THE DEATH OF PROVERBS? FATE OF TRADITIONAL WISDOM IN THE FACE OF MODERN LANGUAGE TRENDS

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Abstract

Proverbs, often described as the mirror of culture and the vessels of ancestral wisdom, have played an essential role in shaping moral, ethical, and philosophical thought across generations in African societies. However, in the 21st century, the global dominance of modern language trends—such as slang, internet abbreviations, emojis, memes, and the use of artificial intelligence-driven communication—has marginalized traditional expressions like proverbs. This study investigates the fate of proverbs in contemporary Nigerian society, particularly focusing on how modern language trends contribute to their decline. It anchors on the concepts of cultural lag, language shift and ethnolinguistic vitality theory. Using a qualitative research approach, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with elders, teachers, and students across three southeastern Nigerian communities. The findings reveal that digital communication, western education, urbanization, and linguistic globalization have led to a steady decline in the usage and comprehension of proverbs among youths. The study recommends that educational institutions, media organizations, and cultural bodies take deliberate steps to integrate proverbs into modern communication platforms, ensuring the survival of traditional wisdom amid linguistic evolution.

Introduction

Language reflects the dynamic nature of culture and society. In African societies, especially Nigeria, proverbs have traditionally served as tools for moral instruction, social control, and interpersonal communication. They convey wisdom, humour, and philosophy in concise and memorable expressions. Traditionally, the use of proverbs signifies intelligence, respect, and cultural awareness. They encapsulate cultural values in succinct and memorable expressions. As Achebe (1958) famously noted, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten." Unfortunately, these linguistic gems are gradually disappearing in contemporary speech, replaced by emerging modern language trends.

The advent of technology, globalization, and western education has introduced new language trends that have marginalized these traditional expressions. The proliferation of digital communication—social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and WhatsApp—has introduced a new linguistic paradigm characterized by brevity, informality, and global slang. Expressions such as "LOL," "OMG," "TBH," and emojis are rapidly taking the place of contextual wisdom once embedded in proverbs. Similarly, the dominance of English and Nigerian Pidgin in popular culture has overshadowed indigenous linguistic expressions. This paper

explores the extent to which modern language trends influence the use, transmission, and understanding of proverbs and the broader implications for cultural preservation.

Despite their historical and cultural importance, proverbs are increasingly absent from the speech and writing of the younger generation. There is a noticeable disconnection between the elders who preserve this tradition and youths who now favour slang, abbreviations, and memes. This shift indicates a potential cultural erosion that may result in the loss of traditional wisdom embedded in these expressions. The problem is further compounded by a lack of institutional support, as schools and media platforms rarely promote or teach the relevance of proverbs. This paper seeks to explore how modern linguistic shifts are contributing to the decline in the use of proverbs, and what this decline means for the transmission of cultural values. The primary aim of this study is to examine the decline in the use of proverbs among Nigerian youths in the face of modern language trends. The study specifically seeks to: 1) identify the factors responsible for the decline in proverbial usage, 2) assess the attitudes of different generations towards proverbs, 3) investigate the role of education and media in promoting or neglecting traditional wisdom, 4) recommend strategies for reviving the use of proverbs in contemporary society.

With empirical data in this study, cultural advocates are supported in their efforts to revive the indigenous knowledge systems. By exploring the contribution of modern linguistic shifts to the decline in the use of proverbs, and its implication of this decline for the transmission of cultural values, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on language evolution and cultural preservation; offers insights for educators, linguists, and policymakers on how to integrate traditional wisdom into modern education and communication; while the younger generations would see reason to embrace and uphold their linguistic heritage.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977). The theory posits that a language or speech form's survival depends on its prestige, institutional support, and demographic strength. Proverbs, though rich in meaning, lack institutional promotion and are viewed as less prestigious compared to modern language trends. This theory helps explain why certain language elements survive while others fade away. It also supports the argument for reinforcing the relevance of proverbs through strategic social and educational interventions.

Literature review

Ogburn's (1922) Concept of Cultural Lag

Ogburn's (1922) concept of cultural lag explains the delay between technological advancement and the corresponding adjustment of cultural practices. The scholar submits that while material culture (e.g. technology, social media, and global communication) has evolved rapidly, non-material culture, represented by proverbs and indigenous communication norms, has lagged behind. This concept of cultural lag by Ogburn (1922) forms the backbone of this study.

Language Shift

Another relevant concept guiding this study is language shift, where speakers gradually abandon their traditional language or speech forms in favour of another language due to social or economic prestige. In Nigeria, the dominance of English and digital slang has precipitated this shift, leading to reduced usage of proverbs in daily interactions.

Empirical Studies

Several scholars have examined the decline of proverbs and its connection to modernity. Adegbija (2004) argued that urbanization and western education contribute to the fading of traditional linguistic expressions. Akporobaro (2005) described proverbs as the backbone of African oral literature but warned that globalization endangers their continuity. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2010) found that while elders maintain proficiency in proverbs, the youth rarely use them, regarding them as outdated. Similarly, Egbokhare and Salami (2013) highlighted the absence of proverbs in school curricula as a key factor in their decline.

Ogunbowale (2015) studied Yoruba proverbs and discovered that young people often replace them with English idioms and social media expressions. Ezeokoli and Oti (2018) examined Igbo proverbs in Nollywood films and found that scriptwriters increasingly exclude them to appeal to modern audiences. Nwosu (2020) linked the neglect of proverbs to the rise of online communication, emphasizing that brevity and humour now replace reflective language.

Unlike previous studies that focused mainly on language loss or generational usage, this present study specifically explores the interaction between modern digital language trends and the decline of proverbs, using qualitative evidence from southeastern Nigeria to illustrate how technology-driven communication shapes linguistic habits.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the decline of proverbs in contemporary language. This design allows for in-depth understanding of participant perspectives and the sociocultural dynamics influencing language use. The population comprises elders, secondary and tertiary students, and language teachers in southeastern Nigeria, an area rich in oral traditions and known for its use of Igbo proverbs. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 45 participants—15 elders, 15 students, and 15 teachers—based on their familiarity with or exposure to traditional and modern language use. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were asked about their usage, understanding, and perception of proverbs in relation to modern language practices.

Data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Data were coded into themes such as modern trends, generational differences, and educational influence.

Evidence of Analysis

Out of 45 participants, only 7 (15.5%) reported using proverbs regularly, 12 (26.7%) said they used them occasionally, while 26 (57.8%) admitted rarely or never using them. Among the younger respondents, 80% preferred using short expressions like "vibes," "no wahala," and "it is what it is," instead of traditional sayings. Elders, however, emphasized that these modern phrases lack depth and moral weight. Teachers expressed concern that proverbs are missing from language syllabi, leading to disinterest among students. These statistics and testimonials indicate a steep decline in proverbial usage.

Discussion of Findings

In line with the specific objectives of the study, the findings reveal that:

1. Modern Language Trends: The rise of digital communication has fostered new expressions that prioritize speed and humour over wisdom and reflection. Slang, abbreviations, and emojis dominate conversations, reducing the relevance of proverbs.
2. Generational Attitudes: Elders value proverbs as cultural treasures, while youths view them as archaic. This generational gap is widening due to the lack of intergenerational linguistic exchange.
3. Educational and Media Influence: The neglect of indigenous expressions in formal education and entertainment media accelerates their decline.
4. Cultural Lag: There is a mismatch between Nigeria's technological advancement and its preservation of cultural wisdom. Proverbs are unable to compete with the immediacy of digital communication.

These findings confirm earlier studies while extending them by illustrating the direct impact of modern linguistic practices on traditional wisdom systems.

Conclusion

Proverbs, once a cornerstone of African communication, are now endangered by the forces of modernization. The rise of digital language, the influence of global media, and the neglect of indigenous education have marginalized proverbial wisdom. However, the study concludes that proverbs can coexist with modern communication if creative strategies are adopted to embed them into digital and educational spaces.

Recommendations

In order to ensure the survival of traditional wisdom amid linguistic evolution, it is recommended as follows:

1) Integration of proverbs into school curricula and digital learning tools.
2) Encouragement of the use of proverbs in social media content and online campaigns.
3) Support for intergenerational language exchange programs.
4) Promotion of indigenous proverbs in literature, film, and radio broadcasts.

5) Encouragement of academic and community-based documentation of proverbs across Nigerian languages.

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