

SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PARTS OF THE BODY RELATED PROVERBS

By

Olufunmilola Mary Afolayan

Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages.

olufunmilola.afolayan@eksu.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines proverbs that relate to body parts in socio-cultural context in Yoruba day to day conversation. The connotations and denotations of the proverbs are analysed to show the philosophical, pragmatic and social world views of Yoruba people in their utterances. Twenty-five (25) proverbs are selected and analysed. The study adopts Dell Hymes (1962) Ethnography of Communication for its analysis. The study shows that part of the body-related proverbs has connotative and denotative meaning beyond literal meaning. Yoruba proverbs have philosophical undertone. This paper also reveals that, beyond the transference of cultural meanings, proverbs connect individuals to the meaning given by society in communication.

Keywords: *proverb, Yorùbá, part of the body, culture, language, connotative, denotative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines sociolinguistic features of body-related inherent proverbs in Yorùbá. Proverbs are short, wise sayings that express general truths, pieces of advice, or moral lessons derived from human experience. They are an important part of language and culture. Sapir (1921) describes language as a unique human tool used intentionally to share thoughts and emotions through organized symbolic systems. Bamgbose (1991) explains language as a structured means of communication that employs various symbolic forms spoken, written, or signed to express meaning within a community. Language does not exist without society. In the same vein, a society without a language would be impossible.

Proverbs are the distilled wisdom of generations, they are short, memorable phrases that carry deep truths about life, behavior, and values. Passed down through cultures and centuries, they offer guidance in moments of uncertainty,

clarity in times of confusion, and reflection in everyday situations. Whether spoken by elders or embedded in literature, a proverb has the power to shape decisions and spark introspection. Taylor (1931) asserts that proverb is the wit of one and the wisdom of many. Olatunji (1984) observes that proverb often evolves from traditional lore, history and religion is usually attributed to elders as it is believed to contain words of wisdom from elders and ancestors. Norrick (1985) claims that proverb is a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with general meaning, a potential free conversational turn preferably with figurative meaning. Medier (1989) says proverbs is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

Among the Yoruba, proverbs (òwe) occupy a central place in everyday communication, moral education, and cultural philosophy. They are concise expressions of wisdom derived from generations of observation and experience. Within the vast repertoire of Yoruba proverbs, those related to the human body are particularly significant to the study. The body, in Yoruba belief, is not merely a biological entity but a complex metaphorical framework through which social, moral, and spiritual realities are understood. Each body parts such as the head (orí), eyes (ojú), mouth (ẹnu), hands (ọwọ), or legs (ẹsẹ) is imbued with symbolic meaning that reflects the Yoruba worldview. Body-related proverbs serve multiple functions: they teach moral conduct, express psychological states, define social relationships, and explain metaphysical concepts such as destiny and character.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quite a number of scholars which include Fasiku (2006), Odebunmi (2008), Adegoju (2009), Sotunde (2009), Aderinto (2014), Akanbi (2015), Abiodun (2018) have conducted extensive research on Yorùbá proverbs. Fasiku (2006) explores the link between Yorùbá proverbs, personal names, and the development of national consciousness. His study highlights how proverbial expressions and naming conventions jointly reflect cultural values and contribute to national identity. He focuses primarily on proverbs that incorporate personal names, focusing primarily on proverbs that incorporate personal names, rather than examining the broader sociolinguistic significance of proverbs in everyday interaction.

Odebunmi (2008) investigates the pragmatic functions of proverbs that emerge in moments of crisis, with specific reference to the proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. He identifies two categories of such

proverbs and demonstrates how they are used to counsel, challenge, persuade, and encourage within interpersonal communication. His work illustrates how proverbs function as tools for managing tension and restoring social balance during conflict situations.

Similarly, Adegoju (2009) studies the role of proverbs in conflict resolution, emphasizing that beyond their aesthetic and cultural values, Yorùbá proverbs embody rhetorical and pragmatic strength. He argues that the linguistic and rhetorical devices embedded in proverbs grant them persuasive power, making them effective instruments for social harmony and moral instruction.

Sotunde (2009) regards proverbs as central to the Yorùbá worldview, describing them as linguistic representations of the people's philosophical and moral outlook. He explains that proverbs encapsulate the Yorùbá approach to life, serving as a medium for teaching, reflection, and moral reinforcement. According to him, the fundamental purpose of proverbs is didactic—they educate and refine behavior through the moral truths they convey.

In the same vein, Aderinto (2014) notes that the Yorùbá employ proverbs strategically in public communication, particularly to express culturally significant messages in ways that maintain decorum and discretion. Proverbs, he explains, are often used to address sensitive issues or convey wisdom indirectly, especially in public gatherings. They allow speakers to communicate deep cultural insights that may be fully understood only by native speakers. Aderinto further stresses that proverbs preserve ancestral wisdom and act as moral correctives, reminders, or symbols of identity for individuals who might stray from the ethical values of their culture.

Akanbi (2015) approaches Yorùbá proverbs from a sociolinguistic and moral perspective, focusing on those that include vulgar or sexually suggestive expressions. He observes that while such language may appear inappropriate in ordinary contexts, within proverbs these expressions are culturally acceptable and serve important communicative and moral purposes. This reveals the Yorùbá people's nuanced understanding of propriety and context in verbal communication.

Likewise, Abiodun (2018) examines proverbs that relate to elders in Yorùbá society. He emphasizes the elevated position of elders as custodians of tradition and identifies various social and physical attributes such as age, achievements, marriage, and wisdom—that define elderhood. Abiodun concludes that proverbs portray elders as embodiments of patience, prudence,

cheerfulness, and moral authority, highlighting their role in maintaining social order and continuity.

Evidently, all the scholarly works cited above do not focus on sociolinguistic analysis as this present study intend to do. This present work looks at body parts related proverbs by mirroring society's understanding of leadership, destiny, unity, morality, authority, work, responsibility, progress, cooperation, journey of life, awareness, wisdom, vision, speech, truth, diplomacy and respect. They take familiar human anatomy and turn it into moral lessons or social commentary where the head symbolizes destiny, while the mouth conveys truth and diplomacy.

This study adopts the Ethnography of Communication (henceforth, EOC) for its discussion. Dell Hymes proposed the theory in 1962, and its major concern is the investigation of language use in its cultural settings and beliefs of the members of a particular culture or speech community. Hymes also developed the SPEAKING model which analyses speech in its cultural context. It consists of sixteen parts which have been divided into eight categories. They are as follows:

S- setting and scene, P- participants, E- ends, A- act sequence, K-key, I- instrumentalities, N-norms, G-genres. In this research we concluded that language is not limited to mere technical set of grammatical rules. In fact, it has a specific context, both in terms of the individual and the cultural norms and beliefs. Language cannot be separated from the social and cultural context of its use, and the interlocutors in the speech community also serves as an important figure because they form interpretation and meaning for the codes in their communication event.

2 DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study were elicited from five native speakers of Yorùbá drawn from Ìbàdàn, Òyó, and Òsun. The ages of the informants range between 65 and 80 years. The selection of elderly participants was motivated by the assumption that most of them have had limited exposure to Western education, also as greater reliance on Yoruba as their primary medium of communication.”and, as such, primarily employ Yorùbá as their main medium of everyday communication. Interviews were conducted with the informants in their respective towns, and the sessions were recorded digitally for subsequent transcription and analysis. In addition to the oral data obtained from native speakers, published Yorùbá proverb collections and related texts

were consulted to validate and corroborate the interpretations and explanations provided by the elderly informants during the fieldwork.

5 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

A. Proverbs on “Orí” (Head/Destiny/Leader)

- i. **Orí lónií şe, èdá ò l’arọ pin** *‘It is the head that makes things happen; the being has no limit’*

This proverb highlights the centrality of the head *orí* in Yoruba mental and linguistic thought. Literally, it attributes delegation and strength to the head, suggesting that destiny and success emanate from one’s *orí* rather than from external forces. Semantically, the proverb underscores the Yoruba belief in the head as the center of destiny (*ayanmó*) and personal fortune. Pragmatically, it serves to affirm individual responsibility and self-determination while discouraging suffering or dependence on others. Culturally, the expression reflects the Yoruba philosophy of self-identity, in which *orí* embodies inner will, spiritual essence, and divine alignment. Thus, the proverb outlines a worldview where personal destiny, moral agency, and divine order intersect, reinforcing the Yoruba moral ideal of accountability and purposeful living.

- ii. **Orí là bá bọ, à bá fi òòṣà sílẹ̀** *‘It is the head that we ought to worship; we could abandon the deity’*

This proverb portrays the head *orí*, as the supreme object of reverence, even above the traditional deities (*òòṣà*). Literally, it asserts that one’s destiny and success depend primarily on the favor of one’s head, rather than on the mediation of external spiritual entities. Semantically, it encapsulates the Yoruba conception of head as the inner divinity and the determinant of human fate. Pragmatically, it functions as a moral and philosophical assertion of self-control and spiritual sovereignty, emphasizing that personal destiny overrides collective or external worship. Within Yoruba metaphysics, the proverb situates head as both a physical and mental entity embodying uniqueness, inner strength, and divine essence. Linguistically, it exemplifies how Yoruba proverbs employ body-part metaphors to articulate abstract philosophical ideas about identity, destiny, and the divine. Culturally, it affirms the Yoruba belief that fulfillment and success emerge from alignment with one’s core rather than reliance on external powers.

- iii. **Ibi ẹsẹ́ ń gbéni rẹ́, orí ló mọ́** ‘*Only the head knows where the feet are taking the body*’

This proverb metaphorically shows the head as the ultimate seat of knowledge, direction, and destiny. Literally, it suggests that while the feet perform movement, only the head understands the reason and destination of that movement. Semantically, it conveys the idea of inner enlightenment and predestination, positioning the head as the cognitive and spiritual center that governs human performance. Pragmatically, the proverb serves as a reminder of the supremacy of destiny and divine will in the affairs of life, while also underscoring the importance of wisdom and foresight in human decision-making. Within Yoruba metaphysical, it affirms the belief that every individual’s head possesses intrinsic awareness of their life path, even when external circumstances remain uncertain. Linguistically, this proverb exemplifies how Yoruba body-part metaphors construct a cognitive framework that links the physical body to moral, spiritual, and existential concepts. Culturally, it reinforces a worldview where human agency operates under the guidance of a divinely ordained personal destiny.

- iv. **Ẹsẹ́ kì í sẹ̀yìn orí, orí ló ń tọ ẹsẹ́** ‘*The head leads the feet*’

This proverb expresses the notion of ranking coordination and purposeful direction within the human body, symbolically extending to human destiny and leadership. Literally, it states that the feet cannot move independently of the head, as the head decides the course and destination of movement. Semantically, the proverb foregrounds the head as the origin of direction, authority, and intention, while the feet represent execution and action. Pragmatically, it functions as a moral and social commentary on order, leadership, and the principle of guidance. Within Yoruba cosmology, it reinforces the belief that the head—as the seat of destiny (*ayanmọ́*) governs all aspects of human existence, guiding one’s journey through life. Linguistically, it exemplifies the metaphorical shaping between the human body and social order, reflecting how physical anatomy provides a framework for expressing abstract ideas about control, hierarchy, and destiny. Culturally, it conveys the Yoruba conviction that success and stability derive from alignment with one’s head, symbolizing the unity of purpose and direction between thought and action.

v. **Orí tó dára, là ń fi gbà àṣẹ** ‘*A good head earns authority*’

This proverb encapsulates the Yoruba belief that legitimate authority and success derive from a well-favored or virtuous *orí* (head). Literally, it asserts that only a “good head” is worthy to receive and exercise authority the spiritual and moral power to command, bless, or lead. Semantically, the proverb links head to the concepts of destiny, wisdom, and divine approval. Pragmatically, it serves as a commentary on merit-based leadership and the moral foundations of power, emphasizing that authority should arise from inner virtue and spiritual alignment rather than mere social status. Within Yoruba cosmology, head functions as both a physical and metaphysical entity whose goodness determines one’s capacity for influence and success. Linguistically, this proverb justifies the Yoruba tendency to conceptualize abstract ideas such as legitimacy, competence, and divine sanction through body-part metaphors. Culturally, it reflects the Yoruba believe that true leadership is anchored in character (*ìwà*), integrity, and the benevolence of one’s destiny.

B. Proverbs on “Ojú” (Sight, Vision and Awareness)

i. **Ojú lalákàn fi ń sọrí** ‘*It is with the eyes that the crab guides its head*’

The proverb literally describes a crab using its eyes to direct the movement of its head. This proverb implies one be observant, watchful, and cautious in life. It implies that wisdom, vigilance, and foresight are essential tools for survival and progress in society. This proverb reflects the Yoruba society’s importance on prudence and observation as virtues. It teaches that social success and survival require being watchful and discerning. In Yoruba interpersonal communication, elders use this to advise younger ones to act with discretion, showing how proverbs serve as moral and social control instruments in the community.

ii. **Ojú lo mọ ohun tó yó’nú** ‘*It is the eyes that know what pleases the heart*’

The proverb literally points to the eye as the organ capable of recognizing what brings joy or satisfies. Only the eyes can tell what truly delights or satisfies a person’s mind or heart. It symbolizes personal desire, attraction, and inner satisfaction, showing that individual preferences differ. This proverb reflects Yoruba understanding of subjectivity and individuality in taste and emotions.

It warns against imposing one's preference on others and promotes tolerance and respect for variety in human desires a key sociolinguistic value in maintaining harmony within the community. This also emphasize that the proverb highlights tolerance as a communal survival strategy, not just individual preference.

- iii. **Ojú kì í mọ ohun tó wà lẹyìn** *'the eye cannot see what's behind. Literally, the eyes can only see what lies in front, not what is behind'*

We don't see everything; human perspective is limited. It suggests human limitation, humility, and the need for trust and cooperation with others. In Yoruba interaction, this proverb teaches modesty in knowledge and judgment. It discourages haughtiness and reminds people that no one can know everything. It encourages collective wisdom and consultation (*ìmọ pọ ni ń mú ogbón wá*), a sociolinguistic value that strengthens communal relationships and decision-making. This proverb is often used in conflict mediation, reminding disputants that no one has the full picture.

- iv. **Bí ojú bá rí, ẹnu a daké** *'If the eyes do not see, the mouth says nothing. This proverb denotes that verbal expression (mouth) depends on visual perception (eyes).'*

The mouth can only speak of what the eyes have seen in which state the importance of freedom of speech. It highlights the link between experience and speech, suggesting that true knowledge comes from personal observation. The proverb shows the Yoruba belief in genuineness and evidence in communication. It criticizes gossip or hearsay and emphasizes self-control. In social interaction, it enforces ethical communication, a vital principle in Yoruba speech culture where credibility and respect are closely tied to what one has personally witnessed.

- v. **Kó oju ma rí ibi, gbogbo ara lóògùn rẹ.** *'for the eyes not to see evil, the whole body is the medication to that'*

This proverb simply means that to avoid trouble or disgrace, everyone and everything must work together. It is not enough for just one part to be careful. Even if the eyes are watchful, the whole body must behave properly for danger to be avoided. The saying reminds us that issues are best avoided when all parts play their role. In everyday life, it teaches that success, safety, and good reputation depend on collective effort whether in a family, a community, a church or an organization.

If one part fails, the whole body will suffer. In conclusion, avoiding evil or trouble requires total discipline, not partial caution. It highlights that this proverb reflects Yoruba communalism, individual vigilance is insufficient without collective discipline

C. Proverbs on “Enu” (Communication and Speech)

- i. **Enu òrofó ló ń pa òrofó** ‘*the mouth of a parrot is what destroys parrot*’

This proverb literally refers to how a gossip’s downfall comes from its own mouth, the same instrument they use to talk ridiculously or spread rumors. Gossip is ruined by its own speech. The proverb carries a negative connotation, emphasizing the destructive power of uncontrolled speech. It suggests that careless talk can lead to one’s ruin, shame, or social rejection. This proverb portrays the Yoruba cultural emphasis on speech ethics and self-control in communication. It serves as a moral reminder that speech should be thoughtful and truthful. In Yoruba social interaction, restraint and discretion are valued; hence, the proverb functions as a linguistic mechanism for social control, discouraging gossip and slander. This proverb portrays the Yoruba cultural emphasis on speech ethics and self-discipline in communication. It serves as a moral reminder that speech should be thoughtful and truthful. In Yoruba social interaction, restraint and discretion are valued; hence, the proverb functions as a linguistic mechanism for social control, discouraging gossip and slander.

- ii. **Enu aráyé ni ẹbọ** ‘*It is the mouth of people that is the sacrifice*’

The proverb compares people’s speech to a sacrifice, something that must be offered or performed. People’s speech, either praise or criticism is inevitable and powerful. The expression implies that human judgment and public opinion are inescapable; society will always talk. The proverb carries both positive and negative connotations. It can signify praise or condemnation, depending on the context. This proverb illustrates the Yoruba confidence in the social power of collective speech. It reinforces the idea that language is a tool for enforcing social norms and reputation. In a communal society like the Yoruba, speech represents social responsibility, everyone is watched and judged through words, making this proverb a reflection of social cohesion and moral regulation through language. This proverb

reflects Yoruba communal surveillance, where reputation is shaped by public discourse.

- iii. **Ìwòfà l'ẹnu; ibi tó wu ẹlenu ló lè rán lẹ** '*The mouth is a pawn-servant; it can be sent wherever the owner pleases*'

The proverb likens the mouth to a servant that obeys the master's command. A person can use their mouth to say whatever they wish, good or bad. It suggests that the mouth is both a tool and a weapon. It can build or destroy depending on how it is used. The proverb implies freedom of expression, but also responsibility for one's words. This proverb reflects the Yoruba understanding of speech potency and accountability. It emphasizes that while people have control over their speech, they are responsible for the outcomes. In Yoruba interactional norms, respect, politeness, and tact are vital one must use words to foster peace and mutual respect. The proverb thus teaches verbal responsibility and moral restraint in communication.

- iv. **Ẹnu oníkọ̀n là tí gbọ̀ pọ̀n-ún** '*It is from the owner of the sore that we hear that it hurts*'

The saying literally means that the owner of the sore is the one who can describe its pain. Only the person experiencing pain or difficulty truly knows how it feels. It connotes authentic expression and experiential truth. The proverb values honesty and firsthand experience in speech. This proverb highlights the Yoruba belief that personal experience validates speech. It cautions against judgment or assumption about others' conditions and instead encourages empathy and understanding. In Yoruba sociolinguistic behavior, speech is a means of expressing emotion, identity, and lived reality. Thus, this proverb reinforces respect for individual voice and emotional truth.

- v. **Ojú l' àgbà nyà, àgbà kì í yànu** '*the eyes distinguish an elder; an elder does not speak carelessly*'

This proverb draws a contrast between seeing and speaking emphasizing that elders are guided more by observation than by speech. Wisdom and discretion come with age; an elder observes more than they speak. It implies wisdom, patience, and self-control associated with age, maturity, and leadership in Yoruba culture.

D. Proverbs on “Qwó” (Hard work, Cooperation and Generosity)

- i. **Ọ̀tún wẹ ọ̀sì, ọ̀sì wẹ ọ̀tún ni ọ̀wọ́ fí ń mó** ‘*The right hand washes the left hand and the left hand washes the right hand, making both hands clean*’

The proverb describes how two hands clean each other, emphasizing mutual support and interdependence. Cooperation and collective effort lead to success and cleanliness both literally and metaphorically. It connotes unity, cooperation, and mutualism. The proverb implies that no individual can achieve total success in segregation; collective effort brings completeness. This proverb reflects the Yoruba cultural value of communalism, the belief that society thrives in cooperation and mutual help. It highlights how social harmony and progress depend on interdependence and collaboration. In Yoruba interaction, this proverb is often used to encourage teamwork, solidarity, and shared responsibility within families, communities, and organizations. This proverb can be used in conflict resolution of a party who claims to be fall apart, settled by the elders of the party.

- ii. **Àtẹ̀lẹ̀wọ́ ẹ̀ni kílì tanni jẹ** ‘*The palm of your hand can never deceive you*’

The proverb literally refers to the palm as a personal and familiar part of the body that one can always trust. One’s own skills and efforts are the most dependable sources of sustenance and pride. It connotes self-reliance, honesty, and hard work. The saying elevates hard work and self-dependence over external help or deceitful gain. This proverb reflects the Yoruba moral and linguistic orientation toward individual responsibility and industriousness. It reinforces the ethics of *ìṣẹ́ lónìṣẹ́* (“hard work pays”) and discourages laziness or overdependence. In sociolinguistic terms, it shows how Yoruba proverbs function as moral regulators and expressions of cultural ideology, shaping behavior through speech.

- iii. **Qwó tó bá dílé l’ẹ̀sú ń yá ló** ‘*An idle hand is the devil’s tool*’

The proverb literally refers to a hand that remains idle being overtaken by evil or trouble. Idleness leads to wrongdoing; being industrious prevents moral decay. It conveys a moral warning about laziness and moral corruption. The hand here symbolizes both work and character, inactivity equates to susceptibility to evil influences. This proverb serves as instructive function in Yoruba society, where industriousness

is highly esteemed. It reinforces the moral expectation that every individual must contribute to personal and communal development. Linguistically, it shows how the Yoruba use metaphor and bodily imagery (the hand) to teach values about work ethic, discipline, and moral uprightness.

- iv. **Òkè ni ọwọ afúnni n gbé; isàlẹ̀ ni ọwọ ẹni tó n gbà n wà.** *The hand of a giver is always on top; the hand of the receiver stays below*

The proverb describes the physical act of giving, the giver's hand raised above the receiver's hand. Givers are said to never lack, they are respected and honored, while receivers occupy a humbler position. It connotes generosity, superiority, and dignity in giving. The proverb highlights the noble and elevating nature of generosity. It reveals the Yoruba esteem for generosity, kindness, and social prestige through giving. It promotes altruism as a social virtue, linking speech with moral instruction. It expresses the Yoruba philosophy that status and respect are achieved through communal contribution and benevolence, not mere possession.

- v. **Bí ọwọ ẹkúté bá ẹ mọ, ló n fi yúnjú** *'As the rat's hands are, so it uses them to wash its face'*

This proverb conveys the idea of resourcefulness and adaptability. Literally, it observes that the rat, though small and limited in restricted capacity, uses its own paws to clean its face implying that individuals must make the best use of their available means. Semantically, the proverb encodes values of self-reliance, contentment, and pragmatic wisdom. Pragmatically, it functions as a moral lesson promoting industriousness and discouraging envy or complaint about one's limitations. Culturally, it reflects the Yoruba worldview that values resilience and self-sufficiency in the face of adversity. Linguistically, the proverb exemplifies how Yoruba thought employs animal imagery and everyday observation to communicate ethical and philosophical ideas. Through this metaphor, the Yoruba emphasize that dignity and achievement arise from maximizing one's inherent abilities and resources, no matter how modest.

E. Proverbs on "Inu" (Seat of Emotions, Secrecy)

- i. **Ọmọ ẹniyàn fi ikà sínú, won pété ẹrín.** *'A human being hides wickedness in their stomach, yet they smile broadly'*

The proverb literally describes a person who hides wickedness within the stomach while outwardly displaying joy or friendliness. It conveys the idea that individuals often hide malicious intentions beneath an exterior of cheerfulness or warmth. Semantically, the proverb encapsulates themes of hypocrisy, deceit, and the duality of human nature. The reference to the stomach (*inú* in Yoruba) functions metaphorically as a representation of the being encompassing the mind, emotions, and hidden motives. This linguistic imagery reflects the Yoruba recognition of human complexity and the moral need for social vigilance. Pragmatically, the proverb serves as a cautionary device, warning against naive trust based solely on external appearances. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it operates as both a moral and communicative guide, encouraging discernment and emotional intelligence in social interactions. Moreover, it mirrors the Yoruba cultural emphasis on intelligence and wisdom as essential virtues in interpersonal communication and community life. This proverb can be used as an interpersonal cautionary context of an elderly person warning youth about false friends.

- ii. **Bá inú sọ, má bà ènìyàn sọ** '*Speak within yourself; do not speak to someone*'

The proverb advises one to communicate internally (to the mind or heart) rather than outwardly to others. Wisdom lies in keeping one's thoughts private rather than speaking recklessly or to the wrong person. It carries a connotation of discretion, self-control, and wisdom. The saying highlights the value of silence and inner reflection over rash or unnecessary speech. This proverb underscores the Yoruba belief in measured and cautious speech. It reflects the sociolinguistic norm that maturity and wisdom are linked to how one uses language. By advising self-control, it promotes harmony and prevents conflict within the community. The proverb thus functions as a cultural mechanism for regulating speech behavior and maintaining social decorum.

- iii. **Inú ni okó ẹyẹ ń gbé.** *The bird's male organ lives inside it.*

The proverb describes the bird's reproductive organ being hidden within its body. True strength, ability, or worth is not always visible on the outside. It connotes hidden potential, humility, and inner value. The saying metaphorically expresses that greatness or worth does not always manifest outwardly; what is unseen may be powerful. This

proverb reflects the Yoruba appreciation for humility and internal virtue over external show. It communicates that appearances can be misleading and that true capability lies within. The proverb conveys a communal belief in modesty, introspection, and the acknowledgment of inner worth, reinforcing cultural respect for quiet strength and integrity. One salient point of this proverb, it has nothing to do with vulgarity but rather a culturally accepted metaphor for hidden strength.

- iv. **Ọ̀nà inú jín jù ọ̀nà ọ̀rùn lẹ́.** *‘The road of the heart is deeper than the road to heaven’*

The proverb compares the figurative depth of the heart’s “path” to the far-reaching road to heaven. The human mind or heart is more complex, secretive, and difficult to understand than any physical or spiritual journey. It connotes mystery, depth, and unpredictability of human thought. The stomach or heart is portrayed as a deep, hidden place that conceals a person’s true intentions and emotions. This proverb portrays the Yoruba worldview that human emotions and motives are complex. It promotes caution in relationships and communication, as understanding another’s heart is difficult. Linguistically, it reveals the Yoruba use of metaphor to express psychological insight, showing that language serves as a medium for moral and philosophical reflection in Yoruba culture. This proverb is often used in conflict resolution, reminding people that motives are deeper than appearances.

- v. **Awòfélé bo inú, kó jẹ́ kí a rí ìkún aṣẹbí** *‘The smooth skin covers the inside, preventing us from seeing the stomach of a wicked person’*

The proverb means that the fine, smooth skin hides the inside of the body symbolizing the hidden nature of inner wickedness. Outward appearance can be deceiving; evil or immorality often hides beneath a pleasant exterior. It connotes deception, moral disguise, and hidden wickedness. The proverb warns against judging character by physical appearance or superficial charm. This proverb highlights Yoruba moral consciousness about appearance and reality. It encourages discernment and wisdom in social interaction, reminding people that speech and outward behavior can mask internal corruption. In sociolinguistic terms, it reveals how Yoruba proverbs use bodily metaphors (the stomach or skin) to convey ethical lessons about honesty, trust, and human character. This proverb functions as a social regulator, discouraging blind trust in appearances.

General Sociolinguistic Overview:

Yoruba proverbs that reference the head (*orí*) demonstrate how the language employs this metaphor to express complex ideas about destiny, authority, and self-knowledge. Denotatively, *orí* refers to the physical head; connotatively, it signifies inner destiny, personal fate, intelligence, leadership, and divine essence. Through everyday speech, these proverbs reinforce core Yoruba social values such as belief in divine destiny (*kadara*), respect for leadership and social order, trust in inner strength and wisdom, and the moral importance of humility, self-awareness, and good character. Sociolinguistically, these sayings are not mere linguistic artifacts but cultural tools for moral education, spiritual reflection, and social regulation.

Yoruba proverbs concerning the eye (*ojú*) reveal that it represents more than a physical organ; it serves as a powerful symbol of wisdom, perception, morality, and social awareness. The sociolinguistic use of these proverbs in daily discourse promotes values such as vigilance, tolerance, humility, honesty, and empathy—qualities essential for sustaining communal living and moral discipline in Yoruba society. The *ojú* thus becomes both a metaphorical and moral lens through which the Yoruba understand ethical behavior and social harmony.

Proverbs about the mouth (*enu*) revolve around the themes of speech, responsibility, and morality. They underscore the Yoruba belief that language is a potent social instrument capable of uplifting or destroying individuals. Such proverbs serve not only as moral instruction but also as mechanisms of sociolinguistic control, ensuring respect, harmony, and social balance through mindful and ethical communication. The mouth (*enu*) symbolizes the Yoruba recognition of the moral power of words in shaping relationships and community order.

Proverbs that reference the hand (*owó*) emphasize cooperation, hard work, generosity, and self-reliance. They reflect the Yoruba worldview that success and social esteem are achieved through mutual assistance, diligence, and moral responsibility. As moral instruments of communication, these proverbs shape individual behavior, reinforce community values, and ensure the transmission of cultural wisdom across generations. The metaphor of the hand underscores the Yoruba emphasis on collective effort and industriousness as pillars of a harmonious society.

Proverbs that invoke the stomach (*ìnú*) emphasize the hidden dimensions of human nature thoughts, emotions, motives, and intentions. The *ìnú* (literally “stomach” or “inner self”) is portrayed as the seat of emotion, secrecy, and morality. These proverbs illustrate the Yoruba people’s deep psychological insight into human behavior and their moral philosophy of restraint, caution, and introspection. Functioning as tools of moral communication and social control, they guide individuals in interpreting character, managing emotions, and engaging others with cultural sensitivity and moral awareness.

Moreover, Yoruba Body-related proverbs serve multiple functions: they teach moral conduct, express psychological states, define social relationships, and explain metaphysical concepts such as destiny and character.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we have examined part of the body related proverbs in Yoruba and their instructive details premised on the ethnography of communication. In this study we reveal how body-related proverbs reveal Yoruba philosophy of interconnectedness between body, society, and destiny and how they function as living sociolinguistic tools that regulate behavior and preserve cultural wisdom. We established that body-related proverbs in Yoruba have connotative and denotative meaning beyond literal meaning. The head “*Orí*” connotes head, destiny, leader. the eyes “*Ojú*” connote sight, vision and Awareness, the mouth “*Enu*” connotes communication and speech. the hand “*Owo*” connotes hard work, cooperation and generosity, the stomach/heart “*Inu*” connote seat of emotions, secrecy. It is also observed that, beyond the transference of cultural meanings, proverbs connect individuals to the meaning given by society in communication. We also argued that body-related proverbs in Yorùbá have a philosophical undertone. Ultimately, Yoruba body-related proverbs demonstrate how language, culture, and philosophy intertwine to guide moral conduct, sustain communal harmony, and preserve ancestral wisdom across generations.”

References

- Abiodun, M. A. (2018). *Acknowledgement and the use of proverbs in Yorùbá*. Poverbium, 17: 23 -26.
- Adegoju, A. (2009). "Rhetoric in Conflict Related Yoruba Proverbs: Guide to Constructive Conflict Resolutions in Africa". African Study Monographs, 30 (2): 55-59 June. Print.
- Aderinto, S.I. (2014). "The Social Implications of Some Nigerian Yoruba and Ibo Proverbs". European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 2. (2): 49-55
- Akanbi, T.A. (2015). *Vulgarity in Yoruba Proverbs: Its implications and sociological effects*. Studies in Social Science and Humanities. 2, (3): 173-181.
- Bámgbósé, A. (1991). *The form of Yoruba proverbs*. ODU: A Journal of West African Studies, 4(2): 74-86.
- Fasiku, G. (2006). Yorùbá Proverbs, names and national consciousness. Journal of Pan African Studies. 1, (4). 48-56.
- Fishman, J. A. (1976). *Advances in Sociology of Language*. Vol 1 Basic concept, Theories Problems: Alternative Approaches. Netherlands: Mouton & Co. Printers
- Holmes, J. (2001). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. USA: Longman. Print.
- Meider, W. (2004) *Proverbs: A Handbook*. USA: Greenwood Press. Print.
- Norrick, N (1985). *How Proverbs Mean. Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*. Berlin; New York; Amsterdam: Mouton. 44(3), pp. 559–560
- Odebunmi A. (2008). *Pragmatic functions of crisis motivated proverbs Ola Rotimi's The Gods are not to Blame*. Linguistik Online 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.33.530>
- Olatunji O (1984). *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*. Ibadan University Press Ltd., Ibadan.
- Taylor, A. (1931). "The Proverb, Proverbs and their Lessons". In Wolfgang Meider (ed.) Supplement Series of Proverbium 13. Vermont: University of Vermont.