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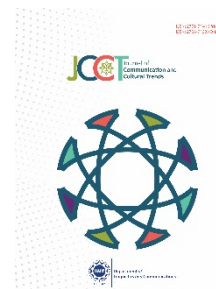
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The Structure and Communicative Import of Selected Proverbs in Nzema Language and Culture

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Abstract

Adopting an Ethno-pragmatics framework, the current study aims to describe the sentential structures and communicative imports of selected proverbs in Nzema, a Kwa language of Ghana, West Africa. Using data obtained from primary and secondary sources, this study identifies the structural properties of the proverbs by further highlighting structures which contribute to the pragmatic interpretations of these proverbs. The findings revealed that structural properties such as conditional constructions, causative constructions, focus constructions, and simple, compound, and complex-embedded sentences are prevalent in the syntactic manifestation of Nzema proverbs; which make affirmative and negative propositions. Hence, it was observed that these structural features have a significant contribution to determining the pragmatic import of these proverbs, based on the Nzema social norms, values, beliefs, experiences, and cultural worldview. This research also underscores existing postulations that proverbs are ‘multi-layered’ in terms of their interpretations, and they rely heavily on metaphoric representations and contextual use in any situation. Additionally, it was also noted that the oral construction of proverbs in Nzema is grammatically insightful; and thus, provides a window to the syntactic description of the Nzema language.

Keywords: communication, Nzema proverbs, pragmatic imports, sentential structures

Introduction

Nzema is a Kwa language spoken in the South-west part of the Western Region of Ghana. The speakers of this region are also called ‘Nzema’. The land of Nzema is bordered by Ivory Coast (also known as the La Cote d’Ivoire to the West, by the Ahanta to the East, by Aowin (or Anyi) and Wassa to the North and by the Gulf of Guinea to the South (Kwesi, 1992). The language forms part of the Volta-Comoe (or Southern Bia) language of

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the Niger-Congo language Phylum. Nzema consists of five dialects namely; Dwɔmɔlɔ, Ɛlɛmgbɛlɛ, Ɛvalɔɛ, Adwɔmɔlɔ, and Egila. Among these dialects, the Dwɔmɔlɔ variant has been standardised for literacy, which is studied from the basic/primary to the tertiary level of education in Ghana. As part of its grammatical properties, the language has the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order of sentence structure. The basic syllable structure of Nzema is V, CV, and N; where N represents a syllabic nasal (Annan, [1980](#)).

Across cultures, proverbs are deemed as wise sayings created (composed) with the incorporation of features of creatures within the ecosystem. Proverbs deal with mountains, rivers, rocks, wind, fire, animals, and plants imagery in conveying their moral and didactic messages. These creatures prevail in the proverbs for a significant communicative purpose according to idiosyncratic cultures. Among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, proverbs are often employed in public discourse, in a mature manner to demonstrate a speaker's level of cultural knowledge and communicative competence (Yankah, [1995](#)).

Many scholars have shared their views regarding proverbs, which are characterised by essential qualities such as brevity and pithiness, wittiness and cleverness (Dipio, [2019](#)). Some researchers have also described proverbs by emphasising their structural properties among other things. For instance, Finnegan ([1970](#)) defined proverbs as a body of short statements built up over the years, which reflect the thought and insights of a people. Owomoyela ([1979](#)), in a similar sense, described proverbs as short, but witty statements, which convey basic truth deduced from careful observation of the life of a people. A proverb is a short pithy, generally a known sentence of the folk that has embedded in it, wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in metaphorical presentations (Mieder, [1990](#)). Mbiti ([1995](#)) observed that the language of proverbs has a rich vocabulary of words, phrases, combinations of words, pictures, allusions, comparisons, and symbols. Proverbs, according to Mensah ([2010](#)), “are morpho-syntactic constructions of different kinds, structures and functions with their unique grammatical peculiarities”. Furthermore, he proffered that, proverbs are constructed with words that exist in a language, which are strung up to form larger grammatical units like phrases, clauses, and sentences.

Emphasizing the role of grammatical features in the structure of proverbs, MacCoinnigh ([2014](#)) also posited, “structural elements are amongst the most universal and easily identifiable proverbial markers and

feature with high frequencies across world languages”. MacCoinnigh’s claim suggests that, cross-linguistically, proverbs are made up of linguistic elements, which serve as markers for one to easily notice and identify an utterance as either proverbial or non-proverbial. As Yuka (2016) rightly stated, “proverbs are linguistic devices employed in conversations to achieve specific communication goals that commonplace phrasal computation in the language cannot attain”. From a pragmatic perspective, proverbs are noted for conveying several interpretations, which transcend the meaning of the words that are used to construct them. Adesina (2015), Hallen (2000), Moshood (2016), and Yankah (1989) all agree that effective use of proverbs in any socio-cultural setting is dependent on the appropriate context of communication. Ramirez (2015) also perceived the proverb as an interesting piece of popular wisdom and tradition used by members of a culture, which help them to foreground their shared beliefs and values. Proverbs play a crucial function in communicative contexts and have become a significant element and linguistic resource quoted by speakers in most discourse situations, especially in Africa. As posited by Adesina (2015), “proverbs are so deeply rooted in African culture so much that almost everybody who knows how to speak his/her indigenous language is a living carrier of proverbs”. The people of Nzema, as part of their oral tradition, also recognise the proverb genre, and for that matter resort to proverbs in almost every discourse interaction for the purpose of ‘beautifying’ the speech and for the achievement of effective rhetoric tasks (Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018; Yakub, 2019).

For example, in entreating a less privileged person to be hopeful and confident in life, the Nzema often employ a proverb that reads as follows: *nane mɔɔ enle duale la Nyamenle a hoho ɔ nwo a* ‘it is God who protects the tailless animal from flies and predators’. Metaphorically, ‘tailless animal’ as used in the proverb represents the vulnerable, handicapped or indigent in the society who need to be supported by people who are wealthy. Indeed, this proverb is an encouragement for the vulnerable that ‘God intervenes in matters concerning the poor’. The Igbo of Nigeria also rely on the expression below to inculcate the virtue of hard work, as they say “*ngana kpuchié ákwa, ágiú ékpughé ya*” ‘when a lazy man covers himself with cloth, hunger uncovers him’ (Nwankwo, 2015). These examples, among others, underpin the fact that proverbs perform didactic functions, serving as a guide to conduct. Dogbey and Sapaty (2019) also shared this

similar view, as they aver, “the totality of law and order are enshrined in proverbs”.

Taking insights from the foregoing notions of proverbs, one could observe that proverbs deal with specific grammatical features, which are generally constructed in simple or complex sentences, based on the grammatical properties of a given language. Therefore, the concern of the current paper is to explore Nzema proverbs from a structural-pragmatic perspective. Moreover, the study hypothesizes that these proverbial structures consist of grammatical features of the Nzema language, which can contribute to their pragmatic interpretations.

Research Objectives

The current study aims to look into certain research objectives:

1. To examine the structural properties of the Nzema proverbs
2. To discuss how these syntactic structures contribute to the proverbial interpretations

Research Questions

1. What are the structural properties of Nzema proverbs?
2. How do the structural properties of proverbs contribute to their ethno-pragmatic interpretations?

The current paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a cross linguistic/cultural overview of previous studies on proverbs. Section 3 gives an overview of the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis of data. Section 4 looks at the source of data and methodology employed for this paper, whereas section 5 presents a critical discussion of the data. Lastly, section 6 concludes the overall study.

Related Literature

Across languages and different cultures, literature on proverbs abounds. Some of the previous works have focused on the structural description of proverbs, while others have concentrated on the communicative content of proverbs among others. For instance, in an M.Phil. thesis, which explored the pragmatics of Akan proverbs in the contemporary Radio and Television discussions in Ghana, Wiaffe-Akenten ([2009](#)) discussed the sentential patterns of proverbs among the Akan people. The author noted that some of

the proverbs could be truncated, though they communicate effectively in their ‘shortened’ forms. For instance, the proverb *Ohuruie tare akyekyede akyi a otare ho kwa* ‘when/if a gnat settles at the back of a tortoise, it lives there for nothing’ is truncated as *akyekyede akyi* ‘the back (shell) of a tortoise’; which is the name of a particular clothe in Akan culture. This proverb implies that external conspirators cannot harm a person who is protected (armed). The study revealed other proverbial structures, such as, compound and complex-relative clause constructions, as in *Abɔfra bɔ nwa na ɔmmɔ akyekyede* ‘a child breaks the shell of a snail but (he/she) does not break the shell of a tortoise’ and *Abaa a yede bɔɔ Takyi no, yede bebɔ Baa* ‘the rod that is used to beat *Takyi* is equally used to beat *Baa*’, respectively. Wiafe-Akenten’s work is similar to the current paper from syntax-pragmatics perspective, and thus provided immense assistance to our data analysis.

Investigating the structure, style and uses of Dagaaba proverbs, Dorzie (2013) discussed sources of Dagaaba proverbs, etiquettes that go with the use of proverbs as well as the communicative relevance of proverbs. He opined that proverbs are used by the Dagaaba to express an internal truth and serve as a guide to conduct, used to warn against the foolish acts. With regard to the structural properties of Dagaaba proverbs, the author identified simple negative sentences, contrast propositions, double propositions and rhetorical questions. Dorzie’s work, though exciting and contributed to studies on proverbs, lacks adequate data for convincing analysis at the sentential level. His analysis was geared mainly towards the sociocultural uses of proverbs, resulting in limited attention to the structural analysis. Specifically, there was no mention of complex sentence structure in Dagaaba proverbs. This is evident in his claim ‘there are other forms of structures which are not discussed in this paper’ (Dorzie, 2013). Dorzie’s work, therefore, provides a scholarly motivation, which validates the essence of this study.

Adopting the framework of Principles and Parameters, Akanbi (2015) used the X-bar syntax in the analysis of Yoruba proverbs at the sentential level. In his analysis, Akanbi discussed the structure of Yoruba proverbs under negative constructions, interrogative constructions, relative clause constructions, focus, and subjunctive clause constructions. The author observed that Yoruba proverbs are predominantly complex sentences; hardly would a Yoruba proverb manifest in a simple sentence structure

(Akanbi, [2015](#)). This position attracts attention for further studies on the structure of proverbs in the Nzema language and culture. Akanbi's work, to some extent, has a resemblance with the current study at sentential (structural) level of analysis; however, the current study seeks to incorporate the pragmatic interpretations of the selected proverbs.

In a 'Discourse-Structural Analysis of Yoruba Proverbs in Interaction', Ehineni ([2016](#)) obtained data through interviews and from native Yoruba texts and examined Yoruba proverbs from functional and formal perspectives. Discussing the structural features of the proverbs, Ehineni noted that proverbs at the sentential level comprise elliptical constructions, substitution, and compound sentences. In the analysis and discussions, the author remained quiet over simple sentence structures as to whether they are prevalent or not in Yoruba proverbs. This seems to underscore Akanbi's ([2015](#)) observation that there seems to be no Yoruba proverb that is of simple sentence in its structure; virtually all proverbs in the Yoruba language are of complex sentences (see Akanbi, [2015](#)). In the analysis, Ehineni did not concentrate solely on the structural features of proverbs in Yoruba. The incorporation of the discourse significance of proverbs also makes his study partly analogous to our discussion of Nzema proverbs, and therefore, provides great assistance to our analysis.

Yuka ([2016](#)) also investigated the structural uniqueness of Lamnso proverbs. The author's approach towards the structural analysis of proverbs was drawn largely from the computational assumptions of Chomsky's ([1995](#)) Minimalist Programme (MP), which specified the cheapest ways of satisfying potentially universal properties of grammatical structures. Yuka observed that Lamnso proverbs are usually short sentences, which tend to be very economical with lexical unit; hence, we find Yuka's adoption of Chomsky's ([1995](#)) Minimalist Programme appropriate for his study. The study is based on a sound methodology with adequate data, where the author discussed the structure of Lamnso proverbs under simple declarative statements, comparative proverbs, serial verb constructions, and structural parallelism. Yuka's study, though provides a significant contribution, lacks information as to whether 'complex-embedded' clauses do occur in the sentential structure of Lamnso proverbs. Conversely, this is one of the structural elements that the current study identified in the sentential properties of Nzema proverbs.

Agyekum (2017) undertook a study of the Ethno-semantic and proverbs of *ohia* ‘poverty’ in Akan. In the analysis, the author discussed the socio-cultural concept of poverty among the Akan from the syntactic point of view such as; conditional clauses, use of causative marker *ma* ‘let cause’, and the use of the copular verb *yɛ* ‘to be’. The author pointed out that, Akan proverbs concerning poverty that are constructed in a conditional clause type are marked by the split conjunction (*sɛ*)....*a*, which can denote the concept of conditionality (if) and temporality (when); that are expressed by identical lexical syntactic forms in Akan. The first part (*sɛ*), is optional, and could be omitted, but the particle....*a*, is obligatory, which is always followed by a comma to indicate the clause boundary between the subordinate conditional clause and the main clause (Agyekum, 2017).

The following examples surfaced in his data analysis: (*Sɛ*) *ehia buroni a, ɔsan epo* ‘if the white man becomes poor, he crosses the ocean’, (*Sɛ*) *ohia ka wo a, na woayɛ mmɔbɔ* ‘when you are afflicted by poverty, you become miserable’. Some Akan proverbs on poverty have the causative marker *ma* to imply that poverty causes one to fall into some unpleasant situations. The author further noted that most of the causative sentences in the proverbs employ the focus marker *na* ‘it is’, which implies that *ohia* ‘poverty’ is exclusive to cause the situation inherent in the proverb. As Agyekum’s study revealed, Akan poverty-related proverbs manifest as causative and focus constructions, such as *Ohia na ɛma ɔdehyɛɛ dane akoo* ‘it is poverty that makes the royal become a servant’, and *Ohia na ɛma ohiani tɔn ne nyansa ma osikani* ‘it is poverty that makes the poor person sell his/her wisdom to the rich’. The copular verb *yɛ* ‘to be’ is also used in the construction of some Akan proverbs related to poverty. Agyekum observed that the link between poverty and the negative attribute is realised using the copular verb *yɛ* ‘is’. He noted that the metaphor implies that poverty has all the semantic attributes that come after the copula verb; *X yɛ Y*. The following are some examples of proverbs in the copular (or stative) verb structure, per Agyekum’s data analysis: *Ohia yɛ adammɔ* ‘poverty is madness’, *Ohia yɛ animguaseɛ* ‘poverty is a disgrace’. Agyekum comprehensively discussed the concept of poverty among the people of Akan as portrayed in their proverbs.

The foregoing works are a significant contribution to the study of the structural features of proverbs. The Nzema data further presented interesting insights into the phenomenon, shedding more light on how these

sentential structures can inform the pragmatic inferences of the proverbs. Crucially, the current paper tries to deepen our understanding of the structural patterns and pragmatic import of Nzema proverbs, and to extend the frontiers of the existing literature on ‘paremiology’.

Theoretical Framework

The current paper employed Cliff Goddard’s (2006) Ethno-pragmatic Paradigm, which focused on understanding discourse from the point of view of specific cultural perceptions, linguistic choices and communicative practices that are best conceived by a particular cultural group. Goddard (2006) observed that though pragmatic ‘universalist’ has gained dominance over the years, a new pragmatic paradigm, which he calls ‘Ethno-pragmatics’, has also remained significant in dealing with culture-specific discourse interpretations. The basic assumption of Ethno-pragmatics is that speech practices are best understood from a culture-insider perspective. In the view of Sharifian (2015), Ethno-pragmatics refers to explanations of speech practices, which begin with culture-internal ideas, i.e., with the shared values, norms, priorities, and assumptions of the speakers, rather than any presumed universals of pragmatics. Though culture is perceived to be a universal phenomenon, every cultural group is believed to have certain peculiar Ethno-pragmatic concepts based on socio-cultural worldview and experiences, which enable them to better, understand their speech practices (Goddard, 2006).

Ethno-pragmatics describes and explains people’s way of speaking which makes sense to them in terms of indigenous cultural perceptions, values, beliefs, emotions, and social categories (Agyekum, 2019; Goddard, 2006; Goddard; Ye, 2015). In other words, any ‘outside member’ who may not actually have a fair knowledge of a particular culture in terms of their values, beliefs, morals, and general worldview including their linguistic patterns would find it difficult to understand their speech practices (Goddard, 2006). Wierzbicka (2003) showed that the notion of Ethno-pragmatics relates to differences in cultural ideologies; different cultures speak differently, think differently and feel differently. In Ethno-pragmatics, discourse practices are said to be culturally-oriented (Agyekum, 2019; Wierzbicka, 1997). Ameka (2006) observed that Ethno-pragmatics deals with cultural knowledge, members of a speech community in the interpretation and understanding of the routine expressions in social interaction use according to his believes. Like proverbs used in other

societies, Nzema proverbs are culturally constructed, and are conventionally understood and interpreted by members of the Nzema society. Thus, the paper draws on Ethno-pragmatics as a theoretical lens, since it can account for an adequate description and explanation of proverbs, which highlight the Nzema philosophical principles and cultural worldview.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology has been employed in the current study. Hence, the following subsections indicate the source of data, sampling techniques, data collection techniques, and procedures of data analysis.

Sources and Data Collection Techniques

The data were obtained from both documented and oral sources, eliciting information through interviews with knowledgeable native respondents. Many of the proverbs were chosen from one published work (a collection of Nzema proverbs), titled *Nzema mrele nee be ngile* by Kwesi and Quarm (1998). The researchers relied chiefly on this secondary material because it is a compilation of many traditional Nzema proverbs, which manifested in various sentential structures. In terms of the criteria of selection, the researchers scrutinized (read) the book carefully and focused on proverbs with simple, compound, and complex-embedded clause constructions. Proverbs in the form of conditional, comparative, and focus constructions were also selected. The selection was based on the premise that the ethno-pragmatic interpretations of proverbs with such grammatical structures could communicate deeply and reflect the Nzema cultural beliefs and philosophical principles. Some proverbs were fetched during arbitration settings among the Nzema. As participant and sometimes nonparticipant observers, it was noted sought that the speakers had the opportunity to audio-record the various arbitration proceedings where proverbs were quoted to offer pieces of advice. In all, 48 proverbs were obtained. Introspection based on native speaker intuition was also essentially brought to bear on this study.

Sampling Techniques

Having assembled these proverbs, the researchers consulted six (6) other indigenous speakers of Nzema, three (3) males and three (3) females, aged between 65 and 75 years. The researchers considered equal number of male and female respondents because women in Nzema society are deemed as competent proverb users and interpreters, just as men. The respondents

are noted for their rich knowledge in the linguistics and socio-cultural aspects of Nzema language and culture. The researchers purposively engaged these consultants for clarification through interviews; eliciting useful information regarding the Ethno-pragmatic interpretations of the proverbs at hand. The authors categorized the data for analysis, based on common structural features and pragmatic implications. In this paper, twenty-eight (28) proverbs were finally used for the analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

In terms of data presentation and analysis, the proverbs were provided by following morpheme-by-morpheme interlineal glossing and the meaning of the proverbs in English. The glossing criteria followed the Leipzig glossing rule; using small capital letters in the morpheme-by-morpheme representation. The analysis was conducted under relevant sub-headings based on structural categorization of the selected proverbs. The analysis and discussion highlighted the pragmatic interpretations of the proverbs based on the Nzema cultural context.

Data and Discussion

This section deals with the presentation and analysis of data. Here, the researchers focused on the structural properties of the proverbs and their communicative imports, situating the discussion within the tenets of Ethno-pragmatics.

Proverbs with Simple Sentence Structure

The proverbs in this category are declarative proverbs, which state a general truth ascertained by experience. They are short but witty propositions used as a reminder to guide human behaviour in the Nzema socio-cultural setting. These proverbs are direct statements, which reflect the worldview of the Nzema and are used to emphasise issues in a communication process. Some of the examples are in (1a-d):

- (1) a. Ezukoa le bozonle.
Money COP god
'Money is a deity'.
b. Nohale le ayile.
Truth COP medicine
'Truth is medication'.

- c. Bane le ɔ nzo.
 Wall has.POSS 3SG ear.PL
 ‘Wall has (its) ears’.
- d. Ehyia bɔ.
 Poverty smell.HAB
 ‘Poverty stinks’.

In (1a) and (1b), the proverbs use the copula verb *le* ‘is’, which drives home the link between the subject-agent and the complement. In (1a), *ezukoa* ‘money’ is metaphorically compared with a deity (lesser god). Proverb (1a) reveals that the Nzema cultural perception about money is characterised by some spiritual powers, which can cause its owner to act or think evil. Regarded as a ‘spirit’, the Nzema believe that money could ‘varnish’ when its owner fails to invest it profitably (handle it properly). This proverb, according to Nzema Ethno-pragmatics, seeks to advise people against extravagance and lavish lifestyle. In (1b), truth is metaphorically compared with medication. The Ethno-pragmatic interpretation here is that faithfulness has the power to free a person from predicaments; just as medication can relieve one (a patient) from sickness. The proverb entreats people to always ‘call a spade a spade’, in spite of any unpleasant outcome. In (1c), the proverbial structure uses the possessive verb *le* ‘has’, which accounts for the literal meaning that the wall (building) has an auditory ability. Beyond the literal meaning, however, this pithy expression implies that one can become aware of some negative issues that may be discussed in his/her absence, even when the conversation takes place within closed doors. The Nzema cite the proverb in (1c) to remind people to desist from unnecessary gossip and backbiting. In (1d), the proverb is constructed in order of subject and verb (SV). By this structure, we are able to conceptualise the adverse effects of poverty that are likely to be experienced by anyone who may be afflicted. The stinking metaphor actually helps to inform us about the ‘state’ and negative attributes of poverty regarding how a poor person’s life may look like; such as lacking all things that ensure a comfortable living.

In (2a) and (2b) that follow, we look at simple sentence proverbs, which employ ‘causative verbs’ in Nzema. Causatives simply denote either actions in which an entity causes something to happen to another entity, or positively or negatively (Lyons, 1977). In Nzema, the basic causative marker is *maa*, which denotes the English factitive ‘make’ or permissive

‘let’. The following are examples of simple sentence proverbs, which make use of a causative verb:

- (2) a. *Koyele* *maa* *anwosesebe*.
 Unity CAUS strength
 ‘Unity causes strength’.
- b. *Ehyia* *maa* *adwenledwenle*.
 Poverty CAUS think.PROG
 ‘Poverty causes continuous thinking’.

In examples (2a) and (2b), *koyele* ‘unity’ and *ehyia* ‘poverty’ appear as causative agents, which bring about the strength and endless thinking respectively. Like in other diverse cultures, the Nzema trust that unity can result in a formidable group to achieve success collectively in an endeavour. People who try to fling collaborative effort and embrace individualism are frowned at, hence the Nzema proverbial expression in (2a). According to Nzema cultural beliefs, the proverb in (2b) implies that the poor in the society keep contemplating; always trying to decide how best they could be relieved (see also Agyekum, [2017](#)).

Negative Declarative Proverbs

Like in English, Akan and other languages, a sentence that performs a declarative function in Nzema can also be in the form of negative proposition. This manifests through the incorporation of the negative markers/morphemes {*n*} and {*m*}, which means ‘not’. The advisory contents of these proverbs are meant to ‘restrict’ the actions of the people, indicating that some steps are **not** to be taken in Nzema society. In (3a-c) below, we present examples of negative declarative proverbial constructions such as:

- (3) a. *Nyamenle* *kye* *a* *be-n-ve*
 God divide/share PART 3PL-NEG-rush
 ‘People must not rush over items being distributed by God’.
- b. *Be-di* *mogya* *edweke* *a* *enlonkoe* *ε-m-*
 bia *bie*
 PL-discuss blood matter PART snail EMPH-NEG- comment
 any

‘The snail is not invited to make comments regarding matters of blood’.

- c. Abusua nyema bɛ-m-pɛ nu
 Family rope 3PL-NEG-cut inside
 ‘The thread that links members of a family must not be cut’.

The negative morphemes $\{-n; -m\}$, as seen in the above examples, show that certain activities should not take place in human societies, especially among the Nzema. For instance, the proverb in (3a) tells people not to rush in life. It underscores the virtue of patience in terms of turn taking. As part of their tradition and belief system, the Nzema see *Nyamenle* ‘God’ to be justice, who treats all persons fairly without discrimination. The implication of the proverb in (3b) is that a person who has no skill and knowledge about something should not be consulted for information to help others. A similar adage often used by the Nzema to communicate the idea in (3b) says: *bedi belahelɛ edwekɛ a atoafunli embua bie* ‘when discussing issues of infidelity, the impotent is not invited to contribute’. This shows that the Nzema society believes in dealing with matters with adequate evidence, engaging people who have fair knowledge about the situation at hand, especially during arbitration. In (3c), we are informed about the essence of maintaining a good relationship among siblings (family members) and people who share a common goal. This proverb is usually quoted to mitigate conflicts and confrontations among members of the society.

Proverbs as Compound Sentence Structure

A compound sentence in Nzema is also made up of two or more main (independent) clauses linked by the coordinating conjunctions *yɛɛ/nee/ɛza* ‘and’, *noko/na* ‘but’, *anzɛɛ* ‘or’ (Kwaw, 2008). However, in this paper, *yɛɛ* ‘and’ and *noko* ‘but’ are the specific coordinating conjunctions identified in some of the proverbial structures. Pragmatically, these proverbs provide advice and urge members of society to make judgements based on two propositions. Consider the following examples:

- (4) a. Domunli lɛ ye kenle yɛɛ akutue lɛ
 ye kenle.
 Lemon has.POSS 3SG day CONJ orange has.POSS
 3SG day
 ‘Lemon has its day and orange has its day’.

- b. Asolo ketēboe ekela yεε asolo dabo
ekela.
Different antelope.POSS destiny CONJ different deer.POSS
destiny
'Antelope's destiny is unique and deer's destiny is unique.'
- c. Bɔvole teladeε le kpotokpoto noko ye subue
yε fε.
Hunter shirt COP dirty CONJ 3SG.POSS soup
COP sweet
'The hunter's garment is dirty but his soup is delicious'.
- d. Agbuyia kpomgba tokule noko tokule la ɔ
bo ati.
Needle stitch hole CONJ hole
exist 3SG.POSS bottom tip
'The needle stitches holes but there is a hole at its bottom'.

The structures in (4a) and (4b) consist of independent statements, which are joined by the conjunction *yεε* 'and'. Comparatively, a lemon contains sour (bitter) juice, while an orange mostly has sweet juice. Therefore, in (4a), lemon is likened to unpleasant situation, while orange represents a comfortable condition. The proverb underscores the Nzema perception that 'no condition is permanent' (Owu-Ewie & Yakub, 2021). The ethno-pragmatic reading of the proverb communicates that in life, there are times for calamities and other times for conveniences. In (4b), antelope and deer are used to mirror certain expected human attributions in the Nzema society. Though both animals share similar features, we are informed through this proverb that each could be destined with different opportunities. Similarly, in human societies, people have unique talents and opportunities; some are well to do, while others live a miserable life. Thus, the Nzema depend on this proverb to advise people to refrain from envy and jealousy, since destinies are believed to be unique. The proverbs in (4c) and (4d) also employ the conjunction *noko* 'but', which helps to achieve the sense of a contrastive interpretation. In (4c), the dirty (unattractive) clothing of the hunter represents the difficulties and disadvantages of doing something, whereas the delicious soup represents enjoyment after such difficulties. The proverb seeks to encourage people not to despair in adversity, because, despite the challenges in undertaking a task, some positive results can be achieved afterwards. In line with the tenets of Ethno-pragmatics, proverb

(4d) seeks to communicate the Nzema perception that people who direct others to do what is right can also have their own shortcomings. For what reason should a hole exist at the bottom of the needle when the needle itself is used to stitch other holes? This proverb is in line with the notion that ‘no one is perfect’ and ‘to err is human’. The people of Nzema ‘inject’ this proverb into communications when one is being informed to mitigate the kind of punishment meant to be meted out to an erred child or adult.

Proverbs as Conditional Construction

Conditional clauses are also prevalent in the construction of Nzema proverbs. For instance, the structure of the proverbs in (5a-c) are marked by the split conjunction (*saa*)...*a*, which denotes the concept of conditionality (*if*). The first part (*saa*) ‘if’ is put in parenthesis because it is optional and may be omitted, whereas the conditional particle,...*a*, is essential and obligatory. The obligatory conditional particle ...‘*a*’, is always followed by a comma to mark the clause boundary between the subordinate conditional clause and the main clause. Proverbs with conditional construction seek to provide some sort of warning, informing people that the occurrence of a particular situation, whether good or bad, is conditional; depending on other situations that serve as triggers. Let us see the examples in 5:

- (5) a. (Saa) ε nli ara de aduoba zo a,
 ε-n-li aduoba amunli.
 COND 2SG mother child sit guava top PART
 2SG-NEG-eat guava ripe.NEG
 ‘If your maternal sibling climbs a guava tree, you do not eat the unripe fruit’.
- b. (Saa) ε-le awie fa wɔ ebinli a,
 ε-ne awozɛka nu.
 COND 2SG-have person take 2SG.POSS faeces PART
 2SG-shit gravel inside
 ‘If you have someone to sweep your faeces, you defecate in gravels’.
- c. (Saa) ε-fa sane nwo ɛya a, w ɔ sua
 nu bɔ.
 COND 2SG-take broom self anger PART 2SG.POSS room
 inside smell
 ‘If you become angry at the broom, your room stinks’.

Each of the proverbial structures in (5) constitutes a conditional subordinate clause and a main clause. Hence, it can be deduced that the message conveyed in the conditional subordinate clause determines or calls for the possibility of the message conveyed in the main clause. The Nzema society practises matrilineal inheritance. In (5a), therefore, we are informed about how the Nzema venerate maternal siblings in particular, and the fact that people need to recognise their relatives, in case they find themselves in better positions. The Nzema cherish and appreciate people who are not selfish and so this proverb tries to say that if a person gains any opportunity or finds a flourishing job, that person should make his/her relatives benefit accordingly. In (5b), defecating in gravels represents the act of causing or bringing problems home, while sweeping the faeces out of the gravels means to try to solve the problems. From Ethno-pragmatic point of view, the proverb implies that people who have others to ‘back’ them often invite troubles. This may be true in many societies, where recalcitrant persons continue to indulge in vices that demand monetary affairs to be able to liberate such stubborn persons. Among the Nzema, the proverb in (5c) is usually used to reprimand someone who cannot control his/her temper. The broom is used for cleaning rubbish in the environment and so whoever has any confrontation with the broom would obviously live in a stinking environment. Thinking beyond the broom metaphor, the Ethno-pragmatic implication of the proverb teaches that a person should always relate well and live harmoniously with their fellow humans, especially with those who provide some sort of support. The communicative content of this proverb corroborates that of the English proverb, which says: ‘do not bite the hand that feeds you’.

Proverbs as Relative Clause Construction

An adjectival clause, also referred to as a relative clause, is the subordinate part of a sentence that performs the same grammatical function as an adjective in a given sentence (Annan, [2014](#)). In the grammar (syntax) of Nzema, a relative clause is introduced by *mɔɔ*, which is equivalent to the relative pronoun ‘who/which’ or the complementizer ‘that’ and ends with the clausal determiner *la*, thus, *mɔɔ.....la*. The relative clause in Nzema describes and post modifies an antecedent NP in a sentence by providing the information needed to make the antecedent definite. Like in English, the Nzema relative clause follows its antecedent immediately and separates the head-word in the subject from the predicator (VP). Since they manifest as

complex-embedded structures, these proverbs are used as a ‘roundabout’ and indirect mechanism to rebuke listeners. Some Nzema proverbs as relative constructions are presented here:

(6) a. Edwɛkɛ [mɔɔ ɛtafinlimalɛ kɛha la] ɛ-m-minli ɛlɛ.
 Speech COMP tongue say CDET EMPH-NEG-miss ever
 ‘A comment [that is made by the tongue] does not lose an impact’.

b. Kakula [mɔɔ kenlebie kɛ-dɔ kale la] biza
 patulo bolɛ.
 Child COMP later FUT-buy car CDET ask.HAB
 petrol price
 ‘A child [who intends to buy a car in future] often seeks the price of fuel’.

c. Nzule [mɔɔ gyi diinyi la] se ɔ bo.
 Water COMP stand.HAB quiet CDET run.HAB 3SG under
 ‘Water [which stands quietly] runs under’ (still waters run deep).

In (6a-c), the relative subordinate clauses are put in square bracket, which come after the antecedent NPs, which they tend to describe. Proverb (6a) affirms the Nzema cultural believe that ‘the spoken word is always powerful’ (Yakub, 2021). Among the Nzema, comments that are made, especially by parents to their wards, either positively or negatively are considered to be forever effective. Thus, the Nzema child is always cautioned to be mindful of his/her behaviour, especially towards his/her parents so as not to incur the wrath of the parents through the spoken word. The Ethno-pragmatic reading of proverb (6b) is about the need for a person to make adequate preparation and planning towards what they intend to achieve in future. As a respondent explained, the child is used in this context to refer to anyone who intends to take up a certain career in the future. The proverb advises a person not to be impulsive, but to ascertain the merits and demerits of whatever activity a person intends to engage in. In (6c), people who seem to be meek and unconcerned, but sometimes act dangerously and indulge in some uncouth practices are likened to ‘still waters which run deep’ and/or ‘snakes which hide under grass’. In traditional Nzema society, people with such traits are more ‘fearful’, since their real characters are not predictable. This proverb is deployed to inform people that they should not judge others as either good or bad at a glance, since ‘appearance could be deceptive’.

victim, which may even lead to death. Therefore, whoever encounters a snakebite, according to the Nzema cultural worldview, must fear even the worm that may not cause any harm. This implies that there is a need to reflect and be careful in the next course of action, taking great lessons from our previous predicaments. Largely, the Nzema dwell on this didactic expression to inform people to be vigilant and meticulous, not to repeat their mistakes. The proverb in (7b) is a reminder against aimless wandering, especially to those who leave their homes and never return with anything good. According to Nzema cultural tradition, mothers are to be treated more passionately in the form of reciprocity, since they are observed to play sympathizing roles greatly in relation to their children; although the good responsibilities of fathers are also recognized. In essence, whoever misses the burial ceremony (funeral) of his/her mother is likened to missing a great opportunity in life. Proverb (7b) rebukes any aimless wanderer, pointing out that unnecessary wandering can lead to losing something precious in one's motherland. In (7c), the nominal clause, which can be substituted for 'his/her parents', begins with the complementiser *kɛ* 'that'; which occurs after the VP 'does not know' and functions as grammatical object. If a person causes harm to themselves without knowing it, this proverb is quoted to inform them about the disadvantages of being ignorant.

Proverbs as Focus Construction

Another interesting phenomenon that was observed is the occurrence of 'focus markers' in some of the proverbs. A focused item in a sentence, according to Agyekum (2017), refers to the most essential information in a given discourse. In Nzema, focus is marked by either *yɛɛ* or *a* 'it is', which indicates 'exclusion, restriction and emphasis'. The communicative contents of such proverbs are that of indicating 'importance' and emphasising something. Consider the proverbial structures in 8:

- (8) a. Mɔɔ kɔ azule la yɛɛ bɔ
 buakɛ a.
 COMP go.fetch.HAB water CDET FOC break.HAB
 pot PART
 'It is the one who fetches water with a pot that breaks the pot'.
- b. Mɔɔ lɛ ye twea la a tu ɔ nloa anu
 bowule a.

COMP has 2SG dog CDET FOC remove 2SG mouth inside
bone PART

‘It is the owner of the dog (pet) that can best remove a bone from its mouth’.

c. Mɔɔ ε-kε-lua la a ε-bu a.
COMP 2SG-PERF-sow CDET FOC 2SG-break.HAB PART

‘It is what you cultivate that you harvest as well’.

The import of (8a) is that mistakes are inevitable in embarking on any good activity. Fetching of water, either for drinking or washing is essential; however, this exercise is associated with ‘breaking’ the pot accidentally. In this proverbial construction, emphasis is on ‘whoever fetches water with a pot’, meaning that no other person is likely to break the pot except the one who uses it to fetch water. Based on this socio-cultural conception, the Nzema sometimes pardon and compromise with a diligent and hardworking person who accidentally errs or commits errors in carrying out his/her duties. As people who are predominantly farmers, some Nzema men rear dogs as pets, and for hunting. Therefore, proverb (8b) seems to emanate from this practice of keeping a dog as a companion. In (8b), the focus marker *a* is used to place emphasis on ‘the owner of the dog’ as the only person who can conveniently remove a bone from the dog’s mouth. According to Nzema Ethno-pragmatics, as a respondent explained, dog in this proverb can represent a child, while its owner represents a parent. In the Nzema cultural context, parents are highly venerated and children trained to be submissive and obedient to their parents. The proverb implies that parents are the best people to deal with their children, in terms of either praising or reprimanding the children. In (8c), one notices the idea of ‘cause and effect’, which reminds a person of the consequence of their actions and inactions. The proverb says that ‘whatever a person would cultivate’, for instance, cassava, they would surely harvest cassava, but not plantain. The Nzema cherish people who are faithful. They detest people who find dubious and devious means of gaining wealth. Therefore, proverb (8c) is often used as an avenue to alert people that ‘good deeds make good returns’ and vice versa. This proverb is akin to the English saying; ‘you reap what you sow’.

Proverbs as Comparative Construction

A comparative clause in Nzema usually follows a comparative form such as *kpale* ‘good/better’, *kpole* ‘bigger’, *ekyi* ‘smaller/lesser’, *ndende* ‘faster’, which is introduced by the conjunction *tela* ‘than/surpass’. The implications of these proverbs are drawn from comparative situations and daily life experiences. By these proverbs, listeners are entreated to make decisions based on the advantages of one choice over another. Proverbs that illustrate comparative clause structure are given below in (9a-c):

(9) a. Raale εtane le kpale [tela (kε) ε ngome
ε-kε-la].

Woman bad COP good CONJ (COMP) 2SG alone
2SG-FUT-sleep

‘It is better to have a bad wife [than to sleep alone]’.

b. Nɾenlande εwone le kpale [tela bε sa
mgbane].

Cutlass blunt COP good CONJ 3PL.POSS hand
nothing

‘A blunt machete is better [than working with a bare hand]’.

c. Mogya ye enlomboε [tela nzule].

Blood COP heavy CONJ water

‘Blood is thicker [than water]’.

Proverb (9a) has some concern with gender construction and stratification. Women, and for that matter wives, are crucial partners to men. In Nzema cultural setting, a man without a wife leaves a ‘question mark’ on his character and lifestyle. The Nzema think that for a man to be a bachelor, it is better he rather owns a bad or troublesome wife. This portrays the numerous benefits men derive from women. The Nzema area is predominantly agrarian; many people are farmers who engage in subsistence agriculture, hence, the existence of proverb (9b). A blunt cutlass, if nothing at all, can cut (harvest) plantain/banana, which has soft stem, thus, such cutlass becomes useful to the farmer than a bare hand. This proverb can be cited to advise somebody to be content with what he/she has at his/her disposal, since his/her situation could be better than others could. The proverb can also be used to entreat people who feel reluctant to learn, either through nonformal or formal education, that, ‘to have little knowledge/skill is better than absolute illiteracy’. The Ethno-pragmatic

interpretation of proverb (9c) points to the way the Nzema people demonstrate their cultural beliefs regarding love and the kind of bond that is expected to exist between siblings and relatives. According to a respondent, blood, as used in proverb (9), represents relatives who share a close biological origin. Crucially, the Nzema use this expression to imply that ‘real’ siblings are more important and given much recognition than any ‘external’ relationships.

Conclusion

The current study explored the structural properties and pragmatic imports of selected Nzema proverbs. From a structural description of the data, it was observed that proverbs among the Nzema manifest as conditional constructions, causative constructions, and focus constructions, simple, compound and complex-embedded sentences; which make affirmative and negative propositions. Furthermore, this paper showed that the structural properties of Nzema proverbs do not exist haphazardly; rather, they are constructed to follow the grammatical features of the language, which contribute to the overall understanding and interpretations of the proverbs. Additionally, this study revealed that, proverbs, which usually employ focus markers, simple sentence proverbs are direct statements employed to emphasise issues in a communication process. Proverbs in complex structures admonish an addressee in a more or less ‘circumlocutory’ and indirect manner for protecting the face of the advisee. In warning people against certain prohibitions in Nzema culture, proverbs which manifest as negative propositions are more suitably ‘injected’ into the conversation. Therefore, relying on the Ethno-pragmatics Paradigm, it was further observed that the interpretations of the proverbs tend to reflect the thought patterns, experiences, and worldviews of the people of Nzema culture. Moreover, the findings highlighted the didactics of Nzema proverbs as a way of ‘positioning’ members of a society in terms of acceptable conduct, in order to fit well within their culture. The proverbs encouraged virtues such as hard-work, tolerance, patience, cooperation, and faithfulness among others. The communicative contents of some of the proverbs taught people to recognise ‘individual differences’ in life, so as to desist from unnecessary comparison, envy, and hostility. Other proverbs reminded people to stay away from awkward deeds such as gossip and backbiting, envy and jealousy, greed, impatience, and unnecessary wandering among others. It was argued that proverbs have the communicative power to promote ethical

standards and social order. More so, proverbs help to ensure peaceful societal existence, since they are a linguistic tool used in veering an erring individual. Lastly, the paper underscored the existing postulations that proverbs are ‘multi-layered’ in terms of their interpretations and that they rely heavily on metaphoric representations and context of the situation in which they are usually employed.

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Abbreviations

1SG ---	1 st person singular	3SG ---	3 rd person singular
2SG ---	2 nd person singular	3PL ----	3 rd person plural
1PL ---	1 st person plural	PROG ---	Progressive marker
NEG ---	Negative marker	FUT ----	Future marker
DEF ---	Definite article	COND ---	Conditional marker
PST ---	Past marker	CONJ ---	Conjunction
PERF ---	Perfect marker	HAB ----	Habitual marker
POSS ---	Possessive marker	VP -----	Verb phrase
COP ----	Copula verb	CDET ----	Clausal determiner
FOC ----	Focus marker	NP -----	Noun phrase
PART ---	Particle	EMPH ---	Emphatic particle