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## **Interpreting Yoruba proverbs: Some hearer strategies**

### **1 Introduction**

In Yoruba society effective speech and social success depend on a good command of proverbs. These treasured sayings convey the demonstrated wisdom of the ages and therefore serve as a reliable authority in arguments or discussion. As Oladipo (2005) points out, they are also a reservoir of a people's ideas about life, existence, reason and knowledge. Proverbs are concise statements, in general use, expressing a shrewd perception about everyday life or a universally recognized truth. Many are rooted in folklore and have been preserved by oral tradition. A Yoruba story of a family vengeance is preserved in *Ìdáró gbà 'kòkò n'ìdáró gba 'de* "to cause hurt in order to retrieve your pot is to be hurt when you must give up the anklet". An example of commonplace wisdom (or basic Physics) is *Lálá tó ròkè, ilẹ̀ ló n bọ̀*. 'Whatever goes up must come down.'

The obvious truth encoded by proverbs is expressed in similar ways by different cultures. So the Yoruba's *ení yára l'Ògún n'gbè* 'Ogun (god of iron) helps the faster man' matches Aesop's (Greek) proverb, "The gods help them that help themselves." So also does the Yiddish proverb, "honey on the tongue, gall in the heart" express a similar philosophy with *èniyàn f'èjẹ̀ sínú tu itọ́ funfun jáde* 'humans have (red) blood inside but spew out white spittle'. The formal expression may however, seem contradictory, as in Yoruba *òwúrọ̀ kùtù ni a ti n sán imò gbígbe* 'Dry palm leaves must be tied early in the morning' and 'Make hay while the sun shines.'

This paper discusses how hearers arrive at a meaning when they hear a proverb. The aim is to determine what cues are deposited in a proverb to help the hearer arrive at a meaning, what clues she might use to figure out the appropriate meaning and how she might possibly use these clues or cues. To ensure correct interpretation, a speaker could foreground his use of a proverb by the use of an introductory formula of the sort discussed by Abiodun (2000:23-24). However, introductory formulae tend to feature only in formal situations. This paper focuses on the more casual use of proverbs in everyday interaction and attempts to provide an interpretive framework that is hearer centred, for the possible pathways by which a hearer may arrive at meaning.

## 2 Conversational Incongruity

The first step is an apprehension by the hearer of a conversational incongruity, i.e., that the words used by the speaker cannot mean what they would ordinarily mean. In i below,

(i) **Bí gbogbo igi bá ní wó pa'ni, kì í ɣe bí tí igi ata**

If a person were to be killed by a tree, it wouldn't be by the pepper shrub

the first-order meaning of the word *igi* is a woody plant with distinct trunk while the first-order meaning of the sentence is an assertion that certain plants cannot cause grievous bodily harm. However if the context of this sentence was not the hazards of agroforestry or something similar, the hearer would reasonably assume that if the sentence has any meaning, it would not be a first-order meaning. If for example, the sentence were uttered by the clerk in an academic department who had been the subject of disciplinary action by the head of department, in response to a report by the cleaner/messenger, that the departmental typist had threatened to issue him a query for coming late, a conversational incongruity emerges. This, for Kittay (1987:24), is very crucial in identifying a unit of metaphor: "a unit of metaphor is any unit of discourse in which some conceptual or conversational incongruity emerges". This incongruity confirms that a first-order meaning is not the appropriate interpretation of the sentence.

Related to the notion of conversational incongruity is that of conversational implicature, a sketch of which is presented here. According to Grice (1975), people engaged in conversation can be assumed to obey a cooperative principle, that is, they will say something appropriate at that point in the development of their discourse. Grice divided the principle into the following conversational maxims (Grice 1975:45-47):

the maxim of Quantity: give neither more nor less information than, or at least as much information as, is required;

the maxim of Quality: do not say what you believe to be untrue or that for which you have inadequate evidence;

the maxim of Relation: be relevant; and

the maxim of Manner: be perspicuous

These maxims are of the kind that rational people engaged in a conversation may be expected to follow, though they could be violated or flouted. Conversational implicatures arise from cases where one of these maxims appears to have been violated, that is, what the speaker 'might expect the hearer to suppose him to think in order to preserve the idea that the maxims are, after all, not being violated' Grice **xxx: 185**. One of Grice's examples is that of a professor of Philosophy who, when asked to give a testimonial about a former student of his who has applied for a job in that field, writes to say that the job seeker's manners are excellent and his writing is legible. The hearer might work out the implicature thus: this testimonial should have said a lot about the applicant's philosophical abilities (maxim of Quantity) but it has not. If the professor is not being uncooperative, it must be the case that the things he would say would either be untrue or unkind and he does not want to say them. The hearer then arrives at the conclusion that the professor does not think the former student is suited for the job.

In example (i), the secretary, having apprehended the fact that the clerk is not talking about the degree of harm a tree could cause a man, has options on how to interpret the sentence, to get the second order meaning, especially if she assumes that the clerk is being co-operative: that he is being as informative as is required, and that his contribution is relevant and is a response to her threat of issuing him a query for late coming. Similarly, if Tolu, a teenage girl accuses her friend Toyin, another teenager, of immoral behavior, Toyin may reply with:

(ii) **Şágo n bú'gò**

The demijohn insults bottle

The first order meaning of **şágo** is a large, bottle with a long narrow neck and **ìgò** is a similar container differing only in size. The first order meaning of the sentence would be that one kind of container, namely, a demijohn, insults a smaller one of the same kind, that is, a bottle. An equivalent English proverb is “the pot calls the kettle black”. There exists a primary conceptual incongruity here: in the real world, containers neither speak nor enter into arguments. If **sago nbu'go** were uttered in a real world context (i.e. not in the course of a folktale), the hearer would assume that **sago** and **igo** refer to entities other than wine receptacles and therefore, that a first-order interpretation would be inappropriate and that Toyin is claiming that Tolu is in a much worse moral situation than her.

### 3 Interpreting Yoruba proverbs: some hearer strategies

#### 3.1 Reference Mapping

By “reference mapping” is meant that the hearer maps possible real life but non-literal referents to the terms in the proverb. Some of the key terms in (i) *Bí gbogbo igi bá n wó pa'ni, kì í Şe bí ti igi ata* ‘if a person were to be killed by a tree, it wouldn't be by the pepper shrub’ are: *gbogbo igi*, *wó pa*, and *igi ata*. *Igi* “tree” is a polyseme with the following referents:

- (a) Fuelwood                      [-live ]

- (b) log [-live]  
 (c) woody perennial [+live +single trunk +sturdy +upright +tall]  
 (d) shrub [+live –single trunk -sturdy ± upright ± tall]

The appropriate selection is determined by the serial verb **wó pa** “fall, kill”. Any live, upright “tree” (c&d) can fall, but only c (woody perennial) can cause physical injury by its fall. The pepper shrub, though it is called a “tree” is not tree enough to do what real trees do. The hearer may then arrive at the following plausible second order meaning by mapping signifiers in the utterance to some real life referents:

- (i). **Bí gbogbo igi bá ñ wó pa ’ni, kì í ɕe bí ti igi ata.**  
 (cond.) *all tree* (cond.) (prog.) *fall, kill person* *not like* *pepper tree.*  
 Certain entities have power over me, but not that entity.  
 All/any superiors can discipline me, but not the typist.

**Igi** ‘tree’ is the metaphor for authority (e.g. the Head of Department) and **igi ata**, the metaphor for counterfeit authority, not being a real tree. Though **igi** is a morpheme in identifying the pepper shrub, the hearer understands that as the pepper shrub is mistakenly thought to be a tree, so is the typist mistaken in thinking he/she is a superior officer. Let us note that speaker intentionality may not be recoverable here, but by reference mapping, the hearer arrives at a plausible meaning for the utterance.

A similar analysis could be done for this Ekiti proverb:

- (iii) **An ké sí ɛran olúwo, ùgbín náà wíi, “hèèò”**  
*they call to animal owner of horn, snail too said, “here”*  
 “When horned animals were summoned, the snail, too, showed up.”

A possible situation for this proverb would be a family meeting to which two married sons with their wives as well as a married daughter (the eldest sibling) have been invited. If the wife of the younger son offers to speak at that meeting, and if her suggestion runs contrary to the intentions of the married daughter, that daughter might use this proverb. The snail has some protuberances on its head, the eye bearing tentacles. These retract when touched and cannot function as a weapon of attack or defence, as real horns can. The hearers can then proceed to (1) map *ɛran olúwo* and *ùgbín* on to real life referents and (2) determine what the

*eran olúwo* referent but not the *ùgbín* counterpart has power to do. In this case, *eran olúwo* would refer to bona fide members of the extended family group (the married daughter and her brothers) and *ùgbín* to the young wife, who in certain contexts is not regarded as a member of the family at all, or is very low on the family pecking order, until the birth of a child, preferably a son. The young wife is being told in this case that her voice is not to be heard at the family meeting.

Reference mapping cannot be done in a context-free manner. A proverb is interpreted as invoking a perceived similarity or proposing an as-yet unperceived similarity, depending on the context.

(iv). **Bí ajá bá ñ sínwín, á m’ojú iná**  
 (cond.) *dog* (cond.) (prog.) *be mad* *it* *know face* *fire*  
 “Even a rabid dog fears fire”

The key terms in proverb (iv) are **ajá, sínwín, m’ojú, iná**. Some of the salient features of **ajá** (dog) [+domestic +controllable -dangerous] are cancelled out by those of the verb **sínwín** (be mad) [-rational –controllable +dangerous], so that **ajá + sínwín** (dog which is mad, i.e. rabid dog) is analysable as [+domestic –rational –controllable +dangerous]. It could bite and wound fatally. Nevertheless, this irrational entity is said to have enough sense to fear fire; so the fire must be of a size to inspire terror.

To illustrate, we can look at two somewhat contradictory contexts, C-I and C-II, for this utterance:

Context C-I: X, an adolescent set on a harmful course of action has responded with insults to all who attempted to dissuade him. Y, his elderly uncle from out of town decides to speak with him but is cautioned that the young man has no respect for elders. Y responds with (iv) a: **Bí ajá bá ñ sínwín, á m’ojú iná**.

In (iv) a, **aja** is mapped on to X, (not one of the discourses but rather, the topic of their conversation) **sínwín** on to his behaviour and **ina** to Y, the speaker:

(iv)a	<b>Bí ajá bá ñ sínwín,</b>	<b>á m’ojú iná.</b>
	“Even a rabid dog	fears fire”
	Even X, though a delinquent,	would respect Y.

Context C-II: A is the eldest of three siblings, B is their mother. A has spent the better part of the day cooking his favourite meal and warns that anyone who so much as touch the pot would be severely dealt with. B asks if she was included in the general proscription. A responds with (iv) b: **Bí ajá bá ń sínwín, á m'ojú iná.**

In (iv) b), we have a more complex situation because **ajá** is mapped on to A, the speaker, i.e., the cook,) and **iná** to B, the hearer, i.e., the mother; **sínwín** is mapped to a hypothetical situation (no actual behaviour qualifies for it). We would then have

(iv) b **Bí ajá bá ń sínwín, á m'ojú iná.**  
 A dog, even if it were mad would fear fire  
 Even if I (A) would be rude I would not dare it with you (B).

As can be seen from (iv) a & b) above, how an implicature is worked out depends on assumptions shared by the participants in a particular speech event. According to Fasold 1990:132, (citing Kempson 1975:144), an exchange that generates a particular implicature between one set of participants may generate an entirely different one between another set of discourses. While in (iv) a), Y arrogates a fearsome superiority to himself, A in (iv) b) actually first depreciates himself in order to draw attention to his good sense (in not being rude to his mother).

First-order meanings are a necessary input in the correct analysis of second-order meanings. (v) and (vi) below are structurally similar to (iv) but slight differences still exist because the first-order meanings of the words and the sentences differ as is shown in the translation below:

(v). **Bí Şàngó ń p'àràbà, tó ń fà'rókò ya, bí ti iginla kọ.**  
 Thunder may strike *iroko* and *araba* trees, but not *iginla*.

Context: L<sub>x</sub>, Chairman of the Landlord's Association in a residential area has successfully bullied a few home owners to pay him some money ostensibly for the repair of a faulty transformer and has threatened to deal with defaulters. This situation is reported by L<sub>y</sub>, a homeowner who has already paid, to L, also a homeowner but who has stoutly refused to the money which he considers extortionate. L<sub>y</sub> then responds with (v)

(vi). **Kíkéré l'abéré kéré, kì í şe mími f'ádiyẹ.**  
 Small though the needle may be, it cannot be swallowed by a hen.

Context: Identical to that in (v) above, except L<sub>y</sub> is less than five feet tall.

Proverbs (**iv-vi**) can all fit into the following format:

	<b>A</b>	<b>can do X to</b>	<b>B (things in C's class)</b>	<b>except C</b>
<b>iv</b>	A rabid dog	fears	nothing	except fire
<b>v</b>	Sango (Thunder god)	can destroy	mighty forest trees	except iginla
<b>vi</b>	A hen	can swallow	small things	except a needle

In addition to the implicature in (v) that  $L_x$  cannot punish  $L_z$ , (vi) would also implicate that  $L_z$ 's diminutive size is no reason for  $L_x$  to take liberties with him. The reference to the smallness in size would be absent were it not for the first order meanings of *Kíkéré/kéré* (smallness/be small) and *abéré* (needle).

Some proverbs are structurally similar and may be thought to be stylistic or rhetorically equivalent, that is, can function in identical speech events.

**vii. Òjò tó p'àlàpà ló sọ ọ́ d'ohun àmúgùn f'éwúré**

The rain which demolished the clay wall made it an easy climb for goats.

Context: Mr P, having lost his job, has moved his family from their four-bedroom bungalow to a two-bedroom apartment where they have to share kitchen and toilet facilities with the Q family. Mrs Q thinks one of the onions that she left on the kitchen sink is missing and she very politely asks if Mrs P took the onion. Mrs P responds with (vii). *Òjò* (rain) maps on to Mr P's job loss, Mrs P is *àlàpà*, the clay wall, so reduced in height (socio-economic standing) as to move to a tenement building of the poorer sort. Mrs Q is the *éwúré* 'goat' who can now clamber over (i.e. insult) Mrs P by asking a polite question which she (Mrs P) has interpreted as an accusation. The next proverb (vii) could serve just as well, both of them roughly mean 'the indignity now suffered by X in the hands of Y was caused by Z.

**viii. Ojo to ro lo k'eyele po m'adiye.**

The rain which fell caused the pigeon to be cooped up with the hens.

The pair of **ix** and **x** would yield an identical analysis:

**ix. Pàpà n p'ara rẹ̀, ó l'oun ó p'ajá.**

The intestinal worm is killing itself rather than the infested dog.

**x. Àfòpiná tó l'oun ó pa fitílà, ara rẹ̀ ni ó pa.**

The moth attempting to extinguish a lamp will end up destroying itself.

Some rhetorically equivalent proverbs may have **xi** and **xii** could be interpreted on the basis of their first order meanings as warning against different vices. In **xi**, it is the toad's behaviour that is picked out for censure; in **xii**, it is the medicine man's baseless belief. To exemplify, we could provide identical contexts for **xi** and **xii**.



**xi. Ikú n p'olongo tí yó lẹ́ tẹ̀, ámbòsì ọ̀pọ̀lọ́ tí n jan ra rẹ̀ mọ́'lẹ̀.**  
Death kills the cautious chameleon, not to talk of the bungling toad.

**xii. Ikú p'agílítí aláwọ̀, ámbòsibọ́sì Ìsègùn tó f'awọ̀ rẹ̀ Ẹ̀'ògùn.**  
Death killed the savannah lizard with the tough hide; not to talk of the medicine man who makes its hide a charm?

Context: K, a young employee whose mentor L had been forced to resign his an appointment after a change of government, is behaving badly at work and is cautioned by M, a much older colleague using either **xi** or **xii**.

If **xi**: *Ikú n p'olongo tí yó lẹ́ tẹ̀...* is used, K would probably interpret it as referring to the good behaviour of his L, meaning if such a good man could lose his job, then the younger had to be more careful. If **xii** were used: *Ikú p'agílítí aláwọ̀ ...*, this would carry the warning that the goodwill of a mentor will not save the protégée, seeing that the mentor himself had been forced to leave. In **xii**, there is no suggestion that L was such a good person himself.

Sometimes, it might be necessary to work out the primary conceptual meaning and map the whole meaning on to a real life situation. The proverb below

**xiii. Agbada ò gbóná l'àgbàdo ò ta.**  
Frying-pan not hot be corn not pop  
Were the frying pan hot enough, the corn would pop

is part of a town pride song. The full song is: *Ọba wa kò f'orí balẹ̀ fẹ̀nì kan; agbada ò gbóná l'àgbàdo ò ta* 'our king bows to no one; were the frying pan hot enough, the corn would pop'.

It might not be possible to identify the individual terms – *agbada* 'frying pan', *gbóná* 'hot', *àgbàdo* 'corn' and *ta* 'pop' with real life referents, but the it would be possible to map the whole statement to a situation which the hearer can identify. It would seem that the singers are responding to a perceived affront to their king, with a threat that if sufficiently provoked, they are capable of matching force with force.

Not all concepts are mapped on to human referents, especially in proverbs that express a philosophy, rather than comment on incidents. **xiv** superficially looks like a more transparent version of **xv**:

**xiv. Ọ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀ dúdú kò yáa bù Ẹ̀án; ọ̀mọ̀ burúkú kò yáa lù pa.**  
An unripe plantain cannot easily be eaten; a problem child cannot easily be killed

xv. **É sùrú kàn ti yòò ʃorí ọmọ kọ lẹ́lá.**

There's no helping a baby's oversize head.

However, the referent of *orí ọmọ kọ lẹ́lá* (a baby's oversize head) might not be a human head at all, but an unpleasant situation that cannot be changed. The proverb would then mean 'what cannot be helped must be endured.'

### 3.2 Cue-word Analysis

A second strategy is the interpretation of cue-words. Among the Yoruba, many proverbs are rooted in folklore. Others are abridged summaries of situations. Examples include the following proverbs with the cue-words underlined.

xvi. **Amúníláṣìfò, ẹran Òbíyẹ**

'He who causes one to speak badly, Ibiye's goat.'

Context: Mrs B is an abandoned wife with two children, the first of whom, C, is a truant. Her mother-in-law is visiting and C has just been dragged home from the mall by a neighbour who found him playing snooker when he should have been doing Mathematics. In the course of scolding him, she says something to the effect that truancy runs in his father's family. Relieved that her mother-in-law is not within earshot, she says **xvi**.

xvii. **Ìdáró gbà 'kòkò, nì 'dáró gba 'de.**

'Injury inflicted in retrieving the pot justifies injury in retrieving the anklet.'

Context: A and B are teenage siblings. A wanted to borrow a T-shirt of B's for a party but B refuses. Three weeks later, when B wanted to use their mother's car to take C, his date out, A takes the car and knowingly delays his return and so spoils his brother's plan. When A returns and B complains bitterly, A responds with **xvii**.

These cue-words carry the weight of meaning, especially if the full story behind the proverb is unknown to either speaker or hearer. In (**xvi**), whatever Ibiye's goat could be said to be or have done, the main proposition is that the Addressee's behaviour is likely to trap the Addressor into saying something that could get the Addressor in trouble. How this comes to be is not stated. See below, however, the expanded text:

(xvi) a **Amúníláṣìfò, ẹran Òbíyẹ Òbíyẹ fọ́jú ọ̀tún, ẹran rẹ̀ fọ́ t'òsì.**

He who causes one to speak badly, Ibiye's goat. Ibiye is blind in the right eye, her goat in the left.'

The story is that Ibiye's goat, having caused some loss to a neighbour was called 'ẹran olójú kan,' by that neighbour, the ambiguity of this sentence could cause problems for the speaker. For "'ẹran olójú kan,' could be interpreted as 'one-eyed goat' or 'the goat of a

one-eyed person.’ The expanded proverb provides more information, of course, but the point is that “*amúnilá Sifò*” is quite sufficient to help the hearer work out the meaning of the proverb. Similarly, “*idaro...idaro...*” carries the warning that injury begets injury. (xviii) below is rooted in a modern anecdote.

(xviii) **Ká-fi énu-á-dáké, àkàrà ìyá Ìsíkéḗlì**

Eat-it-and-keep-shut, the *akara* of Ezekiel’s mother.

From the cue word here, the hearer knows that there is a situation that defies comment. He may however also know the story behind the proverb. Ezekiel (or John in other versions) was the foreman at a building site and had employed his mother as caterer. Though she turned out to be a bad cook and served sandy *akara*, the workmen could not complain for fear of losing their jobs. A similar proverb from Ajibola (1971:7) is *À-rí-ìgbòḍò wí, baálé ilé Şu s’ápé* ‘(A matter you) see-and-keep-mum, a family head defecating in the cooking pot’. It could not be ascertained whether there is a longer version of this proverb but the second clause reinforces the cue-word by stipulating the rationale for the required secrecy. A possible situation that calls for this proverb is when an authority figure is engaged in unwholesome acts but cannot be called to question because of who he is.

Cue-words could be more than a word long. A clause is the cue-word in proverb (xix)

below which is rooted in a folktale. Its expanded form is (xix)a.

(xix). **Mélòó la ó kà l’áyín Adépèlé?**

‘How many shall we count of Adepele’s teeth?’

Context: Mrs B, an abandoned wife with two children has her job and because she is defaulting on her rent payments, has just been issued a quit notice. The children are malnourished and both are ill, but she cannot afford to take them to the hospital. When a friend from out of town telephones to ask how she is getting on, she starts her narration with xix.

(xix) a **Mélòó la ó kà l’áyín Adépèlé? T’inú ọ̀rún, t’òde ọ̀jọ; àìmoye èrìkì ló fi mú’lẹ̀ láìyọ.**

‘How many shall we count of Adepele’s teeth? Inside, a hundred, outside, eighty; uncountable molars are rooted without growing out’

Even in the expanded form, the meaning this proverb depends primarily on the cue-word. The numerals only serve to further show that whatever problems Adepele’s teeth refer to must be

numerous and complex (to the effect that ‘it never rains but it pours’) but they do not serve as a clue to the number or exact nature of complexity. There is another layer of meaning in the play on words but this will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.2 *Decomposition of Pun*

Some Yoruba proverbs are jocular, depending primarily on pun. The problem of Adepele’s teeth is foregrounded in her name, *pèlé*, indicating a type of dental malocclusion, with one tooth lying on another. This group includes proverbs like

(xx). **Ojú Ìmàlẹ̀ kò sí l’ótí; ó sọ ọmọ rẹ̀ ní Òmórù.**

‘The Muslim’s heart still cleaves to wine, so he names his son Umar.’

Possible Context: A young woman who after she has broken her engagement still visits the family of her ex-fiancé regularly may be queried by a friend using this proverb.

(xxi). **Bàbá olórùlé kan tó sọ’mọ rẹ̀ ní Aríléyan; níbo ni yóó yan sí?**

‘The owner of a one-room apartment named his son Aríléyan; where will he romp?’

Possible Context: T who teaches in a small nursery school and earns well below the minimum wage is planning a big party to celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday. Because she has heard that it is the thing to do, she would like to host the party at an exclusive hotel, invite a hundred guests and order her dress from a high class boutique. Her more sensible friend may caution her with proverb **xxi** above.

(xxii) **Ara Ifá ni Fátìmọ́.**

‘Fatima also belongs to the Ifa oracle.’

Possible Context: W often frequents disreputable establishments for entertainment but claims to be faithful to his wife. While going out with his wife, one of the loose women who also frequent the same bars accosts him and requests for money. Mrs W says she is suspicious of his relationship with the lady but he still denies that there is any. She then responds with **xxii**.

(xxiii) **Ọmọ tí yóò jẹ̀ Àṣàmú, kékeré ló ti ṣ ṣ’ẹnu ṣámúṣamú**

‘A child that will be called Àṣàmú must show early signs of giftedness.’

Possible Context: Y is a little girl, who though aspires to be a doctor, would rather watch cartoons on television than do her homework. Her grandmother, in encouraging her to work hard to achieve her goals says (**xxiii**) to her.

Ultimately, the hearer resorts to reference mapping here but first of all, the conceptual incongruity must be resolved. In (**xx**), for instance, the hearer would need to determine the relationship between a Muslim’s love for wine and his son’s name and in (**xxiii**) between the name Àṣàmú and giftedness by decomposing the pun.

Umar in (**xx**) is a common Muslim name that is phonologically integrated into Yoruba as Òmórù or Òmórù. The latter variant can also be interpreted as a nominalization: ‘ò-mú- orù’

(he-who-takes-*orù*, (wine pot) while *Áríléyan* (xxi) literally means ‘he who has a house to romp in.’ Fatima is first daughter of Muhammad, Islam’s founder and is a choice name for Muslim girls. The Yoruba pronunciation /fátimó/ could also mean ‘Ifá (the Yoruba god of divination) still knows it’. *Àṣàmú* in (xxiii) translates to ‘he who is specially selected’

After decomposing the puns, the literal meanings of the four proverbs are recorded as (a) and the second order meanings – the possible results of a reference mapping – as (b) below:

(xx)a A Muslim’s heart still cleaves to wine, so he names his son, ‘Carrier-of-wine-pot’

(xx)b X’s hidden motives are revealed by his conduct/speech.

(xxi) a The owner of a one-room apartment has named his son ‘He-who-has-space-to-romp-in’. Romp where?

(xxi) b X (the Addressee), of severely limited means/abilities sets her mind to achieve grand things. By what means?

(xxii) a ‘Ifa-still-knows-it’ is part of Ifa

(xxii) b If it quacks like a duck, it must be a duck

(xxiii) a A child that will be called ‘Genius’ must show early signs of giftedness

(xxiii) b The childhood shows the man, as morning shows the day

#### 4 Sociolinguistic Implication

As noted in the introduction, a good command of proverbs contributes to social success in Yoruba, and perhaps, in most African societies. In Igbo wisdom for example, proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten while for the Yoruba, proverb is the steed of speech. In Yoruba society, the ability to use proverbs with accuracy is the hallmark of oratory (Abiodun 2000) and a Yoruba person is not considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussions unless he is able to quote some proverbs that are relevant to each situation (Delano 1966: x).

But how do younger people acquire this sociolinguistic competence and what can they do with it? Proverbs are part of Yoruba folklore and their mode of transmission is still

predominantly oral. Younger people learn by interacting with elders as this proverb shows: **Bí ewé bá pé ni ára ọṣẹ, á di ọṣẹ** ‘When a leaf used to wrap soap remains long enough with it, it turns to soap’. The reward for close interaction with elders is social recognition: **Ọmọdé tí ó bá mọ ọwọ wẹ, á bá àgbà jẹun** ‘A youth who knows how to wash his hand will dine with the elders.’

From the examples given here, it would appear that proverbs provide a sociolinguistic shield for their users, in Gricean fashion. Many of them make propositions that are face-threatening and would be used only when an unfriendly state of affairs exists between the Addressor and the Addressee. By using proverbs, a speaker can make many confrontational propositions indirectly, leaving the interpretation to the hearer; and if challenged about the purport of a proverb he has used, the speaker can deny it. Perhaps that explains why the Yoruba put the onus for proverb meaning on the speaker, as is evidenced by such sayings as *olówe l’òwe òyé* (it is the proverb user who understands the meaning). However, if a speaker denies the obvious implicature arising from a proverb, the Addressee or a third party may and *olówe tí kò bá m’òwe ara rẹ, ẹ̀rù ìjà ló ń bà á* ‘a proverb user who claims ignorance of his own proverb is only afraid of trouble’.

This would suggest that these proverbs are different from those proverbs discussed by Abiodun (2000) which are featured in formal situations. In the ‘proverbs of strife’ discussed in this paper, there is neither a place for an introductory formula acknowledging the wisdom of the forebears or an older Addressee nor an appreciative formula complementing the speaker’s wisdom and good conduct.

## 5 Conclusion

Primarily, the hearer relies on the apprehension of conversational or conceptual incongruity to decide to give a metaphorical interpretation to a proverb. Afterwards, the strategies discussed here could be used to interpret the meaning. The crucial point is that the

interpretation of metaphor does not depend on speaker intentionality. This framework may be used for the interpretation of all types of proverbs, those used in formal settings and those used in more informal interactions, here christened 'proverbs of strife'. This framework may be used for the interpretation of proverbs in any language.

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