: Ba'a juya hannun agogo baya

Context: Invoked by Dudu in response to his nephew's betrayal, redirecting discourse from blame and rumination toward acceptance and forward-looking healing.

Source: Kamal, A. (2011). Hausa Boy, p. 156.

Thematic Function: Acceptance-based resolution; temporal irreversibility; forward-looking reconciliation.

Analysis: This proverb makes temporal irreversibility a culturally accepted justification for dispute resolution through acceptance by using the metaphor of mechanical time, the clock. According to interactional sociolinguistics, the statement is a mitigating assertion because it both closes the discursive door on pointless reflection by citing an unquestionable natural law and accepts the truth of the betrayal without disputing or downplaying it. The collective pronoun "we" (Ba'a, implying "one cannot / we cannot") is important because it distributes the awareness of limitation to both the speaker and the listener, avoiding the appearance of lecturing and instead presenting the recognition of irreversibility as a universal human condition rather than a personal shortcoming. This proverb aligns with Hausa-Islamic ideas of qadar (divine decision) and acceptance of what God has allowed to happen, according to Cultural Linguistics. Even though the clock is a contemporary symbol, it is naturalised within a larger framework that views time as flowing under divine superintendence; to insist on reversing it would be not only pointless but also arrogant. According to this perspective, conflict resolution begins with the epistemic act of accepting what has already happened, not as a sign of defeat but as a prerequisite for relational and emotional healing.

B. Yoruba Proverb: Conflict Resolution

Proverb 17: "Soft words break hard kola nuts"

Indigenous Form: Ọ̀rọ̀ pẹ̀lẹ́ pẹ̀lẹ́ ń fọ́ ọ̀bì lílẹ̀

Context: Deployed in a mediation scene to assert the superior power of gentle, measured language over forceful confrontation in the resolution of disputes.

Source: Soyinka, W. (1962). The Lion and the Jewel, p. 31.

Thematic Function: Dialogic conflict resolution; rhetorical gentleness; the power of diplomatic speech.

Analysis: The rhetorical force of this proverb is achieved by paradox: the "hard" item, the hard kola nut, is broken by the "soft" thing, the soothing words. This reverses the typical link between softness and weakness, and between hardness and strength. According to Interactional Sociolinguistics, this is a deliberate reframing of the mediation encounter: the proverb simultaneously promotes and exemplifies diplomatic discourse by modelling the interactional stance it praises and elevating gentleness as the more effective communicative instrument. As the first item provided in rites of reconciliation, blessing, and communal assembly, the kola nut (bì) is more than just a household item in Yoruba culture. It is a sacred emblem of covenant, hospitality, and ancestral communion. The restoration of covenant and the blessing of shared space are the sacred results of diplomatic speech, which is why it is said that soft words crack the kola nut. The ceremonial opening of the kola nut, a cooperative, ritual act in which breaking is a prerequisite for sharing, is explicitly referred to as "fùgẹ" (to break/crack) in cultural linguistics. Therefore, soft words do more than just put a stop to conflict; they also create the opportunity for the collective sharing that comes after.

C. Igbo Proverb: Conflict Resolution

Proverb 18: "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch"

Indigenous Form: Ka ezenwa si, ka ugulu si

Context: Deployed as a metaphor for tolerance and mutual coexistence, asserting every party's right to occupy legitimate space without displacement.

Source: Achebe, C. (1958). Things Fall Apart, p. 16.

Thematic Function: Tolerant coexistence; pluralistic resolution; mutual legitimacy.

Analysis: The simultaneous imperative construction ('let... let...') in this proverb distributes the right to 'perch', to occupy space, to exist legitimately, symmetrically between two birds of different social standing, therefore enacting the principle of mutual coexistence. In Igbo cosmological symbolism, the kite (ezenwa) holds a lower but still acknowledged place in the avian hierarchy, whereas the eagle (ugulu) is a bird of high prestige, linked to strength, authority, and ancestral power. The adage does not reject difference; rather, it emphasises that difference is not a valid reason for exclusion by stating that both must be allowed to perch. This is revealed by interactional sociolinguistics as a remarkably elegant

face-saving directive: by allocating the right of presence equally between high and low-status parties, it resolves potential conflict by affirming a previous principle, that every legitimate party has a right to exist, rather than by compromise or negotiation. Cultural linguistics is based on the Igbo concept of udo (peace) as a state of balanced co-existence rather than enforced uniformity, and the Igbo philosophy of 'd' n'out (unity in diversity). According to this perspective, conflict resolution does not necessitate the triumph of one party over another, but rather the establishment of circumstances that allow all parties to assume their rightful place without fear of displacement, a pragmatic and deeply just vision of social harmony.

5. Findings

The examined proverbs, which emphasise dependency as a structural requirement of social life rather than a moral ideal, consistently depict human flourishing as essentially relational across Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo traditions. The Hausa proverb, "Wash my back and I will wash yours" (Chude ni, in chude ka), the Yoruba proverb, "The town eats together or starves together," and the Igbo proverb, "If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others," are examples of how cooperation is viewed as an existential necessity ingrained in communal existence. Individual deeds are inextricably linked to group outcomes in these traditions, which prioritise group identity over individual success. The Igbo caution "When brothers fight to the death, a stranger inherits their Father's estate" emphasises the perils of internal strife and the significance of preserving shared heritage, while Yoruba discourse affirms relational personhood through the proverb "The honour of one is the honour of all" (Ọy ẹni kan ni ẹ̀dúgẹ gbogbo wa). Similarly, Hausa phrases such as "Obeying superiors is like obeying God" (Bin na gaba, bin Allah) situate individual actions within broader moral and hierarchical frameworks that promote social harmony.

The proverbs also show that dialogue-based reconciliation and moral constraint are crucial tools for preserving harmony in these civilisations. Hausa teachings that highlight virtues such as hakuri (patience) and hankali (composure) as forms of ethical self-regulation that support social stability without coercion include the saying "You restrain others by restraining yourself" (Hana wani, hana kai). Similar ideas can be found in Yoruba and Igbo traditions, where proverbs such as "Peace must be cleaned where it is soiled" (Udo ga-emecha ebe a siri mecha ya) and "Soft words break hard kola nuts"

(*Ọ́r dé ọ̀lẹ́p Ọ́ f ẹ̀ ẹ̀ b'le*) frame restraint and careful speech as active strategies for reestablishment. As seen by proverbs like the Igbo "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch" and the Yoruba "The home stands or falls together," conflict resolution is thus presented as a restorative and participatory process rooted in collective responsibility. Additionally, a lot of proverbs highlight anticipatory reciprocity, portraying collaboration as an investment in future support for one another. Hausa proverbs like "Arise and I will help you" (*Allah ya ce, tashi in taimake ka*) and "You wash the pot because of tomorrow's cooking" show how current deeds lay the groundwork for future cooperation. Igbo agricultural metaphors and Yoruba developmental proverbs that emphasise teamwork as the route to communal continuity and advancement also reflect this idea.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study support the view that proverbs function as dynamic instruments of social interaction. Rather than merely expressing cultural values, proverbs actively shape behaviour and influence decision-making processes. Across Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo traditions, proverbs serve as contextualisation cues that shift discourse toward moral reflection and communal authority. Their use in conversation signals that the speaker is invoking shared cultural knowledge rather than personal opinion.

Despite having comparable intellectual underpinnings, the three faiths use various metaphorical devices to convey related concepts. Hausa proverbs frequently reference hierarchical societal structures and Islamic ethical ideas. Yoruba proverbs often make reference to communal identity, cosmological beliefs, and ritual artefacts. Igbo proverbs tend to employ organic metaphors related to kinship, agriculture, and ecological relationships. All three traditions place a strong focus on group accountability and dialogue-based dispute resolution despite these cultural variances. This convergence implies that proverbs serve as a common means of communication for preserving social peace across a variety of cultural contexts.

7. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of eighteen proverbs taken from canonical Nigerian literary sources, this study has investigated the sociolinguistic roles of proverbs in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo cultures. The results show that proverbs serve as context-dependent speech acts that foster harmony, collaboration, and the settlement of disputes. Proverbs both direct social behaviour and encode cultural information. Speakers can address delicate topics while maintaining interpersonal relationships through an indirect rhetorical approach. Proverbs are therefore effective tools for social control. The three traditions' shared principles and culturally distinctive distinctions are revealed by the comparative study. Proverbs from the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo cultures use distinct metaphors and cultural frames, but they all encourage cooperation, communication, and harmony. These results demonstrate the ongoing value of indigenous linguistic traditions in tackling today's socioeconomic issues. Proverbs offer culturally grounded tools for education, peacebuilding, and mediation in multilingual societies such as Nigeria. Future studies could investigate the use of proverbs in modern digital communication and political discourse, as well as extend this comparative framework to include other Nigerian languages.

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