

Nyanja/Chewa proverbs as didactics: Recontextualising indigenous knowledge for academic writing

Felix Banda and Dennis Banda

Abstract

The paper explores how Nyanja/Chewa proverbs as stores of indigenous knowledge can be used to teach Nyanja/Chewa morphology and grammar, and as a tool to sensitise learners on aspects of academic writing. Using systemic functional linguistics and selected Nyanja/Chewa proverbs, the researchers illustrate how the patterning and the realisation of proverbs as texts in social contexts scaffold interpersonal meanings including appraisal and attitude, and stance. In turn, the researchers argue that proverbs typically have two thematically related parts, which can be used to teach aspects of academic writing in respect to appreciation of textual cohesion and coherence in meaning making. The researchers show that proverbs are typically structured to express evidentially, absolute truth and flawless logic, all of which are characteristic of academic writing. The researchers conclude that proverbs can be used as resources in the teaching aspects of pervasive language and, critical and cognitively demanding analytical skills.

Introduction

Proverbs are a dying feature of African discourse. Very few Africans still use proverbs in their speech and such use is mostly confined to the rural areas and a few elders. The demise of African proverbs will mean the death of a vast body of knowledge and wisdom embedded in them, ranging from social commentary to knowledge of astronomy, physics, biology, etc.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1994), the undisputed father of African literature, describes African proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs are a critical ingredient for effective verbal communication and human interaction. Proverbs can be said to embody knowledge gained over years and they are also vehicles to disseminate such knowledge. They give life-lessons to new and wider generations of people. The aim of the paper is to show how proverbs can be used to teach aspects of Nyanja/Chewa grammar as well as techniques of academic writing such as stance, persuasive language and critical appreciation of evaluative language. Using the typical structure of proverbs which has two parts, which the researchers identify as *topic* or *thesis statement* followed by logical argumentation for support or 'proof,' the researchers argue that this is also the basic structure of the construction of academic discourse.

- Majasan JA 1969. Folklore as an instrument of education among the Yoruba. *Folklore*, 80(2): 41–59.
- Martin JR, David R 2004. *Working with Discourse: Meaning Beyond the Clause*. London: Continuum.
- Miti LM 2006. *Comparative Bantu Phonology and Morphology*. Cape Town: CASAS.
- Simango RS 2012. Subject Marking, Coordination and Noun Classes in ciNsenga. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 30(2): 171–183.
- Williams E 1996. Reading in two languages at year five primary schools. *Applied Linguistics* 17(2): 182-209.