

Research Article

# On Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Yorùbá Deviant Proverbs

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## Abstract

Proverbs are literary philosophical expressions in all languages including Yoruba. They are deployed to smooth communication delivery and also to enrich the intended messages. There are substantial numbers of research on Yoruba proverbs and proverbials. However, the present study examined the lexico-semantic relations between the primeval and certain deviant-constructed Yoruba proverbs, with a view to identifying the elements that define the frame, describe the semantic relations between them and account for the experience associated with the elements that brought the differences into discourse setting. Twenty (20) Yoruba primeval proverbs and their corresponding deviant versions were randomly selected and translated from the source language (SL) to the operational language (OL). The two versions of the proverbs were compared. Areas of differences in the two sets of the proverbs were identified and analyzed using the lens of frame semantics theory. The study discovered that the lexicalized items signaling deviation-frame between the two versions of the proverbs are made possible through relations of synonym, ambiguity, homograph, homonyms, and metonyms while the semantic relations were activated in substitution, paraphrase, and thematic shift. The study attributed the speaker's experience engendering lexico-semantic disparity in the proverbs to the cultural incompetence and contextual equivalent. It is however noted that, the lexico-semantic relations between the primeval proverbs and their variants do not in any way exhibit contrary effects on the meaning and the performative functions of the deviant proverbs. This discovery posits that, unconscious speakers of deviant proverbs take cognizance of pragmatic equivalence rather than textual equivalence so as to make the context of the usage relevant irrespective of lexico- semantic deviations.

## Keywords

Frame Semantics, Proverbs, Equivalence, Deviation, Semantic-relations

## 1. Introduction

Every scholar who has had the opportunity to explain proverbs has done so in line with their observation on proverbs' syntactic structures (forms), texture orientation and philosophical inclination (relevance), and its pragmatic role in communication (functions). Yankah (2012) considers proverbs as the broth of speech [1]. They are considered as elements that enhance and facilitate understanding in discourse. Proverbs are likened to salt in soup, despite its sparing usage; it preserves taste of the soup in the mouth. It is believed that

skillful and ingenious use of proverbs deepens the meaning of what is being communicated. As a literary genre, proverbs involve use of language, and fundamental role in shaping personal and social interpersonal relationship is significant. Thompson (1989: 120) corroborates this view, saying:

“In most cases, proverbs in African societies are the string which fastens their literature together since none of their genres can be said to be bereft of suitable proverbs in their contextual arrangements and presentations. They are more or

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less the base of all literature [2]”.

Essentially, Thompson’s view underscores the fundamental importance and the invaluable role of proverbs in the structural representation of most of Yorùbá genres, as proverbs enhance concise and contextual understanding of the semantic proposition within these genres. This is exemplified by the following excerpt from a children’s poem by J. F. Oduńjo (1982):

“Tẹ́tí kí ó gbọ́ ọ̀rẹ́ mi  
Ìwà rere lẹ́sọ̀ ẹ̀niyàn  
Bí a bí ọ̀ nílẹ́ ọ̀lá  
Bí o sì fa wàrà ọ̀rọ̀ mu dàgbà.....[3]”.

‘Listen and hear, my friend  
Good moral is a virtue  
Even you are born with a silver spoon  
Even if you drink from a pool of wealth.....’

The proposition in line 2 of the above excerpt epitomizes proverb that emphasizes a good moral. This simple construction supports the revered claim in the literature that Yoruba people so endear the use of proverbs so highly that, in conversation, at least one in every two-three statements is often a proverb.

### 1.1. Functions of Yoruba Proverbs

The multifaceted functions of proverbs are established in the Yoruba proverbial expression-“Proverb is told to a wise, but if told to a fool, it only cause discomfort”. This statement stresses that proverbs reference culturally grounded experience and convey truth conditions of statements. It posits that Yoruba proverbs (hereafter: YPs) are derived from social happenings and lived experiences in and around people. Their content are drawn from diverse aspect of life, including interaction between human and human (H-H), human and animal (H-A), object-human (O-H), human-climate (H-C), as well as other interpersonal relationships. Most importantly, it is from these potential sources that proverbs actually reflect societal norms and values, making them an integral aspect of Yoruba culture.

Proverbs perform all-around social function, including hinting, concealing meaning, embellishing speech, and expressing universal truths and worldviews. In Yorùbá context, a single proverb performs more than one functions and purposes. For instance, the maxim- ‘a strong one without thoughtfulness fathers lethargy’ is used to encourage virtue of focus and proper planning. It also illustrates relationship between handwork and success, emphasizing that hard work without a proper calculation may not yield any meaningful outcome. Thus, uncalculated effort may leads to futility. Having adequate knowledge of YPs and a clear understanding of their meanings equips individual with essential acumen for achieving success across various domains, including communication, economy, empowerment, and management in contemporary society. This last view reinforces belief that proverbs are a veritable mine of knowledge, wisdom, and

insight essential for navigating life effectively. Above all, it is imperative to note that the usage of proverb must align with the context and match the speaker’s communicative intent.

### 1.2. Controversy on Source of Yoruba Proverbs

Opinions are polarized regarding the elasticity and adaptability of proverbs over time. Some argue that proverbs echo both past and present realities, emphasizing that not all YPs are realization of past generations; many of proverbs arise from daily interactions during interpersonal relations. However, Adekeye (2000) holds that “proverbs are handed down from generation to generation [4]”, meaning; they are untouched by external influences. She cautions that any attempt to modify proverbs risks eroding their profound meanings and diminishing their relevance. While this assertion appears valid, however recent trends in YPs have shown that there have been different versions of primeval YPs as evident in samples below:

Old-age version: *Igi gogoro mà gún mi lójú, àtòkèrè là á tii wò ó*

[For a sharp tree not to pierce my eye, we examine it from the top]

Deviant version: *Igi gogoro mà gún mi lójú, màá dọ̀q̀jì ẹ̀ ni*  
[For a sharp tree not to pierce my eyes, I shall dodge it]

Considering both the syntactic and the semantic inputs of the above proverbs, we can see that the sample of the old-age YP has undergone change, in such that its second half part has been rephrased in producing the deviant version. In views of Atanda & Oloruntoba-oju (2023); Faturoti (2011 & 2021); Adebowo & Balogun (2015); and Raji-Oyelade (1999 & 2012), this evolutionary discovery could be attributed to factors such as modernization, punning, societal shift, cultural dynamics, and language evolution [5-10]. Raji-Oyelade’s (2012) observation on proliferation of modernist proverbs summaries this phenomenon, she says:

The emergency of postproverbials in contemporary Yoruba society is undoubtedly the effect of the interplay of orality and literacy-modernity, the critical correspondence between an older puritanity, a younger disruptive, and somewhat banalistic generation [10].

This submission highlights the impact of the modernity or linguistic and cultural diversity on the cultural understanding of native speaker and their awareness of the context-bound intricacies associated with language use and communication.

### 1.3. Yoruba Proverb Typology

Based on the syntactic and morphological inputs, the data for the study indicated that YPs can be categorized into broader groups. Proverbs can either be presented in their indigenous or natural root structure or an ancient-deviant structured forms namely:

1. The primeval or ancient proverbs
2. The ancient deviant-structured proverbs

3. The ancient- modern inflected proverbs.
4. The scope of this study is on the examination of:
5. The primeval or ancient proverbs
6. The ancient deviant-structured proverbs

### 1.3.1. The Yoruba Primeval Proverbs

The primeval proverbs are set of proverbial expressions that embody wisdom, worldviews, and cultural-bound practices of our forefather. These proverbs are believed to have existed since time immemorial and have been passed down through generations without modification. By that stance,

they reflect indigenous thoughts and beliefs of the past, before the advent of modern innovations and technologies. These proverbs are always presented in their raw forms, meaning they are regarded as the authentic expressions of traditional wisdom. Their popularity lies in their unaltered syntactic structure, ensuring that they remain faithful and complacent to their original thematic and communicative contextual references. They are used in alignment with the situation they describe. Samples of Yoruba primeval proverbs are provided in [table 1](#) below:

*Table 1. Yoruba primeval Proverbs.*

Proverbs	Literal Translation	Literary meaning
Bá mí na ọmọ mí kò dénú ọlómọ	Flog my child for me is not from the bottom of mother's heart	One who requests the assistance of another person to flog his child on his/her behalf does not truly mean it.
À pè é lówè, ó n láááro nínú	We call it ọwè, it is becoming 'ááró'	A thing earlier considered simple can suddenly become complex. What one has control over is limited.
Èkúrọ́ lalábàákú ẹwà	Weaves and beans are lovers	A way of expressing how someone or thing is precious to another.
Ẹni mojú ògún ní í da obì nírè	It is one who familiar with god of thunder that breaks kolanut in his shrine	Only one who is experienced on an issue should be allowed to handle it.
Ẹni ijà ò bá ní í pera rẹ̀ lókúnrin	It is one who has not experienced a trial that claims of being a man.	Nobody is above trial.

The above samples of YPs require indigenous-bound knowledge for easy comprehension and proper interpretation. Only individuality with extensive familiarity with the Yoruba language, culture, and practices can effectively grasp and discern their structural and contextual meanings.

### 1.3.2. The Yoruba Primeval Deviant-Structured Proverbs

The ancient deviant-structured proverbs exemplified YPs

that have undergone syntactic distortion, particularly in the selection of words that constitute their internal content. Although, they resemble the ancient form, however, certain words have been inadvertently removed or replaced, altering their surface meaning. Raji-Oyelade (2012) and Osabuihien & Oja-David (2018) credited the noted alteration to insufficient knowledge of the lexicon, literature and cultural practices bedrock [10, 11]. Samples of the ancient deviant-structured YPs are presented in [table 2](#) below:

*Table 2. Primeval deviant-structured Yoruba Proverbs.*

Proverbs	Translation	Interpretation
À pè é lówè, ó n lárónínú	We call it ọwè 'a leaf species, it is becoming aró 'colour blue'	A thing earlier considered simple can suddenly become complex.
Èkúrọ́ lalábàákú ẹwà	Palm-kernel is a lover of beauty.	A way of expressing how someone/thing is precious to another.
Ẹni mojú ògun ní í pa obì nírè	It is one who familiar with 'ògún' that spills kolanut in its shrine.	Only a person experienced on an issue should be allowed to handle it.
Kòkòrò tí n jẹ ẹfọ́, nínú ẹfọ́ ní í gbé.	The insect that eats vegetable lives inside the vegetable	The enemy lives within.

The embolden items in table 2 are the incorrect chosen lexical items. They constitute the driving force behind the lexical-semantic difference between the primeval YPs in table 1 and the modified YPs in table 2. Although, the two versions of YPs sound similar, some of their syntactic words convey different meaning. The syntactic reading of the samples in table 2 shows that the words typed in bold are structurally marked substitutes for underlined words of the old proverbial expressions (ii-iv) in table 1. In fact, the sample (iv) of deviant structured in table 2 combines elements from two different expressions:

**Kòkòrò tí ñ jòbì, inú obì níí gbé** [The insect that eats kola lives inside the kola].

*Kòkòrò tí ñ jẹfọ̀ jàrẹ̀ ẹfọ̀, iwọ̀n lewéko dára mọ* [The insect

that eats vegetable is exonerated, the leaves should be consumed in moderation].

As it is evident in tables 1 & 2 above, both the primeval and their deviant-constructed YPs share a similar information structure.

### 1.4. Information Structure of Yoruba Proverbs

The information structure of YPs consists of two sequential units: the topic and the focus. The topic unit serves as the head, providing background idea or context for the conversation, while the focus unit completes the thought and highlights the vocal point of the discourse, as illustrated in table 3 below.

Table 3. Information structure of Yoruba Proverbs.

Proverbs		Topic unit/Head	Focus unit/Tail
Ancient	<i>Kàkà kékú má jẹ̀ sèsé, á fi sàwàdànù.</i> [Instead of rat not eating beans, it would rather waste it]	Kàkà kékú má jẹ̀ sèsé	Á fi sàwàdànù.
	<i>Bámi namọ̀ mi kò dénú ọlọmọ</i> [One who requests the assistance of another person to flog his child does not truly mean it]	Bá mi namọ̀ mi	Kò dénú ọlọmọ
Modi-fied/Deviant	<i>Irú imú lowo, kò ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fàtu</i> [Money is moustache and it could not be pull off]	Irun imú lowó	kò ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fà tu
	<i>À ñ pé é lówè, ó láró ninú.</i> [We call it òwè, it is turning to aró 'blue colour]	À ñ pé é lówè,	ó láró ninú

Deduction from table 3 suggests that structural arrangement proverb consists of two parts. In this pattern, a few words are compressed to communicate much meaning. As shown in table 3 above, the designated topic unit of the YPs denotes presentational clause. The unit encodes topic of the discussion by providing background information, while the focus unit completes the semantic content of the expressions. This structure reveals that both ancient and the structured-deviant YPs share similar information units but differ in cognitive direction. This particular discovery stresses those information units less significant compare to essentiality of how YPs are used as well as their functional purposes in discourse.

## 2. Previous Studies on Yorùbá Proverbs

Yorùbá proverbs (YPs) have attracted significant scholarly attention from language and literary researchers. Prominent studies include (Osoba 2000, Owomoyela 2005 and Sheba, 2006) focused on anthologies, Ọlatunji (1984) explored features of proverbs and their stylistics elements, Ọjọ (2020) analyzed proverbs from stylistics perspective, while Akanbi (2016) delved into syntax of proverb. Asiyanbi (2023) through proverbs, explored Yoruba socio-environmental

practices whereas Olújìnmí (2012) dealt with communicative functions of Yorùbá proverbs on mundane activities [12-19]. Adéjùmò (2009) described Yoruba faunal proverbs regarding issue of power and authority [20], while Adélékè (2009) interrogated the fundamental importance of proverbs and historiography [21]. Most of these studies, however, have focused predominantly on the ancient type of YPs, with little attention given to the deviant-structured ancient proverbs. Raji-Oyelade (1999 and 2012) contributed to this gap through his exposition on post-proverbial taxonomy and examples [9, 10]. According to Raji-Oyelade, the emergency of post-proverbial expressions can be attributed to the ineptitude or lack of familiarity among young speakers. These speakers often repeat proverbs they have heard differently, either omitting certain words, replacing them with familiar ones, or superimposing of new information. This process results in the transformation of the original proverb, as they discard or alter them completely. This phenomenon is illustrated in the following examples:

Primeval Proverbs: *Ọgèdè dúdú kò yá bú sán, omọburúku kò yá lù pà* [The unripe plantain is not fit for consumption; it is not easy to beat the bad child to death]

Post-proverbial: *Ọgèdè dúdú kò yá bú sán, pupa ló ẹ̀ é díndòdò.* [The unripe plantain is not fit for consumption; only

ripe one is fit for frying]

The two versions of the proverbs above are treated as a pair of rhetorical triumphs, rooted in the same tradition and related by the condition of neo-competence. The study also noted that most proverbial statements exhibit positive and negative categories that yield a network of opposing, similar, contradictory, and congruent permutation, as expressed in ‘unripe plantain is not fit for consumption; only ripe one is fit for frying’. This expression is coined from the primeval version-‘unripe plantain is not fit for consumption; it is not easy to beat the bad child to death’. The two forms of proverbs share a similar clausal head - The unripe plantain is not fit for consumption’, but differ in what constitutes their clausal tail or comment. Semantically, the tail or completing clause of the post-proverbial expression- only ripe one is fit for frying suggests an opposing congruent permutation of the completing clause-‘it is not easy to beat the bad child to death’ of the original proverb. The study concludes by noting that despite of the fact that, post-proverbial statements do have meaning and rooted in traditional proverbs, they invariable express the usual tradition meaning and ineffectively transmit the intellect of tradition wisdom. Thus, they are less poetic and may be seen as artistically blasphemous.

Chiangong, M. P. (2015) reviewed Raji-Oyelade’s study on the ‘Post-proverbial as Archetypes of Modernity Yorùbá Culture’ in 1999 [22]. Her exposition centered on the diverse areas of transformation and intervention permeating African proverbs, specifically regarding their definition, classification, and samples from contemporary discourses such as interpersonal communication, fuji music, and home videos. According to the reviewer, Raji-Oyelade distinguishes between the aesthetic-rhetorical and the cumulative –archival scholarship African proverbs in his book. Faturoti, (2021) explored a different aspect of different aspect of variant of traditional proverb, labeling them as ‘Anachronistic proverbs [7]. This study’s crux is on the potency of the pragmatic reference of anachronistic proverbs in changing worldview. The study debunks the ancestral view regarding the inflexibility and incapability of primeval proverbs to undergo alteration in terms of their semantic propositions. He argues that there are a significant numbers of traditional YPs with lose meaning due to their elasticity in respond to certain contemporary happening. Based on this, some proverbs are currently approaching the realm of anachronism because they have become irrelevance, especially when placed within the context of contemporary discussion. Eight (8) samples of traditional proverbs were examined, interpreted and their meaning discussed in relations to current events. According to this researcher, Yoruba proverbs will continue to be susceptible to change as long as they are actively explored in communication, which is inherently dynamic. Hence, a project could be initiated aimed at identifying, interpreting and analyzing Yorùbá proverbs with the intention of enhancing cultural dynamism and linguistic development.

Adeyemo&Balogun (2015) examined the effect of

sex-related proverbial expressions on the meaning and wisdom of the original proverbs [8]. Fifteen (15) samples of traditional Yorùbá and their sex-related proverbial are analyzed. The study discovered that the post-proverbial variants of the original sex-related proverbs have been distorted to the extent that the sexual images and sexuality are more pronounced and implicitly articulated in post-proverbial than they are in the original variants. The study calls for the awareness of language speakers regarding the alteration and distorted proposition in modern sex-related proverbs. Atanda & Olorunoba-Oju (2023) focused their research on the choice of methodology for the analyzing post-proverbial expressions [5]. They assert that data-gathering technique that is all encompassing and elastic would be effective and efficient in answering any question related to population and samples. Thus, the study suggests empirical approach as the best approach for tacking research on post-proverbials in Yoruba studies. The researchers criticize tendency to treat different examples of Yoruba proverbs under ‘postproverbials’, many of which fall under pseudo-proverbial and para-proverbials.

From the review, one can conclude that the earlier researchers who have studies Yorùbá proverbs and post-proverbials have concentrated significantly on their structure, forms, and samples, significantly from a literary perspective. This study, however, departs from literary analysis and focuses on the linguistic accounts of the lexico-semantic variation between the ancient /primeval proverbs and their analogous syntactic- modified/ variants, with a view to identifying the linguistic framework causing the observed divergence, explore the semantic relationship between the two variants, and the experience that brings the differences into the discourse setting, following frame semantic model. In line with this broad focus, the study interrogates three questions.

## 2.1. Research Questions

1. What are the lexical elements that constitute the deviant frame?
2. What kind of semantic relations activate the lexico-semantic variation between the ancient and the ancient-deviant structured proverbs?
3. To what extent do the experiences that bring the identified semantic relations in (ii) to the discourse setting preserve or affect the contextual function of the proverbs?

We believe that a study on the lexico-semantic analysis of modified/deviant Yoruba proverbs would contribute to the body of knowledge of linguistics and Yoruba cultural studies. It would also provide insight into how language is used to coding everyday experiences. Most importantly, a study on lexical and semantics aspects of proverbs would ensure promotion of language education.

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework: Frame Semantics Theory

Frame semantics is adopted for this study. Frame semantics is a descriptive empirical semantic theory designed by Charles J. Fillmore in 1982 [23]. The theory underlines the fundamental importance of relations between words based on the human background experiences grounded in the contextual usage of the words within the community and the larger world. Hence, rather than emphasizing the semantic feature and truth conditions as standard semantic does, frame semantics focuses on human knowledge gained through various environmental experiences and investigate the frame from which particular word evolve concerning the creation of the category representing the word and the meaning associated with it. The frame encompasses the meaning of word that we have stored and associated with that word and its corresponding category. In Fillmore's words, the frame expresses "any system of concept related in such a way that to understand any of them, we have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all the other things are automatically made available [23]".

This assertion actually stresses fact that, not all elements can occur in a frame, only those that create expectations according to the frame structure can. It further accentuates the importance of selection restriction in the structural "representation of our thought [24]." The whole frame is seen as an abstract, schematic aspects held in readiness if the right words are prompted in adequate combination, but the frame is treated as evoked if the concept pertaining to the network is surprising when introduced into the conversation. Rather than relying on the lexical meaning or lexical semantics of words, frame semantic consider the meaning attached to words based on store experiences and their relation to other words in the same speech community. The frame is seen as "a knowledge system that provides a range of licensed relationship among the attributes describing the event sequence potential of the frame [25]." That is, a word is defined in relation to its underlying frame (attached meaning based on the human experiences or interaction between individual and the large society, rather than in relation to other words). Therefore, it is possible for another construction to slightly modify the frame by adding new information, arguably imposing that we invoke another frame to make sense of the sentence. According to Fillmore (1992), verbs and grammatical structure are frames [26]. To achieve explanation adequacy in frame semantics, it is necessary to identify the elements that define the frame of a concerned word, the relations that exist among the identified elements and the experience associated with those elements or brought by them to the interaction or discourse setting.

## 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative content analysis research. The re-

searcher purposively selected twenty (10) primeval proverbs along with their corresponding deviant set for this study. The content translation of the sampled data was done from the source language (Yorùbá) to operational language (English), followed by contextual and culturally-bound interpretations. The sampled proverbs were segmented into parts denoting their information units. After the segmentation, the observed pattern of differences between the syntactic structures of the two types of the YPs were subjected to lexico-semantic analysis by defining the frame of a concerned words, the relationships between the identified elements, and the thematic variation in their meanings. The data were presented using tables.

## 4. Content Analysis

Generally, in communication, the lexical choice of a speaker constitutes a source of semantic variation between two or more expressions, including YPs. Linguistically, the lexico-semantic relationship between the primeval and deviant-structured YPs is significantly made possible by replacing a word or phrase with other. Replacement as a lexico-semantic relation defines varying degrees of substitution, including synonym, homographs, homophones, and homonyms, metonym, paraphrasing, equivalency, and semantic shift. Thus, the frame of the elements that trigger the differences in the structural representation of YPs, the semantic relations between the structures, and the experience that brings the identified elements to proverbial discourse setting are hereby scrutinized as follows:

### 4.1. Homograph

Homograph is a semantic relation that describes words of same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings [27, 28]. In other words, homographs are words with identical spelling but differing pronunciation and meaning as illustrated in example 1 below:

Old-age/ Ancient: *Dán an wò ló bí iyá òkèrẹ́.* [It is trial that causes squirrel's misfortune]

Deviant Proverb: *Dán an wò ló bí iyá òkèrẹ́.* [It is trial that gives birth to the Squirrel's mother]

Literary Interpretation: [If one set forth in a difficult event, one may possibly gets entangled by creating other problems for one self]

Embolden words in the expressions above constitute the element of the semantic frame form the structural relation of the old and modified proverbial expressions. Meanwhile, the two affected words share the same spellings but have different pronunciations and meanings. Thus, the semantic relation between these varying words is activated through homographs. The cultural experience that bring these expressions into the forefront alludes to a monkey's trial attempt to cross over many branches of a tree at once, which lead to its entrapment within the tree branches and, consequently, causes it a very

painful experience. This situation does not imply 'the trial attempt made by monkey in jumping between many branches of the tree at one gave birth to its mother'. It is evident that inadequate knowledge about the Yoruba myth on the part of the speaker has led to the misrepresentation of the expected and the original version of the proverb. Near homographic substituted semantic relation is also exemplified in the samples 2-3 below:

Old-age/Ancient: *Ògò tà ògò ò tà, owó aláàárù á pé*

[Whether a log of wood is sold or not, its carrier would surely collect his wages completely]

Deviant: *Ògá tà ògá ò tà, owó aláàárù á pé.*

[Whether the employer/boss makes profit or not, the sale representative would surely receive salary]

Literary Interpretation:

[What will be would always be in all situations].

The words- 'a log of wood' and 'boss' characterize the lexical frame from which the structural difference between the two versions of the proverbs emerged. Both items are noun phrase but with different associative meanings. The choice of 'a log of wood' in the original proverb is being substituted for 'boss' in the deviant form. Propositionally, the choice of 'a log of wood' collocates with 'carrier'; superficially, the element explicitly designates 'someone who renders service of carrying logs of woods from farm to market/a sale point, with the agreement of receiving wages.. In contrast, the relationship between the choice of 'boss/employer' and 'a sale representative' as substitute for 'log of wood' and carrier' occurs at a deeper metaphorical level. Although both engage in the process of exchanging service for money, the context of agreement between each of them and their benefactors differs. Following this background information, one can reasonably say that a semantic hidden or locked up meaning exists within the content proposition of 'Whether the employer/boss makes profit or not, the sale representative would surely receive salary'. The semantic import of 'a load carrier', who does not need to be involved in the sale of goods and, at same time, expects to collect his wages regardless of sale of goods, is equated to the personality of 'a sales representative, who is actually involved in the sale of item and gets paid at the end of the month if they made enough sale. The substitution here, hinges on the semantic relation of partial homographs-the two words suggesting 'log of woods' and 'boss' partially sound alike with different spelling and pronunciation. However, it is essential to reiterate here that homographs is highly content-dependent in distinguish between meanings. Along this view, we can conclude that there is semantic overlap between the two words. That eventually paves way for semantic

transfer between the wood carrier and sale representative, occurring at analogous context to convey similar pragmatic function. A partial homographic relationship occurs in sample of proverbs in 3 below:

Old-age/ Ancient Proverb: *Kí ló rí lóbè tò fi warú sqwó.*

[What is did you see in the soup that made you put locust beans in your hand?]

Deviant form of old Proverb: *Kí lo rí lóbè to fi garu owo.*

[What is did you see in the soup that made you suspend your hand?]

Literary Interpretation [Demanding explanation from someone on why he /she has behaved in an unruly manner. Believing that without a fire, there may not be smoke]

A careful examination of the structural presentation of the proverb samples in (3) above shows that a lexico-semantic relation of homographs is activated between the verbal clause- 'to put locust beans in ones hand' of the old-age proverb and the modifying version- 'to suspend/retract hand abruptly'. These two strings of words define the lexico-semantic frame that constitutes the linguistic substitution in the two proverbial expressions. This syntactic arrangement is made possible by replacing the approximant consonant 'w' with velar voiced consonant 'g' and changing class of word from prepositional phrase to a noun phrase. Having noted these variations, meaning relation between the two words can be considered as near homograph because the elements sound alike, though not all the speech sounds in them are the same. In Yoruba cuisine, locust beans have associative meanings related to soup because they are typically added to enhance the soup flavor. However, when the presence of locust beans in food detracts someone from the enjoyment of the soup, it gives an indication that something unexpected has been discovered. Attempt by those around the incident to get understand of what happened would lead them to ask a metaphorical question- 'what is did you see in the soup that made you put locust beans in your hand'? rather than choose to say- 'what is did you see in soup that made you suspend your hand'? Therefore, we can conclude that cultural inexperience of the speaker of the deviant proverb leads to the lexico-semantic variation between the old-age and the deviant proverbs.

## 4.2. Ambiguity

Ambiguity is lexical-relation, in which words are commonly associated and co-occur more often than would be expected by chance [29]. A relationship of ambiguity is also evident in the samples of YPs. For the sake of clarity, sample 1 is represented in table 4 below:

**Table 4.** Homograph and Ambiguity relationship in Yorùbá Proverbs.

Proverbs		
Old-age/ Ancient	Deviant	Literary Interpretation
<i>Dán an wò ló bí iyá ọ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀.</i> It is trial that causes squirrel’s pain/problem	<i>Dán an wò ló bí iyá ọ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀.</i> ‘It is trial that gives birth to the squirrel’s mother’	If one set forth in a difficult event, one may possibly gets entangled by creating other problems for oneself.

The underlined verb in the old-age proverb is ambiguous and can be interpreted to mean ‘to be born’, to result, or to lead/bring about. We observe that the choice of it along the sense of ‘to be born’ in the deviant/new version of the proverb collocates with ‘mother’ as against ‘pain’ in the old-age proverb. However, if the concerned verb is taken to mean ‘to lead/cause/brings about’, it will also has an associative meaning with the choice of ‘pain’ as oppose to ‘mother’ in the new version of the proverb. Therefore, one could say that, the deviant proverb in [table 4](#) is in homophonic ambiguous semantic relation with its original version.

### 4.3. Synonym

Synonym is an expression of likeness or sameness of meaning. It involves a situation where choice of lexical items expresses same meaning in some or all contexts. In an attempt to contrast the examples of the old-age/ancient proverbs with the structured -modifying ones, we notice that a synonymous semantic relation can also reasonably activate the differing-frame, as demonstrated in example 4 and 5 presented in [table 5](#) below:

**Table 5.** A Synonymous relationship in Yoruba Proverbs.

Proverbs		
Old-age/Ancient	Deviant	Literary Interpretation
4. <i>Kàkà kẹ̀wé àgbọ̀n dẹ̀, líle ló ñ pelesí i.</i> [Rather for the coconut leaves to slacken, it keeps abounding]	<i>Kàkà kẹ̀wé àgbọ̀n rọ̀, líle ló ñ pelesí i.</i> [Rather for the coconut leaves to soften, it keeps toughen]	Instead for an activity to bring expected solution to an issue, it keeps aggravating it.
5. <i>Iṣu atẹ̀numọ̀rọ̀ kì í jóná</i> [The yam of one- who- loves repeating worddoes not burn up]	<i>Iṣu atẹ̀numọ̀ràn kì í jóná.</i> [The yam of one- who- loves repeating issues/ matter does not burn up’]	A continual repetition of an issue keeps such issue afresh in one’s mind.

In the structural representation of the two proverbial statements in 4 of [table 5](#), a synonymous semantic-relation is activated between the two bolded verbs: ‘to become slack’ and ‘to become soft’. The verb ‘to become slack’ has been substituted with ‘to become soft’ in the deviant version. Semantically, the choice of ‘to become soften’ in the deviant version implicitly expands the semantic connotation of the verb ‘to slacken’. This expansion is based on the understanding that while a slack object may not necessarily be soft, a soft object will definitely be loose and have a relaxed weight. Thus, the choice of ‘become soft’ in the variant proverb presupposes ‘slacken’ in the old- age proverb. In this context, one can account for a semantic expansion from the narrow sense of ‘slack’ to the broad meaning ‘soft’ as a matter of inclusiveness. Therefore, a semantic-relation of near synonym is identified between the two words in the context of discourse.

The structural representation of the two versions of the proverbs in sample 5 also reveals semantic deviation in the speaker’s choice of the modifier of the head noun ‘yam’. In the ancient version, we have ‘the yam of one who continually repeats words,’ whereas in the modified version, we have “the yam of one who continually repeats issue/problem’. Within this broad frame, the variation specifically occurs between ‘word’ and ‘problem’. In this example, the item ‘word’ is substituted for ‘/problem/crisis/conflict’. There is a ‘contradiction’ in the semantic composition of the item ‘word’, which may be [-conflict] and ‘problem’, which would always entails [conflict]. The choice of ‘problem’ is a ‘super-ordinate’ term because it co-hyponyms ‘word’ as part of its semantic frames or contextual meaning in other context. This claim is supported by Yoruba psychological belief, which holds that ‘word’ will always precedes any problem /crisis. A similar

scenario is established in samples 6 below:

6. Old-age/Ancient: *Aja tí yòò sọ̀nù kò ní gbọ́ ifẹ̀ ọ̀dẹ̀* [A dog that will go astray will never hear hunter’s whistle]

Deviant: *Ajá tí yòò sọ̀nù kò ní gbọ́ fẹ̀rẹ̀ ọ̀dẹ̀* [A dog that will go astray will never hear hunter’s trumpet]

Literary Interpretation: [One who is bound to perish/lost will never listen to advice]

The binary contrast between the word in bold type in the old proverb ‘an act of whistling and the one in deviant version- ‘flout’ (instrument for achieving whistling) in example 6 above, is activated at the [+ instrument] componentiality. The synonymous relation between them is expressed through metonymy, where instrument used to achieve an act is substituted for the act itself. Contextual semantic reduction of word sense is enabled in the course of replacing ‘an act of whistling’ in the old proverb with ‘flout’ in the deviant form. The two words are near synonyms; despite the similar refer-

ence, they differ in their associative meaning because one represents an action while the other is a noun. The hunter can only have an associative meaning with *an act of whistling*, whereas, other such as farmer, children, and musicians relate with flout. The speaker whistles by squeezing and rounding his/her mouth simultaneously, while he/she blows free air into an external instrument in an attempt to flouting.

#### 4.4. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a relation, in which two or more expressions suggest same meaning [30]. Semantic paraphrasing involves expressing the meaning of written or spoken discourse using different words with a view to marking the idea easier to comprehend, as demonstrated in examples 7 and 8 in table 6 below:

Table 6. Lexico-semantic paraphrasing in Yoruba Proverbs.

Proverb		
Old-age/Ancient	Deviant	Literary Interpretation
7. <i>Irun imú lowó kò ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fàtu.</i> [Money is moustache, it cannot be removed]	<i>Irun imú lowó ó sòrofàtu.</i> [Money is moustache, it is difficult to pull off]	Money is not easy to get by.
8. <i>Bí a ẹ̀ ñ yọ̀sọ̀ nì à ñ yọ̀ gbọ́.</i> [As we silently fart so we silently hear]	<i>Bí a ẹ̀ ñ yọ̀ wí ní a` ñ yọ̀ gbọ́.</i> [As we silently say so we silently heard]	There is no hidden issue under the sun.

A lexical paraphrase manifests between embolden negative clause ‘it cannot be removed’ at the internal constituent of old proverb and affirmative clause- ‘it is difficult to pull off’ found in deviant version. Both elements define the semantic frame of the proverbs under discussion. Although the two phrases suggest a similar meaning, the contrast achieved through paraphrasing brings about semantic reduction from the use of embolden negative clause in the original proverb to negative polarity phrase in the deviant form. The two words are used denotatively in their respective contexts. However, the verb phrase-‘it cannot be pulled out’ categorically implies ‘impossibility’, whereas the substitute- ‘it is difficult to pull off’ in the second version of the proverb expresses ‘possibility but with difficulties. This interpretation indicates that the polarity phrases are in frame of semantic inability despite, their near-similar contextual usage.

As evident in example 8, the embolden verbs ‘to fart’ and ‘say’ are lexical paraphrases of each other. Both contexts are plausible in a communicative space and can be expressed in homogenous context. The application of ‘fart’ is used connotatively and figuratively to mean ‘to hear’/ ‘to aware’ or ‘to inform’ in contrast to literally ‘say’, ‘declare’ or ‘inform’. The

figurative meaning of ‘fart’ in the context of ‘hear’ has been suppressed and reduced to mere literal meaning. Consequently, this usage ensures a sufficient contextual collocation of ‘say’ and ‘hear as oppose to fart and hear.

#### 4.5. Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness is another semantic device through which the structural relation between the old-age and deviant proverbial texts is produced in Yoruba. Meaninglessness occur when the semantic property of words in a given sentence are not compatible in certain ways. This can be equated to a syntactic change, where the semantic structure of the sentence changes despite the fact that the sequence of the lexical items remains the same [31]. In a lexical semantic field, the properties of an item determine the type of words with which it can co-occur. Thus, words co-occur based on compatibility of the compatibility of their semantic properties, indicating that these properties determine which words that can be meaningfully combined [29]. Therefore, selection restriction validates co-occurrence of words for meaningful sense, as the content propositions of sample of deviant proverb 9 in table 7 suggest:

Table 7. Meaninglessness as Semantic Relationship in Yoruba Proverbs

Proverb		
Old-age/ Ancient	Deviant	Literary Interpretation
9 <i>Èni à ò bá nájà là á wò, a kì í fetí sáriwo ojà.</i> [It is the one we haggle with that we face, we do not listen to the market noise]	<i>Èni à ò bá nájà là á wò, a kì í wo ariwo ojà</i> [It is the one we haggle with that we face, we do not face the market noise]	It is good to concentrate on issue that directly concerns us rather than focusing on side attraction.

The principle of selection restriction does not permit the co-occurrence of ‘noise’ with the verb ‘see’, rather, the word ‘noise’ can only collocate with ‘listen to’ because noise is to be heard through ear, not to be seeing through eyes. Hence, we can say that the choice of the item ‘see’ in the new version rendered the expression meaningless. A semantic incongruity, (as a result of syntactic change), can also be said to have been activated, thereby rendering the expression meaningless. In other words, the semantic input of ‘see’ could be said to have accounts for the meaninglessness of the new version of the

proverb.

#### 4.6. Semantic / Thematic Shift

In a thematic shift, an established topic or focus of discussion is moved to a more super-ordinate topic. Example of this lexico-semantic relationship is noted in YPs when the content meaning of an established functional variable is changed or replaced by another one entirely, as illustrated by the proverbs expressions in table 8.

Table 8. Thematic shift between Yoruba Proverbial Expressions

Proverb		
Old-age/ Ancient	Deviant	Literary Interpretation
10 <i>Èké dáyé, ásà dápòmù.</i> [Modernity becomes order of the day, snuff is found in ‘Apòmù’]	<i>Èké dáyé, Áásà dápòmù.</i> [Modernity becomes order of the day, snuff has turned to concoction]	World is full of unbelievable.

The verb phrase in bold type - ‘snuffs found in Apòmù town under the old-age proverb relays Yoruba history regarding the communal wars between the Apòmù community and its neighboring villages, while embolden phrase-‘tobaccos turns to concoction’ under deviant proverb expresses the modern use of tobacco. The shift occurs between ‘name of a place and act of doing/using something. In the old proverb, we see name of a specific location, where tobacco is newly found, whereas the deviant expression conveys how tobacco is being currently used as drink/ mixture by today’s youth. The deviant version expresses contemporary experiences in contrast to a culturally alluded idea regarding production and availability of tobacco in an unexpected location. This shift pointed out that the initial theme of the discussion has changed to a contextually different topic.

### 5. Discussion of Findings

The data analysis reveals that traditional Yoruba proverbs have undergone change and alteration, with new version

emerging unconsciously. As a result, there now existing different set of proverbs, each with its own semantic content and relevance, yet perform similar contextual and pragmatic functions. Structurally, all the examined proverbs display a consistent information structure of topic-focus relationship. In exploring alternative expressions within the same semantic frame as those found in old-age proverbs, frame semantic offers parallel possibilities through the choice of lexical items within the same semantic range. For instance, we analyzed the contexts where the choice of elements such as *mother, flout, boss* occupy similar contextual position and serve as substitutes for ‘a log of wood, pain, and act of whistling’ in examples (1, 2 & 6) This lexico-semantic substitution is achieved through relation of homonyms. Instead of directly substituting original proverbs with near homonymic word involving semantic transfer, some original proverbs have been paraphrased, reducing their core meaning. An example of paraphrased relation is shown in table 6 where ‘it cannot be removed’ and ‘fart’ are rephrased as ‘it is difficult to pull off’ and ‘say’ respectively. Here, the speaker of the modified version of YPs has diluted the original communicative intent, rendering

it closer to everyday language for easier comprehension. Although, semantic equivalence may be established between the old-age and modified versions, the communicative impact of the original proverbs is often to mere sarcasm or wit, as seen in ‘The orange fruit brings sufferings to its mother’ and ‘The palm kernel and beauty are best friend’ are modern variants of: ‘The fruit of *oṣè* causes its mother’s suffering’ and ‘Weevils dies with beans’ respectively.

It is also observed that the deviant version of YPs often shift focus from the original topic to a super-ordinate theme, resulting in a thematic shift between the two versions. In some cases, the content of the original proverb is replaced entirely in the new version, creating a distinct difference in meaning. This semantic shift is evident in examples (1, 2, and 10). However, the difference is not always immediately noticeable to speaker and the listeners, because of the pragmatic equivalency that could be inferred in the two versions, as seen in texts (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8& 9). Thus, the lexico-semantic relation between the traditional and the deviant Yoruba structured involves various elements, including homophones, homographs, synonyms, metonyms, super-ordinate, collocation, paraphrase, meaninglessness, and thematic shift.

Rather than focusing on relational nuances in the chosen word or the pragmatic force of expression, speaker of the deviant proverbs prioritize syntactic and semantic equivalence. This approach stems from their reliance on semantic synonyms, with less regard for subtle variations in meaning or functionality alignment within a context-driven discourse. To these speakers, synonymy is not perceived as a barrier to communication, provided the listener shares speaker’s background knowledge and can link the expression to the situational context. In essence, the emergence of deviant proverbs sometimes involves a deliberate substitution of traditional experiences with modern-day ones, reflecting the dynamic nature of Yoruba language and culture.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has examined the lexico-semantic relationship between old-age Yoruba proverbs and their modern deviant type. The motivation behind the new deviant version of the YPs appears to be ascribed to the need to suppress and simplify the figurative meaning of the ancient wisdom for better mutual intelligibility among a broader audience. Observation on the usage of proverbs reveals that the current alterations experiencing in the structure of YPs pose challenges for non-speakers and young Yoruba speakers who lack deep familiarity with the language and cultural practices, making it difficult for them to grasp the nuanced shift in meaning. However, when these deviant expressions are used in the presence of elders, they are often corrected, as the elders are expected to recognize such anomalies and guide the speaker toward proper usage.

## Abbreviation

YPs Yoruba Proverbs

## Author Contributions

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