

Probing Proverbial Propositions in Xitsonga Discourse in *Vuthari bya Vatsonga Machangana* and *Tinhlungu ta Rixaka Dictionary*

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Abstract

Vatsonga largely rely on proverbial expressions and other forms of figurative language in their daily discourse to convey various messages and lessons. In fact, Vatsonga are famously known for their instructive slogan, *Mitirho ya vulavula*, loosely translated as action speaks, which they use to prod one another towards striving for good deeds and to use deeds as a testimony to a person's character. Due to their recurrent use in Xitsonga folklore, proverbs are often used by Vatsonga to instil cultural mores and autochthonous wisdom to the youth and other members of society. Hence, Vatsonga youth often use proverbs among themselves during conversations. Underpinned by the context theory of meaning and the qualitative research approach, the article analysed five purposively selected proverbs from two texts, *Vuthari bya Vatsonga Machangana* by Junod (2017) and *Tinhlungu ta rixaka dictionary* by Marhanele and Bila (2016) to highlight the relevance and significance of proverbs to the youth. The findings demonstrate that proverbs are a significant tool for influencing and redirecting contemporary youth to fit societal cultural standards and expectations. The article recommends using paremiology to redirect and guide the youth's upbringing. This will teach Vatsonga the customs and methods of culture, as well as make their lives easier in a variety of situations.

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INTRODUCTION

There have been increasing calls for decolonisation of the continent's education system with a view to restoring, reorienting, and enshrining lost African identities, structures, values, and cultures, and promoting indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), philosophies, and cultural inclusiveness in the middle of the Western process of knowledge acquisition and education (Megbowon & Uwah, 2021). Decolonisation is about "cultural, psychological, and economic

freedom" for Indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty—the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021). South Africa is a decolonised country that should be practicing its indigenous cultures in most of its daily activities. However, there remains a need to recognise and promote African IKS in most South African communities, including Vatsonga.

Vatsonga use proverbs as a tool to carry and convey norms and values from one generation to the

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next (Maluleke, Chauke & Motlhaka, 2023). A proverb is an aphorism, a wise saying based on people's experience, and it reflects the people's social value and sensibility (Mangwegape, 2021). Mieder (2004) defines a proverb as a short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and is handed down from generation to generation. For Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024), a proverb is a concrete but simple traditional saying that conveys perceived truths and deep meanings based on common sense or experience. The fact that proverbs convey truths that come from experience makes them much more significant when it comes to shaping people's lives. Megbowon and Uwah (2021) assert that the beauty of proverbs lies in their relevance, especially in the transmission of wisdom, education, and morality.

Among their multifarious functions, Xitsonga proverbs contribute significantly to shaping Vatsonga youth's behaviour and inculcating the Vatsonga's worldview. Proverbs establish a strong cultural and traditional foundation of moral education for the various dynamics of human life. They were used successfully by parents and ancestors from generation to generation to develop and improve speaking skills in the native language, and they became one of the best teaching and learning sources through mastering by people (Chumarova & Dulmukhametova, Fakhrutdinova, Shvetsova & Belyaeva, 2019). Chumarova et al. (2019) further argue that proverbs summarise the collective experience of the community and are used to raise the young generation. The young generation of Vatsonga, especially the youth, can learn a lot from Xitsonga proverbial expressions and have a well-rounded and positively shaped life that is linked to cultural values. Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024) concur that Africa enjoys the pleasant culture of proverbs, as indeed every nation and tribe within the continent has its own vocabulary of wise sayings chock-full, both those that have been passed down from one generation to another as well as those emanating from the times and trends of the African social order. With that said, this article is mainly concerned with articulating the communicative significance of Xitsonga proverbs by involving them in the possible speech acts they intend to provoke and by expounding the multiple congenital meanings that they imply when used in a communicative situation (Mukhalad, 2019). Many African proverbs are strongly tied to the earth and animals, conveying lessons of life and learning often through daily, seemingly menial procedures (Mustapha, 2020; Aguugo & John-Ogbonnaya, 2024). Nagham (2022) adds that in other past events

related to life, proverbs had many important and famous values in people's lives. Therefore, when people disregard proverbial expressions, they may fall into jeopardy. The article examines Xitsonga proverbial expression amongst the youth, with the aim of highlighting their roles as well as their communicative meanings. The article's objectives are to explore the roles of Xitsonga proverbial expressions, to understand the communicative meanings of Xitsonga proverbs, and to analyse the roles of proverbs amongst the youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at closely related topics that will be presented in related sub-themes; the sub-themes are derived from the authors' arguments about proverbs, thus:

Semantic Analysis of Proverbs

Nagham (2022) extensively engages with the issues surrounding the significance of proverbs in people's lives, focusing on their use as short sentences based on long experiences. The author further asserts that proverbs are essential tools for illustrating culture, social morality, manners, and behaviours from one era to another. They can also serve as impersonal tools for personal interrogation, as parents can use proverbs to control their children's behaviour or ways of thinking (Nagham, 2022). For this reason, Nagham (2022) asserts that proverbs will achieve portions of the unique roles of understanding. Nagham used an eclectic model proffered by Leech, Odeunmi and Udofot to analyse the semantic meanings of proverbs. Nagham's (2022) analysis revealed various semantic meanings of proverbs, with denotative meanings at 100%, connotative meanings at 100%, thematic meanings at 100%, affective meanings at 92.307%, stylistic meanings at 92.307%, colloquial meanings at 76.923%, reflexive meanings at 30.77%, and reference theory at 92.307%. Thus, proverbs encapsulate multifarious semantic properties.

Educational benefits of proverbs

Dei's (2013) paper explored indigenous philosophies and how educators can teach multiple knowledge systems to enhance youth education. It used a comparative approach to study African proverbs, highlighting their cultural convergence and divergence. Proverbs are deeply embedded in communities' histories, focusing on relationships, societal nexus, and interconnectedness. Understanding proverbs' impact on youth education is crucial (Dei, 2013). Dei (2013) further asserts that from 2007–8, a longitudinal study was conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya to examine indigenous African philosophies and their relevance in youth

education. The research involved over a dozen focus group discussions, workshops, and individual interviews with educators, elders, parents, and students from local universities, secondary schools, community colleges, and communities. From 2009–2012, the research continued in Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, analysing library documents and archival collections on Nigerian, Kenyan, and Ghanaian indigenous cultural knowledge systems (Dei, 2013). Dei (2013) focused on understanding the use and meanings of local proverbs and their instructional, pedagogic, and communicative values, particularly focusing on teachings about identity, self-worth, respect for self, peers, authority, and community belonging. In Dei's (2013) paper, the educational benefits of indigenous African philosophies, particularly proverbs, which focus on self and community, responsibility, respect, and mutual interdependence, were discussed. These philosophies are essential in enhancing youth learning and can be used in school curricular, pedagogical, and instructional initiatives (Dei, 2013). Dei's (2013) discussion made the following points: Proverbs guide social conduct for all, including young people, adults, and elders. Elders, as cultural custodians, are seen as having a responsibility to teach and lead by example using proverbs. They also provide forums for socialisation, community building, and teaching the young. Proverbs contribute to understanding ways of knowledge production and delivery (Dei, 2013).

Teaching and learning

Mangwegape's (2021) paper investigated how first-year university student-teachers understood and appreciated the beauty of the Setswana language through proverbs. Proverbs, rich in cultural values, practices, rituals, and traditional poetry, can be used to teach moral values and character building among students (Mangwegape, 2021). She says that they contain values of wisdom, discipline, fairness, preparedness, destiny, happiness, and efforts. The study found that, despite positive attitudes towards proverb instruction, proverbs are viewed largely by the youth as irrelevant moral regeneration (Mangwegape, 2021). The paper suggests that proverbs can provide new instructional ideas and strategies for teaching Setswana proverbs, Ubuntu, vocabulary, and good behaviour. Mangwegape's (2021) study reveals that understanding the meaning of proverbs can help learners identify and explain key words associated with them. This exposure to proverbs, particularly in the context of teaching and learning, is crucial for fostering cultural understanding and ubuntu. However, due to the variety of proverb forms, there is no definitive, inclusive meaning. Mangwegape's

(2021) findings suggest that the meaning of proverbs presented to student-teachers needs updating to provide a more accurate understanding.

Anthropology of proverbs

Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024) argue that African oral culture, particularly proverbial sayings, is declining in history. Proverbs are simple, concrete sayings that convey deep meanings based on common sense or experience. Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024) make the following points: The context in which a proverb is uttered determines its meaning and complexity. Proverbs often have metaphorical denotations and form a genre of folklore, and Africa enjoys the pleasant culture of proverbs, with every nation and tribe having a vocabulary of wise sayings. Hence, this means that many African proverbs are tied to the earth and animals, conveying lessons of life and learning through daily procedures. Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024) say that the narrative film genre, unlike literature, incorporates proverbs in its narrative form to enhance expression and communicate messages. Film directors use gestural movements and cinematic techniques to make the audience enjoy something beyond the libretto and communicative vibes of the actors (Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya, 2024).

With reference to *Isakaba*, the characters Ebube (Sam Dede) and Nwoke (Mike Ogundu) use well-articulated proverbs to slant their performances and convey the popular truth about the African social stance and its royal *modus operandi*, which are framed in strict communalism. The use of proverbs in *Isakaba* could not have been justified if actors adopted formalist acting techniques to Europeanise or Americanise their acting techniques (Aguugo & John-Ogbonnaya, 2024). However, if competent actors can adapt traditional African communication systems, they can convey the proper message. The proverbs used in *Isakaba* were timely, befitting, and corroborated the acting of the film's characters, Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya (2024). The paper recommends that Nollywood filmmakers integrate proverbs in their films for the preservation of the nation's culture and for a more professional and cinematic narrative, enabling the industry to meet basic standards within the framework of global best practices. Aguugo and John-Ogbonnaya's (2024) study found that proverbs can make a story less boring and help convey the culture in which it is set. The paper recommends that Nollywood filmmakers integrate proverbs more consistently to preserve the nation's culture and create engaging audio-visual narratives (Aguugo & John-Ogbonnaya, 2024).

Theoretical framework

Proverbial expressions have a theoretical meaning that makes them key contraptions as well as expressions of a culture's viewpoints on a variety of critical issues (Finnegan, 1970). As a point of departure, this research article employed the 1915 Edward Titchener's Context Theory of Meaning to justify its significance and the role it plays amongst youth. The Context Theory of Meaning talks about the assertion that the meaning of a perception, word, or concept depends on the mental image (and associated bodily sensations) that it triggers (Davis & Francis, 2022). The use of words in constructing a Xitsonga proverb needs to be looked at carefully, and the purpose they serve in a word needs to be understood accordingly. Xu (2013) asserts that the understanding and utterance of the word meaning depend on context. Hence, in this research article, the understanding and utterance of the meaning of Xitsonga proverbs depends on the context of the role that they play among the youth. With that said, the Context Theory of Meaning becomes helpful in the analysis of proverbs because, as a pragmatic theory of meaning, it mainly focuses on what the linguistic form is used for and not necessarily what the word means (Sebola & Abodunrin, 2021). With the use of Context Theory of Meaning, the outlined linguistic meaning of Xitsonga proverb was justified to have a positive impact amongst the youth

METHODS

This research article relied on a qualitative approach, and the aim of qualitative research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena in their natural environments (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Data was collected from the Xitsonga dictionary *Tihlungu ta rixaka* (Marhanele & Bila, 2016) and the book of proverbs *Vuthhari bya Vatsonga Machangana* (Junod, 2017). The collected Xitsonga proverbial texts were analysed using textual analysis to interpret their literal and figurative meaning. Textual analysis involves understanding the language and symbols present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of the text (Aneri, 2020; McKee, 2003). It is done to interpret the text to get a sense or meaning out of it (Aneri, 2020). Hence, textual analysis was used to interpret the proverbs to get their meaning and how their roles can help guide contemporary youth. It is in their youthfulness that they start to seek independence and create their own lives. To fulfil the Xitsonga proverbial roles amongst the youth, this article analysed five proverbs under the following themes: effort, responsibility, reward, nurture, and guidance.

RESULTS

In their youthful stage of life, they desire independence and want more experience outside their guardians' shadows. They develop a desire to create their own lives. This section analyses roles of proverbial expressions that can help shape their lives as they embark on the journey to individual decision-making. These roles are analysed under the following themes:

Theme 1: Effort

Effort helps us sense how hard an action is, control its level of intensity, and decide whether to continue or stop performing it (Bermúdez, 2023). A youth conscious exertion of power can be addressed by a proverb record by Junod (2017: 22) and Marhanele and Bila (2016:341), thus:

Ntamu wa mhisi i ku hlota

(The strength of the hyena is in hunting)

In the context of cultural studies, the proverb *Ntamu wa mhisi i ku hlota* holds profound significance, as it encapsulates the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs of the Vatsonga community. At the core of this expression lies the concept of community, interconnectedness, and the recognition of the holistic nature of Vatsonga existence and their perspective on wild animals.

The communicative meaning of the above-cited proverb is that one gets what they want by working hard. This proverb brings up the idea that, in their youth, people must be made aware that getting what they want requires untiring efforts. It is much easier to teach and rebuke them at this age. This should live in their minds that nothing is for free in this world; they must work hard to buy their dream car and build their dream home. Again, this proverb can be applied to the efforts needed for lobola payments in their youth. A boy must work hard to marry the girl of his dreams, for a man's strength is in working. The sociological background of Vatsonga's hunter-gatherer culture is also embedded in the proverb. From their experience, they observed in a hyena's life that it makes a living by hunting, and then they constructed this meaningful proverb to enhance untiring efforts.

Theme 2: Responsibility

Since the concept of responsibility so fundamentally shapes our self-understanding, our modes of perception, and our relationships with others, it is almost inconceivable that morality and human civilisation could exist without it (Kuhlmann, 2022). A proverb that can help the

youth understand the importance of responsibility is recorded by Marhanele and Bila (2016:842) as follows:

Ximitantsengele xi tshembe nkolo

(The one who swallows a sourplum trusts his throat)

The Xitsonga proverb *ximitantsengele xi tshembe nkolo*, which translates to "the one who swallows a sourplum trusts his throat," serves as the focal point of this responsibility analysis. This proverb, embedded within the broader Vatsonga cultural context, offers a rich tapestry of insights into the sociocultural norms, traditions, and communal practices of the Vatsonga people.

This proverb reveals that Vatsonga are horticulturists; they constructed a proverb from a sour plum. One knows exactly what they are doing when they swallow a sour plum. The communicative meaning of this proverb is that people should take responsibility for their actions. The idea is that, in their youthfulness, young people must be careful of their choices and actions, as they are often followed by consequences. This proverb has a role to play in teaching the youth to take accountability in decision-making, and they must take account of the outcomes of their decisions and actions. Taken literally, the proverb talks about sour plum, but it is communicatively intended to prod people towards taking responsibility for what they do. Hence, it is used to pass judgment in different situations, saying that people must be responsible for their actions.

Theme 3: Reward

Rewards can be defined as a particular monetary return, object, or event that an employee receives in exchange for his or her work or for having done something well (Schultz, 2006; Franco-Santos & Gomez-Mejia, 2015). In simple terms, every action has a return; by return, it implies getting something after doing something. With that said, a Xitsonga proverbial expression by Marhanele and Bila (2016:703) can help shape the contemporary youth to reap positive rewards, thus:

U ta tshovela lexi u xi byaleke

(You will reap what you sow)

At its core, *U ta tshovela lexi u xi byaleke* is a proverbial expression that reflects the interconnectedness of the natural world and the human experience. With that said, the proverbial expression contextualises the importance of hard work, which results in positive rewards.

The use of *tshovela* and *byaleke* in the proverb tells us that Vatsonga are agrarian people. In the good olden days, Vatsonga used to farm and make a living out of it. During the harvesting period, those

who were too lazy to farm did not have food and were reminded through this proverb that they would reap the rewards of their laziness. However, the communicative meaning behind the proverb is that a person will be rewarded based on their work or through their deeds. This proverb encourages the youth as they start to build their careers and make choices about their lives. Literally, what they sow today, they will reap in the future; figuratively, the choices they make now will determine their future. This proverb is communicatively intended to encourage them to be wise and vigilant in their actions because they get a reward for it, either good or bad. Vatsonga made observations through their farming and created this proverb to help ease life.

Theme 4: Nurture (care)

Nurture is the influence of external factors after conception, for instance, the product of exposure, experience, and learning on an individual (McLeod, 2007). Hence, it is significant to involve the Xitsonga proverb in nurturing the youth because it states and reveals the truth—the truth that advocates the experience of life (Maluleke et al., 2023). Nurture is responsible for balancing one's strengths and weaknesses (Xiao et al., 2023). A Xitsonga proverbial expression about nurture is recorded by Marhanele and Bila (2016:530) and states:

Xi ondli xi ta ku ondla-vu

(Take care of it, it will take care of you)

Xiondli xi ta ku ondla-vu is a proverb that reflects its profound and universal wisdom. One of the key features of this proverb is its emphasis on the importance of reciprocity and interdependence within social and ecological systems. The proverb suggests that by caring for and nurturing our surroundings, we can in turn expect to receive the same level of care and attention, creating a harmonious cycle of mutual support and growth. Indeed, the proverb's call for a holistic approach to well-being and community engagement is a testament to the wisdom of traditional African worldviews.

The creativity in constructing this proverb clearly shows that Vatsonga are generally caring and loving people. To *ondla* is caring on a high note; it means a person has an obligation to take care of young people. Hence, the communicative meaning of the above-cited proverb is that when ones take care of the young, when they grow, they will take care of one too. This proverb encourages parents to nurture and take care of the youth because they are at an age where they normally record and capture how they are treated. If elders do justice to the youth, the youth will become a better generation in the future, and they will also take care of them when

they are old. When one treats the youth badly, the youth will also do the same to when one is old and have no strength anymore. It will also encourage them to take care of their children when they become parents. In this sense, this proverb can help and pervert youths from bad things, like being abusive; they can learn caring and good behaviour. Therefore, the generation of caring will continue, and the world will be a better place.

Theme 5: Guidance

Guidance is applicable to all aspects of human life, i.e., physical, mental, vital, emotional, and spiritual, and in all stages of development from infancy to old age (Dhal, 2017). Dhal (2017) further argues that guidance aims to assist children, youths, or adults in understanding themselves, their needs, and their environments, assisting them in adapting to their current situation and planning their future accordingly. With that said, Marhanene and Bila (2016:586) record a Xitsonga proverbial expression that can help shape the lives of contemporary youth as follows:

Rihlampfu lerintshwa ri tiya hi lera khale

(A new branch gains strength from the old one)

The notion of *rihlampfu lerintshwa ri tiya hi lera khale* presents a complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between space, place, and social context. This notion aligns closely with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which underscores the interconnectedness of all beings and the inherent responsibility we have towards one another. This also enhances the sociocultural development.

This proverb tells us that Vatsonga used to fence their yards with branches to prevent intruders. This brings up the idea that when new branches are added to the existing fence, which contains old branches, the new branches are placed in-between the old branches so that they can be strong. Vatsonga made some observations on this creativity and constructed a meaningful proverb. Hence, the communicative meaning of this proverb is that *lavantshwa va nge swi koti ku tihluvukisa loko va tsan'wa switsundzuxo swa vatswari* (the youth will not develop when they disregard advice from elders). Also, the proverb outlines the mutual dependence between the elderly and the youth. In simple terms, the youth should seek advice from elders (assuming that they know a lot about life experiences) to tackle situations and challenges that they encounter in their journey through life. Therefore, this proverb can help youth make life decisions, like marriage and cultural life. Remember, culture and tradition are passed from generation to generation; therefore, youth must get such guidance from elders.

DISCUSSION

It is observed from the analysis that the role of Xitsonga proverbial expression is very significant and relevant in shaping and guiding the lives of contemporary youth. Proverbs signify the cultural values and morals of Vatsonga. Further, these proverbs are a true reflection of life experiences, and the way they were constructed clearly shows the creativity of the people responsible for creating them. Moreover, there's a strong relationship between the literal and figurative meanings. Though proverbs should be understood on a figurative level, the literal meaning cannot be divorced because it is the one that gave birth to the figurative meaning. The communicative meaning of the Xitsonga proverbial expression outlines the importance of culture and tradition and the positive role they play in societies. The role of Xitsonga proverbial expression amongst the youth, as analysed using themes such as effort, responsibility, reward, nurture, and guidance, shows how these proverbs can help shape the contemporary youth.

Vatsonga, a decolonized country, should practice its indigenous cultures in its daily activities. Proverbs, a type of aphorism, play a significant role in shaping the Vatsonga youth's behaviour and worldview. Proverbs are a powerful tool for transmitting wisdom, education, and morality and are passed down through generations. They are used to develop speaking skills in the native language and are considered one of the best teaching and learning sources. Vatsonga, particularly the youth, can learn from Xitsonga proverbial expressions, leading to a well-rounded and positively shaped life linked to cultural values. The communicative significance of Xitsonga proverbs is evident in their connection to the earth and animals, conveying lessons of life and learning through daily procedures. Therefore, disregarding proverbial expressions can lead to jeopardy. This article examined the roles and communicative meanings of Xitsonga proverbs amongst the youth, highlighting their importance in promoting cultural inclusivity and preserving African identity.

It is recommended that Vatsonga should take advantage of the role of proverbial expressions to help guide contemporary youth. In view of the analysis and discussion, it is clear that proverbs are very significant and informative when it comes to discipline and guidance. The themes analysed prove that proverbial expression can be used in contemporary society to shape the young generation. While shaping their youthfulness, they are also gaining knowledge of culture and tradition. Cultural and traditional values are transmitted through the use of proverbs. It is recommended that

Vatsonga use this proverbial expression since they respect tradition and the experience of their creators in different situations.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the various Xitsonga proverbial expressions' themes that were analysed proved and provided a positive way forward for the contemporary youth to be guided and shaped as they enter a new journey in life, a journey of independence. This shows the relevancy of proverbs and the important role they play in societies. The use of this proverbial expression could also aid in promoting and developing Xitsonga proverbs in contemporary society. This will also prevent the disappearance of traditional and cultural life, which in this case is paremiology. They are a significant tool for transmitting traditional and cultural values from generation to generation. Lastly, *ku veleka i vukosi, kambala i mavala* (To bear children is wealth, to dress oneself is nothing but colour (Junod, 2017:162): this proverbial expression means those who has children has riches greater than the most beautiful clothes. Children are the most precious gift—the gift that needs to be catered for all the time.

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