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The Syntax of Yorùbá Proverbs

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Abstract- Yorùbá people relish in interspersing their utterances with proverbs . Hardly can a typical Yorùbá man or woman utter three sentences without putting in a proverb. Hence, Yorùbá say: 'Òwelẹ̀sinọ̀rọ̀,ọ̀rọ̀ lẹ̀sinòwe, bọ́rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wa' translated to mean that 'proverb is the vehicle through which issues are resolved' . However, Yorùbá proverbs are not just strung together haphazardly; they follow some particular syntactic rules of the grammar of the language. These syntactic rules give some aesthetic values to proverbs usage in the languge. This paper is set to discuss the various syntactic forms that many of the Yoru `bá proverbs manifest. We also look at the implication of the syntactic rules upon which these proverbs are hinged and how these rules are applied to structures to conform to the wellformedness condition of Yoru `bá grammatical sentences.

Keywords: proverbs, yorùbá people, wellformedness condition, strong pillar.

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The Syntax of Yorùbá Proverbs

Timothy Adeyemi Akanbi

Abstract- Yorùbá people relish in interspersing their utterances with proverbs. Hardly can a typical Yorùbá man or woman utter three sentences without putting in a proverb. Hence, Yorùbá say: 'Òwelẹ́sinọ̀rọ̀,ọ̀rọ̀ lẹ́sinòwe, bọ́rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wa' translated to mean that 'proverb is the vehicle through which issues are resolved'. However, Yorùbá proverbs are not just strung together haphazardly; they follow some particular syntactic rules of the grammar of the language. These syntactic rules give some aesthetic values to proverbs usage in the languge. This paper is set to discuss the various syntactic forms that many of the Yorùbá proverbs manifest. We also look at the implication of the syntactic rules upon which these proverbs are hinged and how these rules are applied to structures to conform to the wellformedness condition of Yorùbá grammatical sentences. We shall, in the final analysis, show that, even though some teenagers are no more facilitated with knowing and sayingYorùbá proverbs, proverbs, nevertheless cannot become extinct in the language. This is so because proverbs are the strong pillars that hold the norms, cultures and traditions of the Yorùbá people together.

Keywords: proverbs, yorùbá people, wellformedness condition, strong pillar.

I. Introduction

Proverbs are the sayings that are very common in languages. All peoples of the world have a repertoire of proverbs in their languages.Cultures, norms and traditions of any people are preserved in their proverbs. Proverbs are regarded as the sayings of the wise. It is the wise that say proverbs and it is also the wise that understand it. Yorùbá people relish in proverb sayings and they say it a lot. It is believed that it is the elders that have the monopoly of saying proverbs in the Yorùbá culture because the elders are believed to be wise; hence the saying that Ẹnuàgbà lobì ti ń gbó. In literal terms this means that it is the elders that can tell whether a kolanut is ripe or not. In its figurative notion, it means that the elders are the custodians of wisdom.We need to say though, that it is not that the young ones also do not give proverbs in Yorùbá culture, a young person can give proverbs among his/her peer group. However, if a young person will have to say a proverb before the elders, he must know the language to use before saying the proverb. In other words, he must pay homage to the elders. Some of the words for paying homage includetótó ó ṣe bí òwe; kí òwejé tiàwọnàgbà; àwọnàgbà bọ̀ wọnsọpé... Such sayings are made as a wayof acknowledging the ancestors and the elders and crediting them with such proverbs (cf. Abiodun 2000). The words of this homage may be said either at the beginning before saying the proverb or at the end after the proverb has been said.Every setting in Yorùbá has a proverb attached to it. This is why it is said that Òwel'ẹṣinọ̀rọ̀, ọ̀rọ̀ l'ẹṣinòwe; bọ̀rọ̀ bá sọnù, òwe la fi ń wa. This is translated to mean that'proverb is the vehicle of words, if words get lost; it is the proverb that is used to search for them.' All this goes to show that the Yorùbá people are fond of and they relish in saying proverbs.

Proverbs, as we pointed out gives aesthetics value to speech. Ashipu (2013:11) notes this fact when by saying that "Of the proverbs in many African societies we are told that they are consciously used not only to make effective points but also embellish their speeches in a way admired and appreciated by their audiences. It is part of the art of an accomplish orator to adorn his rhetoric with apt and appealing proverbs… Proverbs are also used to add colour to everyday conversation….. Proverbs are essential to life and language: 'without them, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul." For every situation, Yorùbá have a proverb that is appropriate for that situation. Proverbs are used to warn, instruct, direct, rebuke, praise, command, etc.

However, proverbs are not just said in a haphazard manner, there are grammatical rules that the structure of proverbs follows. That is, in terms of sentence structure, there are various types of Yorùbá proverbs structurally. In terms of structure, proverbs can be in the form of simple, complex or compound sentences. Not only this, Yorùbá proverbs can also be pragmatic in nature. Except somebody knows the background of a particular matter, he may not be able to understand what the speaker meant by the proverb he uses. In addition, every Yorùbá proverb has its sociolinguistic implication. This is to say that every proverb has a relevance to the social togetherness of the people. Every situation calls for a proverb that is appropriate to it. However, the focus of this paper is on the syntactic analysis of Yorùbá proverbs. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one deals with the introduction. Section two discusses the theoretical framework used for this study. Section three looks at the various syntactic formations of someof the selected Yorùbá proverbs. We look at the implications of the syntax of proverbs in section four; while section five concludes the discussion.

II. Theoretical Framework

This work is couched within the theoretical framework of Principles and Parameters Theory known

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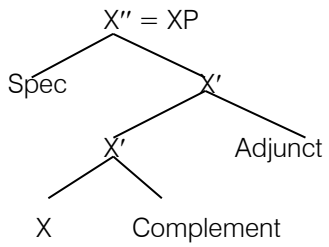
in its earlier version as the Government and Binding (GB) Theory. As proposed by Chomsky (1981, 1982, 1986), GB as a theory is composed of some other sub-theories. One of these sub-theories brought to GB from the earlier modifications of Transformational Grammar of Chomsky (1957, 1965) is the X-bar Syntax. X' Syntax which was first introduced by Chomsky (1970) and made popular and expanded by Jackendoff (1977) seeks to capture the similarities between different categories of phrases by assigning the same structural analysis to them. One important innovation brought into the grammatical analysis through X' Syntax is the binary branching. Binary branching replaces and is an improvement over the earlier ternary branching of grammatical analysis. The information carried by X-bar theory is schematised in the configuration labelled (1) below.

1



This sub-theory is relevant to this work, hence our adoption of the sub-theory of GB for the analysis of sentences in this work.

III. The Syntacticstructures of Yorùbá Proverbs

The Yorùbá proverbs follow a pattern that is unique in terms of grammatical and syntactic ordering. There seems to be no Yorùbá proverbs that are of simple sentence in its structure. If there are, such are not presented in this qork.Virtually all proverbs in the Yorùbá language are of complex sentence. In fact, hardly can there be a Yorùbá proverb that has less than two verbs. This does not mean that Yorùbá proverbs are of Serial Verb Construction in nature, they are not. But they are of different structural grammatical types. Many of the Yorùbá proverbs are of the following structures: negation, interrogation, focusing, topicalisation, subjunctive, etc. We shall discuss the structure of each of these Yorùbá proverbs.For some, we shall draw a representative structural tree where they become relevant.

a) The structure of Yorùbá proverbs

As we have said, Yorùbá proverbs in virtually all cases do not exhibit simple sentence structure. They are always of the complex sentence structure. The complex structural nature of Yorùbá proverbs is what makes them to be in negative, interrogative, relative, focus and subjunctive forms We shall take each of these sentence structures as are found in the Yoruba proverbs one after the other for proper analysis.

b) Negative structure type

The following proverbs[1] are of the negative structure type.

a) `Àgbàdokò rotọ̀pọ̀ èníyànlóko, ó yàgàn, kò rotiẹnití à bá yàgbadofún, kò wotẹnitabaṣeloóore.
The maize planted in the farm does not think of doing well to people, it goes barren.

b) A kì í ṣeỌ̀gọ̀jì[2] tó bá niyayọ̀ oyè tó dẹlẹ́sìnrìnwálé
We are not like ***Ọ̀gọ̀jì*** *who rejoice with the celebrant and came home a debtor*.

c) Àdó kì í ṣeẹgbẹ́ akèǹgbè
The small guard is not an equal to the big one.

d) Àjùmọ̀bí kò kantàánú, ẹnití Ọlọ́runránsí ni ló ń ṣeniloóore.
Mercy does not depend on blood relation; those who are sent by God are the ones that do mercy onto man.

e) Àjọjẹkò dùn, bí ẹnìkankò ní
Partnership cannot be enjoyed if one lacks good fortune.

f) Kò dùn mí, kò dùn mi, aya n bọ́pọlẹ́ẹ̀mẹfà
I do no bother, I do not bother, the housewife continues emphasising the offence.

g) À sẹ̀sẹ̀ yọoòrùn, ó dàbí ẹnipé kò ní í ta nilára
The early rising sun appears as if it will not generate heat.

h) Àpọ́nlé kò sí fọ́batí ò lólorì
There is not honour for a king that does not have a queen.

i) Àárọ̀ lọjà, kò ṣe é dúró wò
Morning shows the day; do not stand akimbo.

j) Gbogboohuntójú bárí kọ́ lẹnu ń sọ.
Not all that the eyes witness that the mouth utters.

The proverbs in (2, a - j) above are all of negative structure form. The negative markers in the proverbs are in various positions within the structure and of different forms. Some are place at sentence initial position, some at the sentence medial, and some have more than one negative marker within them. The morphological forms of the negative markers are also different. This is based on the fact that Yorùbá language has various types of negative markers.While some are clear**kò**, 'not' some are of the form **kì í**, 'never' or not used to.' In some case, the consonant /**k**/ in **ko** gets deleted to remain /**ò**/ with low tone.The environment within which each of these negative markers occurs is different from the other. It can be

[1] Many of the Yorùbá proverbs used in this paper were taken from Jẹ́jẹ́nìwà and Babátúndé (2013).

[2] Ọ̀gọ̀jì is a name

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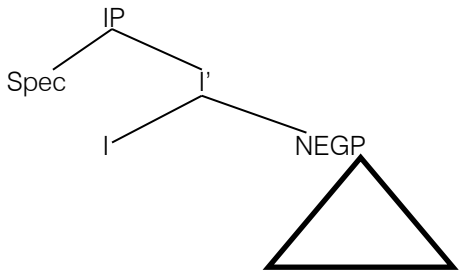
observed that **kì í** occurs in the environment where a particular action or incident may not happen ordinarily happen; while **kò** occurs only in an environment where a particular element is being negated. Another issue relating to these types of structures in Yorùbá proverbs is that the negative markers can occur more than once. When it is like this, it is used only to make emphasises and to press home the information the proverb user is trying to put to the fore. The structural configuration of the proverbs is given in (3).



k) Interrogative structure type proverbs

In this type of proverbs, various types of interrogative markers are used to turn the supposed positive statement to an interrogative one. In Yorùbá language, there are different types of interrogative markers. Each marker is used for a specific interrogative sentence. Sonaiya (1988) gives the type of interrogative markers in Yoruba as listed in (4). Such items are used as interrogative markers in some of the proverbs in Yorùbá language.

i.	Ta	Who
ii.	Kí	What
iii.	Báwo	How
iv.	(N)ibo	where
v.	Nígbàwo	When
vi.	Kílódé	Why
vii.	Mélòó/èló	How many/how much
viii.	Dà	Where
ix.	Ńkọ́	Where/how

All the markers in (4) are known as WH question markers. Any question with any of these interrogative markers requires a sentential answer. This is why such questions are also called content questions. Virtually all the above interrogative markers are seen to be used in Yorùbá interrogative proverbs. There are other question markers in Yorùbá which are known as Yes/No question markers. The type of questions that make use of such Yes/No question markers require only Yes/No for the answer. There are two major types used in Yorùbá. They are **Ṣé** and **Ǹjẹ́**.These two interrogative markers are similar but they are, in some ways, semantically different (see Akanbi forthcoming). The other yes/no question marker, which we believe is more of dialectical than for Standard Yorùbá is **ha…bi**. The following sentences are some of the interrogative proverbs in Yorùbá.

a) Olé tó gbé kákáki **ọ**ba, **níbo**niyóò tifọn?
The thief that stole the king's trumpet, where will he blow it?

b) Baba jóna, **ẹ** ń béèrè irungbọ́n, **kí** ló múná ràn?
A man is burnt you are asking for the beard, what ignited the fire?

c) Àpọ́ndọ́jà ó lọ́ja ò kún, ìyàwó **ẹ** **mélòó** ló wà níbẹ̀?
A bachelor got to the market he said there were not many people, how many of his wives are there?

d) Ẹ̀bìtì tó pa Ọ̀jẹ̀làńkẹ́ kò jẹ̀bi, **kí**nieégúnfẹ́ fi **ẹ**yìnṣe?
The trap that killed Ọ̀jẹ̀làńkẹ́ is not at fault, what does a masquerade want to do with palmnut?

e) **Kí**nieégún ń wá to lóun ò lè fàárọ̀ jó?
What does the masquerade wants to do that he will not dance in the morning?

f) **Kí**niológìnní ń wá tó fi jóná mọ́lé?
What is a cat seeking for that it perished in the inferno?

g) **Mélòó**niọ̀kánjúwà máa lá nínú àpò iyọ̀?
How much salt will greedy man leak out of a bag of salt?

h) **Ta**niyóò fi ọ̀bẹ tó nù jẹ̀ṣu?
Who will use the lost knife to peel yam.

i) Bí kò ṣeàkópọ̀, **kí**niewúré ń wá ní isọ̀ ẹ**ẹ**lè?
But for gathering together, what would the goat be looking for at the slot of the pigeon?

j) A ò fẹ́ ọ nílù, ò ń dárin, tí o bá da tán, **tá**niyóò bá ọ gbè?
You are not loved in the community; you are leading a song, after you have led it, who will sing along with you?

k) Ẹnitó bímọ tó sọ́ ní Mákù, **nígbà wo**niMákù kò ní íkú?
A person that has a child and name him Maku, when will he not die?

l) A biọmolánàá ó lóun ò bá waṣiré, **kó** tó dáyé **ńkọ́**?
A child born yesterday says he is not going to play with us, how about before he was born?

m) Ẹnisebẹ̀ẹ̀tẹ́ a ní kí ẹ̀bìtì pá, ẹnitikò sè **ńkọ́**?
Somebody who cooked saltless soup is wished dead how about the one that did not cook anything?

Ọkunrin ń fi ọwọkantúṣòkòtò, ó ń fi ọwọkejìtẹ́ní. Obìnrinníkòrítòunmúgbọ; bí ó báfẹ́rítíẹ́ múgbọ́ńkọ?'
A man is loosing his trousers with one hand and preparing the bed with the other and the woman is complaining that she is not being attended to; what will he do if he wants to attend to him?

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n) A buomilámù rééégún, ẹni tó lọpọnlódò ńkọ́?
The one who scoop water from the water pot says he saw a masquerade, how about the person that went to the river to fetch the water?

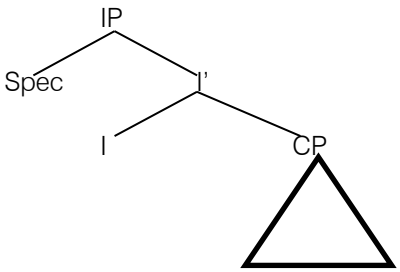
These and very many others are the interrogative proverbs in Yorùbá. Virtually all the interrogative markers that are there in the Yorùbá language are made use of in Yorùbá interrogative proverbs. But not all of those listed in (4) above are used here. It needs to be said that the interrogative markers in Yorùbá are very sensitive to humanness and animateness this informs the reason why ***ta***'who' and ***kí*** 'what' are seen to be used. ***Ta*** 'who' is selected when the questioned entity has the feature [+human] while **kí** 'what' is used when the questioned entity has the feature [±animate].

Certain things are to be noticed and explained in the interrogative proverbs we presented in examples (5a – o) above and many of them that are not presented. The interrogative markers can be at the initial, medial or final positions. For instance, (5e, f, g, h) above have their interrogative markers at the initial position.When the interrogative markers are placed at the initial position, it is the whole structure that is being questioned. In such instances, only one NP actor/agent is always made conspicuous in such a question.

However, when the interrogative marker is at the medial position, it is the concept within the proverb that is being questioned. For example, in (5i), it is the issue of gathering together that is the focus of the question. In (5j) the issue focused for questioning is the act of singing.In (5k) it is the time or period that is the focus of the interrogation. It is also pertinent to note that in interrogative proverbs, the information being sought can relate to human or non-human, location, quantity, quality, when, manner etc.

The examples in (5k, l, m, n) above are instances of proverbs where **ńkọ́** 'how' is used. As we said earlier, the marker always comes at the end of the sentence. There are two markers of this type that are assumed to be syntactically and semantically the same; and that is **dà** 'how/where[3]

Questions are asked to clear doubt and to seek for clarification. That is why questions are answered when asked. But interrogative proverbs can in most cases not be answered. In fact, the one who says such proverb does not expect to receive an answer. Such questions are rhetorical. Olúmúyìwá (2012) rightly notes this fact when he says that "…the content word questions demand phrasal or clausal answers. However, this is not so with Yorùbá interrogative proverbs. Thus, the question in each Yorùbá interrogative proverbs has important rhetorical dimensions. The question is asked for a purpose other than to obtain information." However, as valid as Olumuyiwa's assertion is, we want to posit that interrogative proverbs go beyond mere rhetorical. Such proverbs showthat the world itself is full of mysteries and that questions that are begging for answers abound in the world. This is the import these types of proverbs are trying to bring to the fore. Hence the proverb "*Ayé lòkun, èníyànlọ́sà, ẹ̀dá tí Olúwabá là lọ̀ lè kayé já*meaning "the world is an ocean it is only those guided by the Lord that can swim across to the shore."aptly confirms the mysteries that are in the world. The configurational tree below captures the structure of interrogative proverbs.



o) Focus construction structure type proverbs

Apart from the foregoing syntactic devices that we have noted and have discussed so far, there are still some other syntactic devices employed in Yorùbá proverbs. Focus construction is another device noticed in Yorùbá proverbs. Jones (2006:143) defines focus as "a grammatical means of marking the organisation of information in discourse." She goes further to say that focusing "divides sentences into a focus and an open proposition corresponding to background information."Another phenomenon that looks like focusing is topicalisation. Focusing and topicalisation are two grammatical phenomena that are similar. They are similar in that the two involve movement. However, while focusing is a syntactic device that foregrounds new information or the new material that contains such information in a sentence, topicalisation foregrounds old information (cf. Oyelaran 1990:2). The examples below are proverbs that have the structure related to focusing.

a) Ilé ni à ń wò kí á tó sọmọlórúkọ.
The circumstances dictate what name a child will bear

b) Fìlà niobìrin, ẹni tó bá wọ́ lórí niyóò de.
Women are like caps, it is he that it fits that wears it.

c) GbogboènìyànniAdéwùmí ń wù, Ọlọ́runọbanníí sọniní Adéyẹmí
Everybody loves to wear a crown but it is only God that crowns a person.
Ìṣẹ́ ni à ń ṣekí á tó jàreòṣì
We work in order to avert poverty.

d) Ilé ni a ti ń kó ẹ̀sọ́ ròde
Charity begins at home

[3] See Akanbi (2012) for his argument on the syntactic and semantic difference of these two markers.

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In these examples, the focused NP is moved from a particular position in the sentence to the initial position. The reason for this movement is to show the

The question to be asked on the various item in the utterance. Therefore, he focused that item for emphasis. In doing this, he will be able to drive home his point to his audience. Not only this, his audience will be able to recognise the import of the item focused in the speech of the one saying the proverb.

e) Relative clause constructionproverbs

In relative clause construction proverbs, like its focus construction counterpart, move-α rule is normally made use of. These two types of constructions resemble each other in that it is the NP in the two constructions that are moved to Spec CP. But they are different in that while focus construction uses *ni* as the marker, relative construction uses *tí* as its marker. The noun or clause relativsed is normally moved from some point in the lower clause to the Spec CP of the matrix clause. The lower clause will then serve as a modifier for the noun or the clause that is moved. The proverbs in (8a – e) are examples of relative clause construction type proverbs.

a) Ijó tí ó bá ká nilárani à ń ṣuẹ̀ṣẹ́ jó
A dance that interests is danced with fisted hands.
b) Ibití wọ́nbá gbé iyọ̀ sí ibẹ̀ ní í sẹmí í sí.
Wherever salt is put, it melts there.
c) Ikú tí ó pa ẹlẹ́wù ẹtù, òunniyóò pa ẹnití ó jogun ẹ̀wù ẹtù.
The death that killed the wise is coming to kill the foolish.
d) Kòkòrò tí ń jobì inú obì ló wà.
The insect that destroys kola nut resides in it.
e) Kòkòrò tí ń jẹ̀fọ́ jàreẹ̀fọ́, ìwọnlewéko ń dáramọ.
The attraction of the vegetable calls for its destruction by insects.

The proverbs listed in (8a - e) above, and some like them, are relative clause construction type proverbs. Like the focus construction type ones, the NPs at the initial positions of the sentences are moved from somewhere in the sentences. It means then that the positions where the NPs are placed are the landing sites. Like the focus construction counterpart of relativisation, the elements so moved are for emphases. A kind of premium is placed on such item for proper identification. But unlike focus construction, the aspect relativized cannot be meaningful except it derives its meaning from the totality of the sentence; whereas, in focus construction, the element focused can be meaningful on its own. We will take one example from each of these structural types of proverbs for proper understanding of this observation.

a) **Fìlà niobìrin**, ẹni tó bá wọ́ lórí niyóò de. (7b)
Women are like caps, it is he that it fits that wears it.
b) **Kòkòrò tí ń jobìinú obì ló wà.** (8e)
The insect that destroys kola nut resides in it.

In the examples above, (9a) is a focus construction, while (9b) is a relative clause. It is observed that while the bold part of (9a) is meaningful independent of the whole clause, the same thing cannot be said of (9b) where the bold part does carry meaning on its own; it can only derive its meaning from the totality of the structure. This buttresses the fact that focus constructions are IPs while relative clause constructions are NPs (cf.Awobuluyi 1978a, 1978b, 1987,Owolabi 1987, 1989b).

c) Subjunctive clause construction type proverbs

Merrian-Webster Dictionary defines subjunctive as an event "relating to, or constituting a verb form or set of verb forms that represents a denoted act or state not as fact but as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally (as with doubt or desire)." In Yorùbá, subjunctive clauses normally begin with ***bí***. This morpheme is the one consistently used in clauses of such type. The proverbs in (10a – d) below are all subjunctive construction types.

a) Bí ínà òbátánlaṣọẹ̀jẹ̀kìítánlékánná
As long as there are lice on the cloth, the finger nail will not cease have blood.
b) Bíẹ̀bìtì òbápeku, á fẹyìnfẹ́lẹ́yìn
If trap does not kill a rat, it will release the palm kernel to the owner.
c) Bí irọ́bá lọlógúnọdúnọjọ́kanniòtítọ́ ńbá a.
Lie may go for more than twenty years; it takes only a day for the truth to catch up with it.
d) Bía òkú, ìṣe ò tan
When there is life, there is hope.

Subjunctive clauses, in most cases, combine with negation to make a full statement. The negative marker for this type of proverbs is normally **kò** or the shortened form of it /**ò**/. This is why we see in (10a, b, and d) that the final part of these proverbs have negative markers within them. However, it is not all subjunctive clauses that have this attribute of negation marker, some do not (see 10c). But we need to say that majority of the subjunctive clauses exhibit negative marker within their structures.

Subjunctive proverbs normally express what should be the norm, i.e. if *x* is like this, then the outcome will be *y*. However, in some cases, the case may not be so straightforward. There can be another eventuality that may not go by the norm.

IV. The Implication of Syntactic Form of Proverbs

The question to be asked on the various syntactic ways of forming proverbs in Yorùbá is 'what is the implication.' The implication is that the Yorùbá do not just utter proverbs, every proverb that is uttered is

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rule-governed. Just like any other utterance is rule based, so also are the Yorùbá proverbs. Besides this, the Yorùbá proverbs are said in such syntactic manner so as to show the aesthetics of language.There is no doubt that language is not beautiful if it is well used. Therefore, the various syntactic ways by which proverbs in Yorùbá are rendered give a kind of stylistic device to them. If the proverbs are said in a manner that does not follow the syntax of Yorùbá language, it will be difficult for the audience to attach any meaning to such proverbs; because they (the proverbs) may bring out the intended meaning that the user expects to manifest.

V. Conclusion

This paper has revealed the fact that all the proverbs in Yorùbá are rule governed and that proverbs are not just said, they have the structures which they follow. The proverb that the speaker intends to use will dictate which syntactic structure the form will take when it is said. Based on this, we havetherefore divided some of the selected proverbs in the language to various structural types. The proverbs chosen for analysis are just representatives of other proverbs that are in Yorùbá language. There are therefore no special criteria used in selecting those proverbs we have used. We also noted in the paper that in the interrogative proverbs, there is no one rendered within the structure where ***da*** is used as the interrogative marker. We want to posit that the reason for this may not be unconnected with the fact that **dà** as a question marker is used to elicit information on concrete rather than abstract things. It is also said in the paper that the various structures within which Yorùbá proverbs are said bring out the aesthetics of the language.

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