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BEMBA PROVERBS AS INSTRUMENTS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MUFULIRA, ZAMBIA: A SOCIO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Mary Mpembamoto[1] Pethias Siame[2]

[1]Department of Literature & Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, psiame@yahoo.com, *https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3203-5307*
[2]Department of Literature & Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, marympemba12@gmail.com

Correspondence: Pethias Siame, Email: psiame@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study presents a socio-semantic analysis of the role of Bemba proverbs in conflict resolution within Kamuchanga Township, Mufulira District, Zambia. Proverbs, as condensed forms of cultural wisdom, serve as functional instruments for social regulation and harmony. Guided by Speech Act Theory, the research employed a qualitative case study methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation with fifteen key informants, including elders and adult community members. The findings elucidate a multifaceted framework in which Bemba proverbs operate proactively to prevent disputes, reactively to facilitate resolution, and normatively to promote social cohesion and impart moral counsel. The analysis demonstrates how these proverbs function simultaneously at locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels, enabling indirect communication that preserves social face and reinforces communal values. The study also notes an observed difference in proverb recall between the elders and adult participants in the sample, a difference that participants themselves attributed to urbanization, formal schooling in English, and reduced intergenerational oral transmission. Because the original study design did not set out to measure generational change, this observation is presented as an incidental finding and a recommendation for future research rather than as a primary empirical conclusion. The study concludes that Bemba proverbs constitute an indispensable, culturally embedded conflict management system and advocates for their documentation, integration into educational curricula, and revitalization within community mediation practices.

Keywords: Bemba proverbs, conflict resolution, socio-semantics, Speech Act Theory, indigenous knowledge systems, Zambia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language functions not merely as a vehicle for conveying information but as a fundamental instrument for structuring social reality, managing relationships, and upholding cultural order. Within this complex sociolinguistic landscape, proverbs emerge as particularly potent cultural formulae. They are traditionally defined as concise, metaphorical sayings that express a perceived truth or piece of wisdom based on common sense or cultural experience, and which are passed down through generations (Mieder, 2004). In many African societies, including among the Bemba people of Zambia, proverbs are not relics of a bygone era but active, dynamic tools embedded in the daily fabric of social interaction, especially in the delicate arena of conflict management.

This paper investigates the socio-semantic role of Bemba proverbs in the specific context of conflict resolution within Kamuchanga Township, Section 'O', in Mufulira District in the Copperbelt Province of Zambia. Mufulira, a historically significant mining town, presents a unique socio-cultural environment where traditional Bemba values interact with the pressures and dynamics of urbanization and industrial life. Section 'O' of Kamuchanga Township serves as an ideal microcosm to observe this interaction. Conflict, understood here as a state of discord arising from perceived incompatibilities of needs, values, or interests, is an inevitable aspect of communal life. How a community perceives, manages, and resolves conflict is central to its sustainability and cohesion.

The central problem this study addresses is twofold: to systematically identify the specific Bemba proverbs actively deployed in conflict scenarios in this community, and to critically analyze their socio-semantic functions, specifically how they generate meaning and perform social actions in context. The research is guided by two primary objectives: first, to identify and catalog the proverbs commonly employed in conflict prevention and resolution among the Bemba people of Kamuchanga Township; and second, to analyze the layered meanings and pragmatic functions of these proverbs within the conflict resolution process. These two objectives define the scope of the study. The study did not set out to measure generational differences in proverb knowledge or use, nor did it aim to trace historical change over time. To unpack this "doing with words," the study is theoretically anchored in Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which provides a robust framework for understanding how utterances perform actions beyond their literal meaning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of proverbs as instruments for social guidance and conflict mediation is a global phenomenon with deep historical roots. Their study, therefore, necessitates a review that moves from the general to the specific, situating Bemba practices within wider African and global traditions of proverbial wisdom.

The antiquity and universality of proverbs underscore their fundamental role in human communication. Evidence from ancient Sumerian tablets, such as the 'Instructions of Shuruppak' (c. 4500–1900 BCE), reveals that early civilizations already relied on pithy, wisdom-based sayings to impart ethical and practical knowledge (Alster, 1997). This tradition demonstrates that condensing complex social and experiential truths into memorable, formulaic language is a cross-cultural cognitive and communicative strategy. As Mieder (2004) asserts, proverbs fulfill a universal human need to summarise collective observations into nuggets of transmissible wisdom. They offer pre-fabricated evaluative commentary on life's situations, providing ready-made frameworks for understanding and navigating interpersonal and social complexities. In conflict situations worldwide, proverbs often serve to depersonalize critique, appeal to shared values, and suggest resolutions through analogy and metaphor.

Zooming into the African context, the prominence and functionality of proverbs become even more pronounced, largely due to the strength of oral traditions. In African societies, language is seldom a neutral medium; it is performative, constitutive of social reality, and deeply intertwined with community wellbeing (Ndhlovu, 2021). Proverbs are thus not mere stylistic embellishments but are integral to judicial processes, governance, education, and daily moral reasoning. Scholars like Yankah (2012) and Mbiti (1990) have extensively documented how proverbs in Akan and other African cultures carry the authority of ancestral wisdom, lending weight to the speech of elders and mediators. They function as "linguistic diplomacy," allowing for the discussion of contentious issues without breaching protocols of respect and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For instance, the Igbo proverb *taa okwu eze tupu I kwuo* 'chew your words well before speaking,' is a classic example of a proverb used preemptively to instill caution and prevent conflicts born of reckless speech (Nwaga, 1976). The effectiveness of such proverbs hinges on a shared cultural code that allows listeners to decode the figurative message and apply it to the immediate situation.

Within Zambia, the ethnographic landscape is rich with diverse proverbial traditions employed in conflict management. Research on the Tonga people of Southern Zambia by Lubbungu and Siame (2025) illustrates how proverbs serve a pedagogical role, instilling societal values that preempt conflict and providing neutral ground for mediation when disputes arise. Similarly, Simataa (2020) highlights the use of Lozi proverbs in the traditional *Kuta* (court) system, where they are invoked to underscore principles of justice, fairness, and collective

responsibility, thereby legitimizing rulings and fostering acceptance. These studies establish a Zambian context where proverbs are recognised as vehicles of ethical guidance and tools for adjudication and reconciliation.

Focusing on the Bemba specifically, existing literature points to a robust proverbial tradition. Early works by Kashoki (1975) and Mwansa (2018) have catalogued Bemba proverbs and commented on their general wisdom. More recent studies have begun to link this wisdom to specific social functions. Chanda (2018), for instance, explores how Bemba proverbs in Mufulira have evolved in response to urbanization, adapting to new forms of dispute while retaining their core semantic and social functions. Chilufya (2020) emphasizes the poetic and symbolic nature of Bemba proverbs, arguing that their aesthetic quality enhances their persuasive power in mediation. Furthermore, Mphande (2016) discusses the socio-semantic elements in African proverbs, noting how they embed social norms within linguistic structures.

However, a discernible gap exists in the literature. While the general cultural significance of Bemba proverbs is acknowledged, there is a scarcity of focused, empirical studies that systematically analyze their specific, applied role in the process of conflict resolution within a defined contemporary community setting. Much of the scholarship remains general or textual. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a fine-grained, socio-pragmatic analysis grounded in field data from Kamuchanga Township. It moves beyond listing proverbs to explicating the mechanisms, articulated through Speech Act Theory, by which they operate to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts, thereby contributing a detailed case study to the broader fields of applied sociolinguistics, conflict transformation, and African indigenous knowledge systems.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analytically examine how Bemba proverbs function as active agents in conflict resolution, this study employs Speech Act Theory as its primary theoretical lens. Developed by the philosopher Austin (1962) and systematically refined by Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory fundamentally challenges the view that language is solely used to make true or false statements about the world. Instead, it posits that to speak is to act. Utterances are performed to accomplish specific goals: we make promises, issue warnings, extend apologies, give advice, and effect reconciliation. This performative view of language is exceptionally pertinent to the study of proverbs, which are quintessential examples of utterances designed to *do* something socially and morally significant.

Austin's initial formulation distinguished three simultaneous acts performed in any utterance. The first one is the locutionary act. This is the act of *saying something* with a determinate sense and reference. It encompasses the literal, propositional meaning of the words spoken. For example, the Bemba proverb

Inshiku shalingenye, umwana nanyina literally translates as 'Days are not numbered; a child and its mother become the same age.' At the locutionary level, this is a statement about the passage of time and its leveling effect.

The second one is the illocutionary act**.** This is the act performed *in* saying something. It is the speaker's intended force or function behind the utterance. This is the core of the speech act. It deals with acts such as warning, promise, advice, or verdict. Using the same proverb, an elder employing it in a dispute performs an illocutionary act of advising or exhorting the parties to forgive, implying that prolonged enmity is futile in the face of life's brevity.

The final one is the perlocutionary act. This is the act performed *by* saying something; it is the consequential effect (intended or unintended) of the utterance on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the listener. The perlocutionary effect of the proverb might be to calm anger, induce reflection on the futility of the conflict, and ultimately motivate the disputants towards reconciliation.

Searle (1976) further categorized illocutionary acts into types such as assertives, for example, stating; directives like ordering and requesting; commissives such as promising; expressives like thanking and apologizing, as well as declaratives like pronouncing. Proverbs in conflict resolution often function either as indirect directives, like advising and warning, or expressives such as reproaching and condemning a behavior indirectly. Their power frequently lies in this indirectness, a concept central to pragmatics (Yule, 1996). By speaking figuratively, the mediator avoids a direct, face-threatening command like "You must forgive her!" and instead presents a shared cultural truth. The disputants are thus invited to draw the applicable conclusion themselves, a process that fosters ownership of the resolution.

When applied to Bemba proverbs in conflict resolution, this tripartite framework allows for a nuanced analysis. The locutionary content provides a culturally shared narrative or metaphor, a story about trees, water, chickens, or stones. This establishes common ground and depersonalises the issue. The illocutionary force is where the social work happens: the proverb acts to warn *Umwala wamoneka, taona lukasu* 'A visible stone isn't struck by accident'; to advise *Cinci wa babili, tekuba cinci uli weka* 'Two minds working together achieve more'; or to rebuke indirectly: *Akanwa kali nemilandu; kalailetelela*'A guilty person explains before being asked'. The perlocutionary effect is the desired outcome of the mediation: reduced hostility, increased empathy, acceptance of a solution, or a commitment to changed behavior.

Furthermore, the theory underscores the importance of context and shared cultural knowledge. The success of an illocutionary act depends on what Searle called "felicity conditions." For a proverb to work as a warning, all parties must recognize the speaker as a legitimate authority (e.g., an elder), share an

understanding of the proverb's figurative meaning, and be operating within a cultural frame that values such indirect communication. The socio-semantic approach of this study is precisely concerned with this interplay between linguistic meaning (semantics of the proverb) and its contextual, action-oriented use in a specific social setting (pragmatics). Therefore, Speech Act Theory provides the ideal analytical toolkit for deconstructing how these compact units of cultural wisdom perform heavy lifting in the maintenance of social order and harmony among the Bemba of Mufulira.

A critical note on the cultural limitations of Speech Act Theory is necessary here. Austin and Searle developed this theory primarily based on examples from the English language, which may embed Western assumptions about intentionality and directness. Some scholars (e.g., Rosaldo 1982 on Ilongot speech acts) argue that speech act theory is culturally specific and may not fully capture non-Western communicative practices where indirectness, silence, or collective intention play different roles. This study acknowledges that while Speech Act Theory provides a useful analytical toolkit, it is applied cautiously, with awareness that Bemba pragmatic norms may not map perfectly onto categories derived from English.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, an approach particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena that require a deep understanding of meanings, interpretations, and processes within their natural context (Creswell, 2014; Siame & Banda, 2024, 2025). Given that the investigation centered on the nuanced, context-dependent use of language (proverbs) in social interaction (conflict resolution), a qualitative paradigm was indispensable for capturing the richness and depth of the practice.

The research was conducted as an instrumental case study of Kamuchanga Township's Section 'O' in Mufulira District. The "case" here is the sociolinguistic practice of using Bemba proverbs for conflict resolution within this specific community.

4.1 Fieldwork Duration and Procedures

Data collection was conducted over a period of eight consecutive weeks, from early September to late October 2023. This duration allowed the researchers to build trust within the community and observe conflict resolution events as they naturally occurred. Non-participant observation was carried out during six community gatherings, including two formal elder-led mediation sessions, two village court proceedings (*imboni*), and two informal dispute resolution meetings held in public spaces. Total observation time amounted to approximately eighteen hours. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each observation session.

4.2 Participants and Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where researchers intentionally recruit individuals who possess specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The sample comprised fifteen (15) participants, including five (5) elders (three men and two women aged 60 and above) recognized in the community as custodians of tradition and frequent mediators of disputes, and ten (10) adult community members (aged 30–55) from various households, known to be fluent in Bemba and engaged in community life. No youth participants (for example, those under 30) were included in the study. References to "youth" in the findings and conclusion have therefore been removed or revised to reflect the actual sample of elders and adults. Data saturation was reached after the twelfth interview, when no new proverbs or thematic functions emerged; the remaining three interviews confirmed existing patterns.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Primary data collection was achieved through two main methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation (Siame & Lubbungu, 2023; Okolie *et al.*, 2025). The semi-structured interviews, conducted individually in Bemba, were guided by a flexible protocol. The protocol focused on the two study objectives: identifying proverbs used in conflict prevention and resolution, and exploring their meanings and pragmatic functions. It was not designed to systematically measure or compare generational differences in proverb knowledge. The interview guide did not include standardized prompts requiring participants to list as many proverbs as they could recall, nor were equivalent recall tasks administered across age groups under controlled conditions. Any numerical comparison of proverbs recalled by elders and adults therefore emerged from the flow of conversation rather than from a planned, systematic instrument.

4.4 Translation Protocol

All interviews were conducted in Bemba by the first author, a native speaker. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Bemba. Translation into English was performed independently by two native Bemba speakers who are also fluent in English and hold postgraduate degrees in linguistics. The two translations were then compared and reconciled through a consensus process involving a third native speaker mediator. Back-translation was not employed due to resource constraints, but reconciliation ensured high semantic equivalence.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process, employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Siame, 2024) and a socio-semantic analysis informed by Speech Act Theory. Interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly reviewed. Initial coding identified recurring patterns related to types of conflicts, specific proverbs

mentioned, and described outcomes. These codes were then clustered into broader themes, which ultimately crystallized into the four core socio-semantic roles of proverbs discussed in the findings. Simultaneously, each cited proverb was analyzed through the lens of Speech Act Theory to delineate its locutionary meaning, intended illocutionary force, and intended perlocutionary effect as described by participants or observed in context. This dual analytical strategy ensured that the findings were both grounded in the empirical data and rigorously interpreted through a coherent theoretical framework. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for cultural protocols, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

4.6 Researcher Positionality and Ethical Approval

The first author, while a Zambian national, is not a member of the Kamuchanga community and initially held an outsider status. Access was gained through a local community liaison, a respected elder who introduced the researcher to participants and vouched for the study's integrity. Prolonged engagement over eight weeks helped mitigate observer effects. Ethical approval for this study was not obtained from the Kwame Nkrumah University Institutional Review Board because the study did not involve humans, but language, in particular, proverbs. The authors acknowledge that this statement requires clarification. The study did involve human participants through interviews, observation, audio recording, and the use of participant quotations. No formal ethical review or exemption determination was sought from the University Institutional Review Board. The research proceeded on the basis of informed consent from all participants and adherence to cultural protocols, but the authors recognize that this does not substitute for institutional ethical review. This limitation is noted, and the authors recommend that future research involving human participants obtain the necessary ethical clearance. Nonetheless, all participants provided informed written consent, while others provided verbal consent for non-literate elders after the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards were explained in Bemba. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect participant identities.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed that Bemba proverbs in Kamuchanga Township are not deployed randomly but are strategically utilized to fulfill four distinct yet interconnected socio-semantic functions in conflict management. These functions form a comprehensive framework, addressing conflicts proactively, reactively, and normatively.

5.1. Proverbs as Proactive Tools for Conflict Prevention

A significant finding is the use of proverbs as preemptive instruments to discourage behaviors that are culturally recognized as precursors to conflict. These proverbs are often invoked in general socialization or at the earliest signs

of tension to "nip discord in the bud." They function as cultural early-warning systems, embedding cautionary principles in the communal psyche. For example, the proverb:

> *Apali abakulu; insengo tashipatama,* 'In the presence of elders, horns do not bend,' was frequently cited.

At a locutionary level, it paints a vivid image of an animal showing deference. Its illocutionary force is a powerful directive emphasizing respect for authority, wisdom, and social hierarchy, warning that insolence or stubbornness (*"horns"*) in the face of legitimate authority is socially unacceptable and will lead to sanction. The intended perlocutionary effect is the internalisation of respect, leading individuals to restrain pride and aggression, thereby preventing challenges to authority that could escalate into serious disputes.

This preventive function aligns with Mieder's (2004) assertion that proverbs fulfill a universal human need to summarize collective observations into nuggets of transmissible wisdom, offering pre-fabricated evaluative commentary on life's situations. Similarly, Yankah (2012) and Mbiti (1990) have extensively documented how proverbs in Akan and other African cultures carry the authority of ancestral wisdom, lending weight to the speech of elders and mediators. The proverb's power to prevent conflict lies in its capacity to depersonalize critique and appeal to shared values through analogy and metaphor, a strategy that Brown and Levinson (1987) identified as "linguistic diplomacy", allowing for the discussion of contentious issues without breaching protocols of respect and politeness.

Another potent preventive proverb is:

> *Ubululu bwatulile ku kana na kana,* 'The fire of conflict often starts with children'.

This proverb, at the locutionary level, metaphorically links a destructive force (fire) to a minor source (children's squabbles). Its illocutionary act is to warn the community, especially parents and elders, not to dismiss minor disagreements as trivial. It advises vigilant intervention at the nascent stage. The desired perlocutionary effect is to motivate adults to mediate children's disputes promptly, instilling values of harmony early on and preventing small "fires" from igniting larger conflagrations that consume families or the wider community. This finding echoes Lubbungu and Siame's (2025) research on the Tonga people of Southern Zambia, which illustrates how proverbs serve a pedagogical role, instilling societal values that preempt conflict.

5.2. Proverbs as Facilitative Instruments in Active Conflict Resolution

When conflicts have materialized, specific proverbs are employed by mediators to de-escalate tensions, reframe perspectives, and guide parties toward a

mutually acceptable resolution. Their indirectness is their greatest asset here, allowing difficult truths to be communicated without direct accusation. The proverb:

> *Imiti ikula, empanga,* 'Young trees make a forest' was often used in disputes involving collective responsibility or community projects.

Locutionarily, it states an ecological fact. Illocutionarily, in a conflict where individuals are refusing to contribute or cooperate, it acts as a persuasive appeal to unity and collective effort. It reframes the dispute from "me versus you" to "us building our future together." The perlocutionary goal is to soften individualistic positions and inspire a cooperative mindset for resolution.

This reframing function is consistent with Finnegan's (2012) foundational work on oral literature in Africa, which emphasizes proverbs as performance, highlighting how their meaning emerges not from text alone but from situated delivery, intonation, and audience response. The performative dimension was essential for understanding how this proverb operated in live mediation contexts. Furthermore, Lederach (2003), in his work on peacebuilding and indigenous reconciliation mechanisms, argues that sustainable conflict transformation must draw on local cultural resources. The Bemba proverb system, as documented here, exemplifies such a resource, offering a culturally grounded alternative to externally imposed mediation models.

> Similarly: *Umwikalishi, atula icilundu* 'Still water breeds worms', is a powerful tool for breaking deadlocks.

Its locutionary meaning describes stagnation leading to decay. In mediation, its illocutionary force is to warn against the toxicity of silence, suppressed grievances, and unresolved tension. It advises disputants that avoiding dialogue, like *"still water,"* will only worsen the situation, *"breed worms"* of resentment, and further conflict. The intended effect is to compel the parties to engage in open, albeit difficult, conversation to clear the air and move forward. This aligns with Ndhlovu's (2021) observation that in African societies, language is seldom a neutral medium; it is performative, constitutive of social reality, and deeply intertwined with community wellbeing.

Case Vignette: During an observed mediation session in early October 2023, two neighbors, both adult males in their forties, disputed a property boundary. Each accused the other of encroachment, and voices had been raised for nearly an hour without resolution. An elder mediator, Mr. B. (aged 72), listened without interruption, then said softly in Bemba:

> *Umwikalishi, atula icilundu* 'Still water breeds worms'.

He did not address either man directly. One disputant initially looked confused; the elder repeated the proverb, adding:

> *You have been silent for many weeks. Now the water is still, but worms are already there. Speak now, but speak to solve, not to fight.* The disputants paused. One man sighed and said, *"I was not speaking because I was angry, but silence made me more angry.*

The conversation then shifted from accusations to negotiation. Within thirty minutes, both men agreed to a joint survey and shared maintenance of the boundary path. The elder later explained that the proverb worked because it named the problem (toxic silence) without naming the person, allowing both to save face while changing behavior. This vignette demonstrates what Yankah (2012) describes as the proverb's capacity to serve as "linguistic diplomacy," enabling discussion of contentious issues without confrontation. The elder's strategic deployment of the proverb also reflects Searle's (1976) categorization of illocutionary acts, functioning here as an indirect directive that preserved the dignity of all parties while effecting behavioral change.

5.3. Proverbs as Mechanisms for Promoting Social Cohesion

Beyond resolving immediate disputes, proverbs play a crucial role in continually reinforcing the social bonds and shared values that make a community resilient. They are tools for nurturing the collective identity and interdependence that preempt fragmentation. The proverb:

> *Cinci wa babili, tekuba cinci uli weka* 'Two minds working together achieve more,' is a classic cohesion-building utterance'.

Its locutionary content celebrates collaboration. Its illocutionary function in daily life is to constantly advise and remind community members of the ethos of teamwork over individualism. The perlocutionary outcome is the reinforcement of cooperative behavior, strengthening networks of mutual support that are the bedrock of social cohesion.

This cohesion-building function resonates with Mphande's (2016) discussion of socio-semantic elements in African proverbs, noting how they embed social norms within linguistic structures. The proverb serves as what Kashoki (1975) and Mwansa (2018) described as a vehicle for transmitting collective wisdom that binds communities together. Furthermore, Simataa's (2020) study on Lozi proverbs in traditional *Kuta* (court) systems similarly found that proverbs are invoked to underscore principles of justice, fairness, and collective responsibility, thereby legitimizing rulings and fostering acceptance, a finding that parallels the Bemba emphasis on communal harmony.

Another profound proverb in this category is:

Abaana bambwa, tabapishana meeno 'Discord in the family brings great misfortune.'

This proverb locutionarily links family strife to negative consequences. Illocutionarily, it serves as a grave warning and a powerful expression of the high cultural value placed on familial harmony. By constantly reiterating that the family unit is the foundation of all social order, its use fosters forgiveness, patience, and reconciliation within households, thereby maintaining the integrity of the primary social cell from which wider community cohesion flows. This finding echoes Mbiti's (1990) argument that in African ontology, the community is paramount, and individual identity is inextricably linked to communal belonging. The proverb operationalizes this philosophy by reinforcing the moral imperative of family unity.

The four functions presented here (prevention, resolution, cohesion, moral counsel) are not hierarchical or strictly sequential. A single proverb can serve multiple functions depending on context. For example:

Imiti ikula, empanga 'Young trees make a forest'

Although it is listed under conflict resolution, it also functions as a social cohesion tool when used in non-conflict settings to encourage cooperation, and as moral counsel when teaching children the value of collective effort. The functions overlap, and a proverb's illocutionary force shifts with the speech situation. Mediators in the study confirmed that they select proverbs not by rigid category but by situational appropriateness, often using the same proverb for different purposes across different disputes. This flexibility aligns with Finnegan's (2012) observation that meaning emerges not from text alone but from situated delivery and audience response, and with Chanda's (2018) finding that Bemba proverbs in Mufulira have evolved in response to urbanization, adapting to new forms of dispute while retaining their core semantic and social functions.

5.4. Proverbs as Vehicles for Imparting Moral Counsel

Finally, Bemba proverbs function as a primary medium for ethical education, distilling complex moral philosophies into accessible, memorable axioms. They provide a value compass that guides individual behavior, which in turn minimizes actions that cause conflict. The proverb:

Umwana ekalisha ilyo anya 'A child sits down when misfortune befalls him' is locutionary.

The proverb offers deep moral counsel. Locutionarily, it describes a reactive posture to adversity. Its illocutionary force is to teach the virtues of humility, patience, and introspection in the face of trouble, as opposed to reckless retaliation. The perlocutionary aim is to shape character, encouraging

individuals to respond to provocation or hardship with measured reflection, thereby making them less likely to instigate or escalate conflicts.

This moral counsel function is consistent with Chilufya's (2020) emphasis on the poetic and symbolic nature of Bemba proverbs, arguing that their aesthetic quality enhances their persuasive power in mediation. The proverb's didactic purpose also reflects what Lubbungu and Siame (2025) identified among the Tonga: proverbs serving a pedagogical role that instills societal values. As Mieder (2004) noted, proverbs provide ready-made frameworks for understanding and navigating interpersonal and social complexities, and this is precisely what *Umwana ekalisha ilyo anya* accomplishes by offering a behavioral template for responding to hardship.

Similarly:

> *Temba inshiuku; shikutembe* 'Patience pays,' is a concise moral imperative.

Its illocutionary act is to advise endurance and long-term perspective over short-term impulsive reactions. In a conflict scenario, invoking this proverb aims to produce the perlocutionary effect of calming immediate anger and encouraging disputants to wait for a fair process or a better outcome, embodying the virtue of patience that is essential for peaceful coexistence. This proverb's function as moral counsel echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) broader analysis of how indigenous knowledge systems, including proverbs, carry ethical frameworks that colonial education sought to displace. The proverb's emphasis on patience as a virtue also resonates with Yankah's (2012) observation that proverbs in African rhetoric serve to encode and transmit moral philosophy through memorable, figurative language.

5.5. An Incidental Observation on Proverb Recall among Elders and Adults

During the interviews, a difference in proverb recall between the elder and adult participants became apparent. When the conversation touched on proverbs applicable to conflict resolution, the five elders mentioned an average of twenty-three proverbs each across the course of their interviews. The ten adult participants mentioned an average of four, and six of the ten mentioned fewer than five. These figures were not obtained through a standardized recall task. They emerged from the natural flow of semi-structured conversations, and the original interview guide did not include a question asking participants to list as many proverbs as they could recall. Nor were equivalent prompts administered under controlled conditions to both groups. The comparison is therefore presented here as an incidental observation rather than as a planned empirical finding.

During observation sessions, elders deployed proverbs spontaneously in mediation. Adult participants rarely initiated proverbs and sometimes requested

explanations when proverbs were used. One adult participant stated, "I understand when my father uses proverbs, but I cannot use them myself. I would feel like I am pretending to be an elder." When asked to explain this difference, participants themselves attributed it to urbanization, formal schooling in English, and reduced intergenerational oral transmission. These explanations are consistent with concerns raised in previous literature (Chanda, 2018; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986), but the present study did not investigate these causal relationships systematically. The study also cannot establish that proverb knowledge has declined over time, because it compares different age groups at a single point in time rather than following the same community across generations.

This observation resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) analysis of decolonizing the mind, which critiques the enduring legacy of colonial education in displacing indigenous languages and knowledge systems. As one participant noted, "In school, we were punished for speaking Bemba. Now, the proverbs feel like a forgotten language." The finding also aligns with Chanda's (2018) observation that urbanization has accelerated the evolution and potential attrition of Bemba proverbs in Mufulira. Furthermore, Finnegan's (2012) emphasis on proverbs as performance, rather than fixed texts, helps explain why the transmission of proverb knowledge may be disrupted when the oral context and intergenerational transmission are weakened. As Mieder (2004) cautioned, proverbs are not relics but dynamic tools; their vitality depends on active use within communities. The observed difference in recall between elders and adults is consistent with Lederach's (2003) concern that sustainable conflict transformation must draw on local cultural resources, resources that may be eroding. It also echoes Mphande's (2016) observation that socio-semantic elements in African proverbs are embedded within living communities and cannot be preserved through documentation alone; they require continued practice and transmission. Because the present study was not designed to measure generational change, this observation is offered as a recommendation for future research rather than as a primary conclusion. Table 1 summarizes the socio-semantic functions of some Bemba proverbs.

Table 1: Socio-Semantic Functions of Selected Bemba Proverbs in Conflict Management

Proverb (Bemba & Translation)	Primary Socio-Semantic Function	Locutionary Act (Literal Meaning)	Illocutionary Force (Intended Action)	Perlocutionary Effect (Desired Outcome)
Apali abakulu; insengo tashipatam	Conflict Prevention	Description of deference shown by an animal.	Directive: Warn against insolence; enjoin respect for authority.	Internalisation of respect; restraint of pride/aggressio

a. 'In the presence of elders, horns do not bend.'				n to prevent disputes.
Ubululu bwatulile ku kana na kana 'The fire of conflict often starts with children.'	Conflict Prevention	Metaphor linking a large fire to a small source.	Advisory/Warning: Urge early intervention in minor disputes.	Prompt mediation of small issues to prevent escalation.
Imiti ikula, empanga 'Young trees make a forest.'	Conflict Resolution	Statement about growth and collective formation.	Persuasive Appeal: Encourage unity and collective effort.	Shift from an individualistic to a cooperative mindset to resolve disputes.
Umwikalishi, atula icilundu 'Still water breeds worms.'	Conflict Resolution	Description of stagnation causing decay.	Warning/Advisory: Criticize silence and avoidance.	Motivate open dialogue to resolve underlying tensions.
Cinci wa babili, tekuba cinci uli weka 'Two minds working together achieve more.'	Social Cohesion	An assertion about the superiority of collaboration.	Expressive/Advisory: Reinforce the value of teamwork.	Strengthen cooperative networks and mutual support.
Abaana bambwa, tabapishana meeno 'Family discord brings misfortune.'	Social Cohesion	Link between family strife and negative outcomes.	Expressive/Warning: Emphasize the supreme value of family harmony.	Foster forgiveness and reconciliation within families.

Umwana, ekalisha ilyo anya 'A child sits down in misfortune.'	Moral Counsel	Description of a reactive posture to adversity.	Instructive: Teach humility and introspection.	Shape character to respond to conflict with reflection, not retaliation.
Temba inshiuku, shikutembe: 'Patience pays.'	Moral Counsel	The assertion that endurance yields reward.	Advisory: Encourage long-term perspective and restraint.	Cultivate calmness and perseverance in the face of provocation.

The findings that are compressed in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that Bemba proverbs constitute a sophisticated, culturally coded system for managing human relations. Through the lens of Speech Act Theory, their operational logic becomes transparent. They are not simply "sayings" but are carefully selected linguistic performances. Their metaphorical locutionary content provides a safe, shared conceptual space. The illocutionary forces; warnings, advice, and persuasion are delivered through this indirect channel, protecting the speaker and the hearer from the threat of confrontation. Finally, the cumulative perlocutionary effects across these four functions are profound: a community that is taught to prevent conflict, resolve it wisely, value its cohesion, and guide itself by a strong moral compass. This system relies entirely on a deep, shared cultural knowledge that allows the metaphorical bridge between the proverb and the immediate situation to be built and crossed. As one elder participant stated, "The proverb is the needle that stitches the tear in the community's cloth without making the hole bigger." This metaphor perfectly captures the delicate, reparative, and indirect action performed by these speech acts.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations to contextualise the findings and suggest directions for future research. First, the research is geographically confined to Section 'O' of Kamuchanga Township. Although it offers rich, in-depth data, the findings may not be fully generalisable to all Bemba communities in Mufulira or across Zambia's Copperbelt, where local variations in proverb usage and social dynamics may exist. Second, the sample size, though adequate for a qualitative, in-depth study, is relatively small. A broader survey incorporating a larger and more demographically diverse sample could quantify the prevalence of specific proverb usage and measure attitudinal differences across age, gender, and education levels more definitively. Third, the study did not set out to investigate generational differences in proverb knowledge or use. The observation in Section

5.5 emerged incidentally from the fieldwork and is not supported by a systematic, standardised instrument. The study therefore cannot establish a generational decline over time; it can only note a difference in proverb recall between the elders and adults who participated. Future research designed specifically to measure intergenerational transmission would require a different methodology, including standardized recall tasks, equivalent prompts across age groups, and ideally a longitudinal or cohort design. Fourth, the study relied heavily on self-reported data through interviews and recalled scenarios. Although supplemented by observation, the most intense and private mediation sessions often occur within family compounds and are not directly accessible, potentially omitting the most nuanced applications of proverbs. Future research could employ longitudinal ethnographic methods to document conflict resolution processes more fully over time. Finally, the study notes the observed difference in proverb recall between elders and adults but does not explore the specific modern alternative conflict resolution strategies that adults may be adopting. A focused comparative study on intergenerational conflict resolution methodologies would be a logical and valuable extension of this work. Such a study should also obtain the necessary ethical clearance for research involving human participants.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has systematically elucidated the vital and multifaceted socio-semantic role of Bemba proverbs in conflict management within a contemporary urban community in Zambia. Far from being archaic ornaments of speech, the findings affirm that these proverbs are active, performative speech acts that constitute a sophisticated indigenous system for peacebuilding and social maintenance. They function proactively to instill values that prevent conflict, reactively to mediate and resolve active disputes through indirect and face-saving communication, and normatively to continually reinforce the social cohesion and moral framework that undergird a harmonious community.

The analysis, grounded in Speech Act Theory, has provided a clear framework for understanding this functionality. The locutionary content of proverbs offers culturally shared metaphors. Their illocutionary force performs critical social actions like warning, advising, and persuading. Their ultimate perlocutionary effect is the cultivation of reflection, behavioral change, and reconciliation. This tripartite mechanism allows proverbs to address deeply sensitive issues while preserving the dignity of all parties, a communicative strategy of immense social value.

The study also noted an incidental difference in proverb recall between the elder and adult participants. The five elders mentioned an average of twenty-three proverbs each during their interviews, while the ten adults mentioned an average of four, with six of the ten mentioning fewer than five. These figures emerged from semi-structured conversations and were not obtained through a

standardized recall task. Participants themselves attributed the difference to urbanization, formal schooling in English, and reduced intergenerational oral transmission. The present study was not designed to measure generational change, and it cannot confirm that proverb knowledge has declined over time. The observation is therefore presented as an incidental finding and a recommendation for future research rather than as a primary conclusion. A systematic study of intergenerational transmission would require a different design, including standardized instruments and equivalent prompts across age groups.

Therefore, this study concludes with a strong recommendation for active preservation and revitalization. This should include the systematic audio and video documentation of elders using proverbs in context, the integration of Bemba proverbial studies into local school curricula and community workshops, and the conscious promotion of these practices within formal and informal mediation structures. Future research should include longitudinal ethnographic studies and comparative intergenerational analyses to further document patterns of proverb knowledge and use and to test revitalisation interventions. The profound socio-semantic power of Bemba proverbs can be safeguarded, ensuring that this ancient wisdom continues to serve as a vital resource for fostering harmony, stability, and social identity in both the traditional and modern landscapes of Zambia.

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