

The Structure of the Lamnso' Proverb

Lendzemo Constantine Yuka, University of Benin

Abstract

Proverbs are linguistic devices employed in conversation to achieve specific communication goals that commonplace phrasal computations in the language cannot attain. Among the Nso' people, the competence of a speaker is ascertained only when the individual can adequately employ and understand proverbs in a conversation. Proverbs are structurally complex, couched in standard metaphorically paradigmatic forms that represent logical relationships in life. They embody truisms representing the thoughts of a people, their views and interpretation of the world around them. Proverbs are generally preserved by orally handing them down from generation to generation in condensed and forceful forms. If the knowledge of a language is generally not assumed until an individual justifies his proficiency in the use of proverbs, there is certainly something intricate about these linguistic devices that set proverbs beyond common knowledge of the grammar of the language. This paper sets out to identify the structural uniqueness of Lamnso' proverbs. It investigates the lexical sequences employed for proverb computation in the language and seeks to determine the application of the descriptive adequacy of Lamnso' grammar for Lamnso' proverbs. The paper claims that the ability to employ and understand Lamnso' proverbs is a step removed from basic requirements for competence and performance in Lamnso' grammar which an average speaker requires to function minimally within any Nso' speech community.

Key words: Proverb, Lamnso', Structure, Computation, Economy of derivation.

1. Introduction

The nucleus of the Nso' dynasty was established in the 14th Century. It is the oldest ethnic group within the North West Province, in Cameroon. As many clans surrendered their rights and privileges to the core conquering Nso' people, the dynasty expanded. After many years the principal identity of this tribe is their language (Lamnso')¹, which has been a powerful uniting force for the various clans. The language is not

¹ In this paper, Nso' refers to the people, while Lamnso' refers to the language of the Nso' people. Lamnso' is spoken in the greater part of Bui Division, which is 150 km. from Bamenda, the capital of the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. It is also spoken in Nigeria, specifically in Taraba State, Sarduana Local Government Area. Lamnso' belongs to the Ring subgroup which is subsumed under the Grassfield branch of the Southern Bantoid languages. Kom, Oku, Aghem, Babanki and Noni are other languages of the subgroup (Welmers 1973: 159). Lamnso' and Oku are closely related. Lamnso' does not have prominent dialectal variations (Grebe 1984). The languages commonly referred to as Bantu are also classified as Southern Bantoid languages. They are considered to be Narrow Bantu, whereas Lamnso' and other Grassfield languages are non-Bantu (or Wide Bantu). Like Fula (Annot 1970), Swahili (Mkude 1995, Welmers 1973) and many other languages of the Wide Bantu family, Lamnso' nouns and nominals fall under different classes on the basis of agreement operated by concord markers which vary from one class to another (Grebe and Grebe 1975, Eastman 1980, Yuka 1998,1999).

Orthographically, the name of the language has been represented in the literature as Lamnsoq, Lam Nso, Lamnso, Nso, Lamnsok and Lamnso?. Gradually, most researchers have preferred the last option because the variety of existing spelling stem from the struggle to appropriately represent the glottal stop which appears in every lexical position except as a C₁. For typographical reasons, this sound [ʔ] has come to be represented in the literature by [']. In this paper, therefore, **Lamnso?** is written simply as **Lamnso'**.

pure Tikar, but a combination of different languages belonging to the many clans now united as one people. Lamnso' exhibits a broad structure exhibits lexical similarities with southern languages like Widikum.

Language and culture have an intricate relationship. Language is part of culture as well as its vehicle. Culture is understood to be a totality of a people's way of life which encompasses codes of manners, dressing, religion, ritual norms and language (Khadka, 2000). Among the Nso' people proverbs are defined as 'the language of the soil' because those who effectively use proverbs in conversation require a good knowledge of Nso' values, institutions and a gamut of the people's experiences. Optimum competence in the language is exhibited with the effective use of proverbs. Lamnso' proverbs are not overtly different in structure from the basic sentential utterances employed in day to day conversation by native speakers, yet the ability to employ and understand them in use is highly cherished by those interested in the assessment of speaker competence. The Nso' traditional society has for long been basically oral. Its history and culture until recently, was being transmitted by word of mouth. Proverbs have been seen to be "... the wisdom of many and the wit of one' (Obiechina 1967:148). They are the experience and wisdom of several years gathered and summed up in one expression (Nwoye, 1992). Proverbs contain highly imaginative and suggestive symbols which transmit ancestral wisdom, profound philosophy and a practical code of behaviour on a day-to-day basis (Echenim, 2004). The understanding within the Nso' people is that, proverbs are the preserve of the older members of society. Riddles are more popular among the young. The spoken word is valued and oratory is highly venerated. The use of proverbs in appropriate contexts singles out a good speaker. It should be interesting to investigate the covert structural idiosyncrasies of these proverbs and how such unique structural features challenge the competence of an average native speaker.

2. The Data

The language of the Nso' people contains an inexhaustible basket of proverbs which the speakers employ in daily discussions. Some of the proverbs used for analysis in this paper were furtively collected during numerous discussions on various topics in a multiplicity of local scenes among Lamnso' native speakers. Majority of the proverbs here are selected from a collection of Lamnso' proverbs, published by the Nso' Language Organization (Kintati ke Lamnso')². These proverbs offer an insight into the large truths that succinctly colour conversational humour which reveal the thought patterns of the Nso' people. Our selection of proverbs for this paper is guided by our quest to examine the structural idiosyncrasies and the semantic particularities of these linguistic forms vis-à-vis the common grammatical forms of the language. The literary translations of these proverbs are as close as possible to the original style in their compressed forms.

3. Theoretical Orientation

² This organization promotes the development of theoretical and literacy manuals in Lamnso'. It works in collaboration with the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees (NACACO)

Our approach to the structural analysis of proverbs in this paper draws largely from the computational assumptions of Chomsky (1995) which specify the cheapest ways of satisfying potentially universal properties of grammatical structures. Lamnso' proverbs are usually short sentences. They are unique in form and are memorized and repeated in appropriate contexts by competent speakers. The appropriate semantic interpretation of most Lamnso' proverbs requires the ability to decipher missing constituents from those represented on the sentential string. The words or phrases uttered often refer to something or somebody beyond their physical or literary reference. Such words or phrases more often than not are in comparison to elements far removed from those in direct reference. One of the features of a Lamnso' proverb is its compact lexical composition. Proverbs in this language tend to be very economical with lexical units. Any word or constituent that can be circumvented in phrasal computation without compromising the desired semantic impact is avoided.

In this paper, we adopt the assumptions of the Chomsky's (1995) Minimalist Programme (henceforth MP) in evaluating the derivation of Lamnso' proverbs. The MP embraces matrices (Economy Principles) that compare derivations; preferring those with the most economic³ output. The most economic derivational output must also employ the 'least effort'. Our interpretation of 'least effort' is in terms of cost. The least costly derivation is chosen with cost primarily measured in terms of length. The shortest derivation is preferred. Choice points in the computation of proverbs are guided by minimal cost. Maximally economic convergent derivations that satisfy output grammatical conditions are the optimal goal of each computation.

This paper takes premise from the assumptions of the MP to justify the structures of Lamnso' proverbs and proffers reasons why Lamnso' grammar should accommodate structures that are logically in deviance to the basic tenets of its sentential strings and why the semantic interpretation of these derivations are far-fetched from the meaning of the combination of the lexical units that make up the utterance.

4. The internal structure of the Lamnso' proverb.

The constituents of the Lamnso' basic clause are morphologically related by word order, agreement and case marking (McGarrity and Botne 2002). Yuka (1998) has shown that the Lamnso' nouns can be classified into classes based on the (C)V affixes borne by the noun stem. The affixes on the nominal modifiers like adjectives, determiners, quantifiers, demonstratives, possessives etc must be identical with the (C)V affix of the noun they modify. The morphological nature of the Lamnso' tense marker is determined by the final segment of the constituent in subject position. The two constituents are morphologically interdependent. Yuka (2008a) investigates the internal structure of the Lamnso' verb. These verbs have verbal extensions which can be categorized into two broad classes: the verbal extensions that restrict argument structure within the sentence and those that determine event and meaning. A simple

³ Understood to be the derivation with the least constituents, the least number of grammatical computations and the minimum sum of syntactic operations.

sentence in Lamnso' is closely interwoven and reveals an intricate agreement relationships existing between its fundamental constituents.

Economic sentential derivations do not require the inclusion of constituents whose exclusion fails to affect the semantic value of the sentence. Since Lamnso' proverbs are couched in very short sentences that say so much with very few words, it will be interesting to examine these proverbs and identify how competent users of the language achieve their economic constructions and how such constructions meet grammatical acceptability in the language given our understanding of the intricate agreement relations existing between the principal constituents of a basic Lamnso' sentence.

4.1 The lexical constituents of the Lamnso' proverb

The proverb is usually a basic statement that reiterates a truism. It usually defines a condition or relates the result of an action or a habit. Such proverbs are meant to either remind the audience of the natural turn of events in society or to caution them about the consequences of their actions or inactions. Structurally, proverbs categorized under basic sentences contain a subject NP (agent), the verb and the verbal complement NP that bears the action denoted by the verb. Examine the following proverbs below.

1. a) Shinón shé shuù shí yò' yí ba'ri lá'

bird AM mouth sm neg prog build compound

'The noisy bird never builds a nest'

(Employed in reference to a lazy individual who talks much and does little)

b) Wir nye i wun dzə̀ə̀ ɲkùy

person prog-defecate on his road latrine

'An individual has defecated on his path to the latrine'

(In villages, latrines are built some distance away from the house. Regular visits to the facility are made through a path. One who defecates on this path may soon regret his act because he may soon need to use the same path again and will not like the sight of his waste. This proverb is employed to caution those whose actions hurt their benefactors).

c) ɲgi' sí koom àmbuù sòɲ

melon sm non-prog bear in need teeth

'Melon has yielded in the farm of those without teeth'

(Said when somebody is misusing a rare opportunity'

d) Mbè' yò' yii kúy shaa kitu

shoulder neg prog grow pass head

'The shoulder does not grow above the head'

(Said as a reminder to the young of the need for them to respect their elders)

What is not immediately noticeable in 1a-d presented in isolation are the preambles that are a traditional structural feature of all Lamnso' proverbs. Proverbs belong to the language community and have no known author. They constitute wisdom gathered over several ages and orally passed down from one generation to another. They are the property of the community and are commonly prefaced by the following expressions:

<i>Wir veri yii suúy jii ...</i>	Our people say ...
<i>Nso' yii suúy jii...</i>	The Nso' people say ...
<i>Kibó'haàrí ki i suúy jii ...</i>	Tortoise (or some other animal) said ...
<i>Á yii suúy jii</i>	It is said that
<i>A tar ver i suúy jii ...</i>	Our fathers (elders) said

This preamble distances the speaker from the expression of truth, ascertained by experience. It gives the speaker the license to comfortably state what in some cases could otherwise come across as impolite, arrogant, offensives or confrontational. Once the copyright of the statement is attributed to the ancients or to the community, the speaker is only seen to be sharing a collective wisdom drawn from the fundamental relationships of the speech community. The speaker promotes the perception of the proverb as an intrusion by the third person in a situation where the neutral authoritative source is needed to articulate cultural principles relevant to the situation being experienced.

Proverbs derive their abstract forms from the nature of their constituent computation. They exclude the explicitness which is the feature of normal sentences. In example 1a above, the subject NP *Shinán shé shuù* 'mouth bird' is a Noun-Noun construction which belongs to the category of unmarked associative constructions in Lamnso' (Yuka, 1997: 108). It is employed in description of the bird adjudged to be noisy. Rather than use the standard lengthy clause to define or describe the noisy characteristic of the bird (*shinán she shi yù jè'èr i shuu ...* 'the bird that makes noise with its mouth ...') the economy of derivation selects only the three most semantically relevant lexical units to compute the subject NP of the proverb. The predicate of the clause further defines the subject NP (*yò' yii bà'ri lá'*). Competence in the language does not only require the ability to interpret economic derivations such as the NP in question, it is the proficiency with which the context of the situation is interpreted. Lamnso' proverbs have multi-layered meanings and rely heavily on context for their immediate meaning. If the proverb in 1a is said to farm recruits in a task situation, it will have reference to the ability of the employees to complete their tasks on the farm, rather than to house construction. In the classroom performance evaluation situation, reference will be to the talkative student(s) who fail to satisfactorily complete their assignments. This shows that proverbs are generally semantically indefinite given their application in heterogeneous situations. They have poly-functionality and poly-semanticity (Mieder 1993: xi).

In example 1c, the verbal complement *ambuù sòŋ* 'those in need of teeth' is another Noun-Noun construction which is a little more complex in computation than the subject NP. N₁ is verb based, derived

from the verb *buú* 'lack'. *à-* is the plural prefix of Class 2⁴ nouns in Lamnso' (Yuka 1997, McGarrity and Botne, 2002). The vowel prefix ([a]) assimilates the features of the initial segment of the verb *buú*. The result of this backward assimilation is orthographically represented by [m] which shares the bilabial point of articulation with the initial sound segment of the verb. The fusion of the Class 2 nominal prefix (*a-*) and the verb (*buú*) derives N₁. N₁ therefore possesses nominal features resulting from the nominal prefix, and verbal features derived from the verb. The [+N, +V] feature composition gives N₁ the adjectival colouration. The internal composition suggests that within Noun-Noun constructions in Lamnso', N₁ (the possessed) specifies the attributes of N₂ (the possessor). The standard expression *...those who lack teeth...* has been condensed into few words to form a mnemonic device which has been committed to memory and employed in appropriate contexts. The Noun-Noun construction is an economic derivation in the sense of Chomsky (1992 and 1995).

Given our analysis in 4.1, it may not be wrong to assert that the requirements for competence and performance within the grammar of Lamnso' proverbs is a step removed from the constraints that guide competence and performance as defined by Chomsky (1995). This distinction is a possible explanation of why the use of proverbs in the clan is seen as a mark of wisdom in the use of the *language of the soil*.

4.2 Couplet Proverbs

The proverbs in 4.1 are sentences that state a truism with an S — NP + V + NP structure. In this section of our paper, we present couplet proverbs of the form S₁-S₂. S₁ - S₂ proverbs exhibit semantic relations that can be captured by different parallelisms. The reference to parallelisms is developed from our claim that phrasal collocations require a profound understanding of both S₁ and S₂ as well as the metaphoric interpretation of lexical items. Once phraseology becomes formulaic, it is not easily alterable in style and structure. Semantically, it attracts an axiomatic interpretation that is prescriptive and didactic as well. The structure of the following proverbs leads us to group them in the light of the relationship between the clauses.

4.2.1 Antithetic Parallelism

⁴ Lamnso' nouns fall into ten major classes as shown in 4 below. We follow the Bantu system of noun class numbering.

Class	affix	Gloss
1	∅-	shwà' 'a knife'
2	à-	Ashwà' 'knives'
3	-∅	Wum 'egg'
5	∅	luŋ 'a song'
6	me-	Mejy 'stars'
7	ki-	Kikun 'a bed'
8	vi-	Vikun 'beds'
9	-∅	yo 'a snaek'
10	-si	yosi 'sneaks'
19	shi-	Shijy 'a star'

Classes 6, 7, 8 and 19 take CV prefixes while classes 1, 3, 5 and 9 have no affix on the noun. Class 2 is marked by a V suffix and 10 by a CV suffix.

Antithetic parallelism defines a sentential construct where the fact in S₁ is contrasted with that stated in S₂.

In 2 a-d below, the truth acknowledged in S₁ is emphasized in S₂ by an opposite truth.

2 a) A sì dzó kisaŋ, bòŋ ghán kisaŋ
to be prog-sit empty good prog-walk empty

‘A pointless journey is better than idleness’

(Said when somebody benefits from a pointless journey)

b) Wir tán mbiy, la wù yò' kfèn dzèr dzéə
person prog-struggle leader who he neg then non-prog-ask road

‘He who seizes leadership should not request for guidance’

(Used to caution those who struggle for leadership of the need to know where to lead their followers to)

c) Wir kër shwa', kóm wún i kici ki
person prog-owns knife prog-scrape body with stick sm

‘Somebody has a knife and yet scrapes his body with a stick’

(This proverb is usually heard when an individual possesses an instrument or potential and fails to make good use of it)

d) Lèm i kiwó ki, li i kirán ki
non-prog-keep with hand sm non-prog-take with ladder sm

‘Keep with the hand (and) take with the ladder’

(Said when a task initially taken for granted becomes difficult to accomplish).

In 2a, contrast is between the two verbs *dzé/ghán* (sit/walk). Idleness is the vice being rejected. The intensity of this denunciation is heightened by the preference of an aimless trip to idleness from which an individual stands a chance of benefiting from. The adjective *kisaŋ* (empty) that qualifies the two verbs is identical while the verbs are semantically diametrically opposed to each other. In 2b, contrast is between the VPs *tán mbiy/dzèr dzéə* (seize leadership/request for guidance). It is a contrast between one’s ambitions for leadership and his ability to lead. In 2c, the NPs *shwà'/kici* (knife/stick) are juxtaposed. The ownership of an appropriate tool is contrasted with the competence to employ same to one’s benefit. 2d, introduces prepositional arguments *i kiwó ki/i kirán ki* (with the hand/with the ladder). Here contrast of height is introduced to represent the difference between assumption and reality.

The choice in the selection of the semantically divergent phrases to reflect a singular theme is a task which is a step beyond the basic requirements of competence in the grammar of the average native speaker of Lamnso' whose understanding may not be easily stretched further than the restrictions governing lexical insertion rules and the computation of phrases associated with their use in appropriate contexts.

4.2.2 Synonymous Parallelism

Unlike antithetic parallelism where contrast is the style employed to illustrate a known fact, the S_2 in synonymous parallelisms reiterates what the first clause asserts. Examples 3a-c reveal the reoccurrence of either the NP or the verb of S_1 in S_2 .

3. a) Kiwó ki lóo yo' kibiy, kibiy ki wàa yo' kiwó
hand sm when prog-rub lap lap sm prog-rub hand
'When the hand is rubbing the lap, the lap also rubs the hand'
(Said when one expects a kind deed to be reciprocated)

b) Aà soòsì ñwa' ji melaà, à yèn melaà
you non-prog-thrust hive for trouble you see trouble
'If you provoke bees in a hive, you will receive their rage'
(When somebody invites problems to himself, this proverb is used)

c) Lèm i kiwó ki, lì i kiwó ki
keep with hand sm take with hand sm
'Do not take what you did not keep'
(An advice against stealing)

In 3a, the constituents of S_1 and S_2 are identical. The major difference in the two clauses is as a result of the swooping of syntactic positions between the NPs. This structure achieves its goal of reciprocity of action in the most economic manner thinkable. Simply put, given candidates α and B, once α begins to do X to B, B (by the same token) begins to do X to α . α and B end up doing X to each other. In 3b, the proposition is that, if one's intent of stirring the bee hive is to provoke the bees, he/she gets suffers the 'anger' of the bees (as they will attack the intruder by stinging). The economy of derivation lies in S_2 . *à yèn melaà* 'you will see trouble', makes no reference to the reaction of the bees but metaphorically captures it in what is experienced. 3c is unique in its composition since the lexical items in S_1 are identical with those in S_2 even in their syntactic strings. One could argue that the repetition is uneconomical since the truth in S_2 , adds nothing to that in S_1 . But the reiteration introduces a denunciation of an underlying negation of S_2 . A less economic derivation of S_2 could be as in 3d below.

d) Lèm i kiwó ki, la à yò' lì i kiwuú ki
keep with hand sm do you neg take with foot sm
'Do not keep with the hand and take with the foot'
(Don't take what you did not keep)

3d is obviously more cumbersome and less economical in derivation than 3c.

4.2.3 Synthetic Parallelism

In synthetic parallelisms, the thought in S_1 is developed by the thought in S_2 . Such structural compositions have sometimes been analyzed from the ‘cause and effect’ perspective. Structurally, S_1 may depict an action, while S_2 states the consequences of S_1 . Generally S_2 is always shorter than S_1 which paints the scenario within which S_2 can occur. 4a-d are examples of synthetic parallelism in Lamnso' proverbs.

4 a) Wir sùúy wán ñkónkón, i dù sùúy i rim
 person non-prog-tell child too much sm go non-prog-tell to witch
 ‘Somebody has exaggerated the announcement of a newborn to the extent of telling the witch’
 (Said when an individual exaggerates the celebration of a good event to the extent of attracting the interest of those who do not wish him/her well).

b) Shwéri lóo shaà, bo á yén kinyè ké ñgòv
 wind when non-prog pass before they non-prog see anus AM chicken
 ‘It is when the wind blows that the anus of the chicken can be seen’
 (Once there is an uncontrollable force, the truth is revealed)

c) Wir li ñgwásáñ té' gwíy sho, a ñgvəsi kpú jíñ
 person prog-take maize prog-feed bush fowl with prog chicken die hunger
 ‘Somebody is feeding bush fowls with maize while the chicken are starving’
 (Said to depict misplaced priorities)

d) Wir wo ù dzér dzəə, yò' yii layi
 person who sm prog-ask road neg always prog-miss
 ‘One who constantly ask for directions never misses his way’
 (Said when somebody in need asks for help or when one takes a wrong decision in the midst of of those who could have provided relevant information to guard against such a bad choice).

An analysis of the examples above indicates that structurally, S_2 is dependent on S_1 to express a complete thought. S_2 violates the Extended Projection Principle⁵ (ECP). The features of the missing subject NP of S_2 can easily be interpreted from the Subject NP of S_1 , since the two NPs are identical. It is in the quest to derive an accurate pre-formulated and pre-fabricated generalized grammatical statement that such economy of derivation is employed for Lamnso' proverbs. This is the primary reason why proverbs are unalterable in style and structure. The native speaker of Lamnso' requires an understanding of the underlying assumptions, hidden associations and allusions contained in the grammar of proverbs which are intrinsically not part of the basic grammar required by the average native speaker to be positively assessed in competence and performance in the language.

⁵ The requirement within the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework that every clause should have a subject

4.3. The Lamnso' Proverb and verb serialization

Tri-componential verbs (Ezejideaku and Okechukwu, 2008) relate a range of semantic notions. They are made up of three phrases, each expressing an act. The first verb states a truth, the second develops it and the third relates the consequences of the actions conveyed by the preceding verbs. The structure of tri-componential verbs in Lamnso' is akin to verb serialization. The grammatical phenomenon of Serial Verb Construction (SVC) has been extensively examined in many languages. It is known to be wide-spread in West Africa as recorded in Bamgbose (1974), Williamson (1966, 1989), Kari (1989, 1997b, 2003), Ndimele (1996) among others. In the analysis of the proverbs in 5, we seek to understand the variance between the grammatical competence of Lamnso' the native speaker and the expectations that qualify him/her to be adjudged proficient in the use of proverbs in the same language.

5 a) Wir tsəm í Ndzəádzəv, tsəm í Taaŋkùm, i ràn vilaáme
 person non-prog-shoot at Ndzəádzəv non-prog-shoot at Taaŋkùm sm non-prog-clean reward
 ‘The person worked at Ndzəádzəv, worked at Taaŋkùm and lost out in the entertainment’
 (Said when an individual attempts to gain from two fronts and ends up getting nothing’

b) Wir li ŋgwásáŋ té' gwíy sho, a ŋgvəsi kpú jíŋ
 person prog-take maize prog-feed bush fowl with prog chicken die hunger
 ‘Somebody is feeding bush fowls with maize while the chicken are starving’
 (Said to depict misplaced priorities)

c) Kù' diy dzé shé', ki boŋ, á shè', ki bír, á shè'
 more mourn be laugh sm good prog laugh sm prog-bad prog laugh
 ‘The greater part of mourning is laughter, be it during the good or the bad times’
 (It is better to be receptive and laugh over the good and the bad things of life)

Example 5a reveals three verb phrases in a single sentence. The first verb phrase (*wir tsəm í Ndzəádzəv*) has the NP, (*wir*) as its agent, in consonance with the Extended Projection Principle. The transitive verb, (*tsəm*) heads the predicate phrase. The following verb phrase (*tsəm í Taaŋkùm*) is equally headed by the same verb (*tsəm*). The third verb phrase is headed by the transitive verb *ran* (miss). Notice that the three verbs share a common subject (*wir*). These verb phrases equally share the present non-progressive tense marking. The SVC in 5a, has a single illocutionary force (all the verbs are assertive). The three verb phrases exhibit no syntactic clause boundary markings, such as complementisers, connective adverbs or conjunctions. Non of the three verbs modifies the other, neither is any a subordinate to another. The connectivity of the three actions relayed makes the sequence one single complex event.

Our analysis of example 5a clearly reveals that, each of the verb phrases has been condensed. The VPs share a single subject NP, one tense/aspect marker, conjunctions or connective adverbs are omitted and yet

the construction relates the sequence of activities within the grammatical rules of the language. The end result is a construction that is more economically derived. The grammatical intricacies involved in SVC highlighted in 5a, are available to the native speaker as part of his basic training in the language. The semantic interpretation of the verbs in 5a, is what takes the grammar of Lamnso' proverbs a step beyond basic competence in the language. We explain this immediately.

Literally, the verb *stám* means 'to shoot', 'to knit', 'to knell', or 'to plaster'. A good native speaker will have to be very context sensitive to correctly interpret the appropriate reference in 5a. The Nso' people built their traditional houses with bamboo stems. The bamboos are tied into shape to form the walls, and then plastered with red soil. The roof is thatched with grass. Neighbours will normally gather on a chosen day, to build a house for one man. The plastering is seen as the toughest part of the job after which the owner of the house entertains those who came to build for him with food and drink. 5a relates the scenario of a greedy person who opts to shuttle between two plastering venues with an eye on the food and drink, and ends up missing entertainment in both venues.

The context of 5a, above, reveals not only the intricacies of semantically interpreting the verb in use, but the transitivity alternation of the verb *stám* (plaster). Unlike the verb *ran* (to miss) which has *vilaáme* (entertainment) as its object NP, the first and the second verbs (though transitive) lack object NPs. The two NPs (*Ndzáádzəv* and *Taąkùm*) are prepositional complements. We do not yet have a convincing explanation of how the native speaker recovers the missing verbal complements in his/her interpretation. Maybe we can simply suggest that reference to missing NPs is implicit and discerned from the sub-categorization features of the verb. We return to the interpretation of such constructions in the next section which briefly examines the socio-cultural restrictions in the derivation of Lamnso' proverbs.

Example 5b, like 5a, has all the features of a SVC in the language, but unlike 5a, each phrase has all the structural requirements of a basic sentence. Example 5c is a more complex SVC with four verbs encoding several sub events. Only the first verb is subject marked. The internal argument is shared by the verbs representing the various events.

Above all, what example 5 reveals is that Lamnso proverbs are short sentences that do not respect the lexical insertion rules of the language. This adherence to economic derivations relies on the correct interpretation of the context of situation for their immediate meaning. The ability of the average native speaker to easily understand these proverbs is challenged.

5. Socio-cultural Restrictions in Proverb Derivation

Section 4 of our paper is interested in establishing whether the derivation of proverbs follows the lexical insertion rules with which Lamnso' grammar ascertains well-formed sentential constructions. We set out to

find out the peculiarities of the grammatical composition of Lamnso' proverbs that place the competence of an average native speaker in doubt once a proverb is introduced in conversation. Put more succinctly, why do the Nso' people refer to proverbs as "...the language of the soil"? Why has competence in the appropriate use of proverbs in conversation been linked to 'profound knowledge' of the language? In this section⁶, we examine sentential forms of proverbs with an interest in the socio-cultural restrictions that inform their structures. We make a preliminary attempt to categorize the proverbs in the light of their sentential structure and semantic import within the Nso' society. We hope that in so doing, we will not only be focusing on proverb derivation but revealing how Lamnso' native speakers view the world and express their values through proverbs.

5.1 Declarative Proverbs

A declarative proverb is a short sentence that states a truth ascertained by experience. Such proverbs are employed as a reminder to the traditional norms of society. They are propositions drawn from logical and valid reasoning meant to maintain sanity within the community.

6 a) *A yii kiyy shónj bì' yà'*

'A thief is normally identified by his/her trembling'

6a is employed when somebody gives himself away through mannerisms, behaviour or conflicting utterances. The proverb is an admonition to tale bearers and spin doctors to engage honesty in all their interactions. Declarative proverbs are structurally similar to the basic sentence proverb examined in 4.1

b) *Mbè' yò' yii kúy shaa kitu*

'The shoulder never grows taller than the head'

6b is a reminder to the young to always respect their elders. The proverb uses the vertical positions of body parts to remind the young of the respect for natural hierarchy. Among the Nso' people, age and wisdom are intricately linked. Wisdom is the knowledge of life acquired through years of experience. Younger people humble themselves in the presence of their elders whom they revere and seek to draw from their knowledge of the world accumulated through time.

c) *Nyuy loò kur ndzà y i wìr kinye, la wu yò' a tà' kifám*

'God does not need a belt when He is clothing a person'

6c is said when fortune smiles at a member of the community. An individual's good luck and destiny are believed to rest in the hands of God. God's justice is never queried and as the English say "...the ways of God are not the ways of man". Society may judge some persons as undeserving of certain benefits. Once such an honour is bestowed on them, that moment is an appropriate context to hear the proverb in 6c. If one

⁶ Unlike all our previous examples, the proverbs in this section are in two tiers (the proverb and the literary translation). We opt to leave out the lexical translation for the simple reason that our discussion here does not require the specification of lexical features, argument structure, and the relations between sentential constituents.

borrow an oversized garment, the individual usually requires a belt to hold the garments in place. God does not require a belt to clothe anybody because he gives to each according to his/her needs.

The declarative proverbs in 6 are general principles. They are maxims that are accepted and extolled in the community over time. For any sentence to be accepted as a proverb, it must be restricted by these features. Such a sentence must equally have implied meaning that is multilayered and rely heavily on context for their immediate meaning.

5.2 Comparative Proverbs

Comparative proverbs usually present two scenarios each in a clause. Following common logic, preference for one of the options is made.

7 a *A si moo yée le, boŋ moo yée sho*

‘It is preferable to struggle to contend with a surplus, than with lack’

The Nso' people are generally subsistent farmers. When a particular crop is in season, there is usually an abundance of it everywhere. Once it is out of season, it becomes very difficult to come by. 7a presents two conditions: One of abundance and another of want. The proverb prefers to have to battle with plenty, than to experience lack.

b) *À lóo leŋrí fəð, à waà kuumé rár*

‘When you admire the red feather, you must remember war’

During the days when the Nso' people were expanding their territory by engaging their neighbours in warfare, brave warriors were distinguished on return to the clan with a gift of a red feather by the Fon⁷. 7b states that one should not admire the red feather in isolation of how to earn it. The proverb extols hard work and merit. It effectively does this by presenting honour and glory on the same platter with hard work.

c) *A si dzé kisaŋe, bəŋ ghán kisaŋe*

‘An aimless journey is better than idleness’

7c is said when an individual benefits from an aimless journey.

The proverbs in 7a to c consist of two clauses that are juxtaposed to relate one truth. The clause containing the preferred condition normally follows the first condition. It will be a violation of the socio-cultural restrictions of proverb derivation to have a proverb that places its preference on a condition which is logically not the better of the two. Also, proverbs that extol anti-social behaviour cannot be candidates for Lamnso' proverbs. The power of comparison in the proverbs in 7 do not only bring to the fore an awareness of the existence of an alternative, but strengthens the values of the condition or action in preference.

⁷ The fon is the paramount ruler of the Nso' people. He reigns over an expansive fonom.

5.3 Cause and Effect Proverbs

In cause and effect proverbs the matrix clause presents a given course of action, the subordinate clause relates the consequences of such an action. Cause and effect proverbs are used as a reminder to the responsibilities of the actions individuals take. More often, the consequences of the things we do are so grave that society has found a warning avenue in proverbs to constantly alert the community of the dangers of the wrong choices they are likely to make. Examine 8a – b below and follow the analysis thereafter.

8 a) *Shúu loó nyòm ngaà kitàn, bow ú mà' nge' sho*

‘When poor man develops a sweet tooth, he is in trouble’

This proverb is akin to the English saying “*Cut your coat according to your cloth*”. It cautions people not to develop habits they cannot afford lest they suffer in their quest to fulfill their desires.

b) *Á kem fo sé', bo a yú kitu ke kav*

‘When a disagreement ensues over the profit (on an item), the cost prize (of the item) is known’

8b warns that the consequence of an argument is the revelation of secrets that were hitherto hidden. The proverbs in 8 are bi-componential. For any Lamnso' sentence to qualify as a cause-and-effect proverb of the structures in 8, it must be seen to bear two parts: One an action, the other a consequence of the action. The consequence must bear an effect capable of dissuading the participant from engaging in acts inimical to the harmonious functioning of the community.

5.4 Didactic Proverbs

Didactic proverbs are the most commonly used proverbs in Lamnso'. They aim at teaching subtle lessons of smooth cohabitation to people in the society. They are used to encourage good manners that promote peace. Didactic proverbs warn people to avoid harmful practices, to shirk indolence and embrace diligence. Parents are alerted that the best time to inculcate good social habits in a child is when he/she is young. People are cautioned against neglecting things which appear unimportant as such things may bring disaster later (Nyembezi 1974).

9 a) *Wir buŋ kitém, la wu yò' stà' ndzév*

‘When you lack a calabash do not dirty the water’

9a admonishes those who lack a means to achieve something not to hinder those who have the ability to accomplish it.

b) *Kiwó kimò'ón ki yò' yii kúr kifú*

‘One hand cannot tie a bundle’

9b advocates collaborative work. It asserts that a task is made easier when many people come together to accomplish it.

c) *Vishwím vi yo' yii kó' way ngəv*

‘Cockroaches do not attend a fowl's market’

9c is usually used when somebody begins to fraternize with his enemies. The proverb cautions that it is sensible to avoid contact with people who do not like you.

d) *Aá tír ru' i wò, làà yò' bà'ri bùn*

‘When a tapper mortgages his palm bush to you, don’t build a palm wine store’

9d states that one should not attempt to take advantage of people in difficulty. If somebody pledges his property to you as a security for a loan, you should not claim ownership of the property. The proverb cautions that within the community, individuals should respect terms of agreement.

d) *Á yò' yii yó' fon, á sòr wó i nsay*

‘One does not anoint the King and then wipes his hands on the ground’

9e is said to encourage reward for good deeds. During periodic traditional rites in the land, the *fon* is normally anointed with a paste made out of cam wood. It is a privilege to be selected to anoint the *fon*. After the task is finished, it is customary that the fellow who did the anointing be rewarded. To clean ones hands on the ground after soiling them is regarded as a mark of poverty. The reward is normally palm wine and a live chicken.

The proverbs in 9 are morally prescriptive. They spell out the appropriate reaction in a given circumstance. These prescriptive sentences idolize the community virtues. Rather than simply state what society expects of an individual in a particular situation, the proverbs opt to identify what the individual is not expected to do. This form introduces negation. The general assumption with deriving a negative sentence is that, at the deep structure level, the sentence is declarative. The negative transformation base generates the particle *la* and the negative element (*yò'*), which it places before the main verb. The introduction of negation reverts what otherwise would have been the prescription of a vice to virtue. Proverbs that advocate vices are unacceptable within the plethora of Lamnso' proverbs.

5. Concluding Remarks

The description of proverbs as “...*the language of the soil*...” is principally what drew our attention to the unique composition of proverbs. We set out to determine what informs the complexity of proverb derivation that renders the average native speaker’s competence in the grammar of Lamnso' inadequate enough not to equally take for granted his ability to employ and understand proverbs. From our structural analysis of Lamnso' proverbs, two features can be said to be responsible for the complexity of proverbs:

- a) Economy of derivation: the attempt to condense moral and philosophical expositions into a mnemonic form which can be committed to memory and repeated at appropriate contexts has pushed proverb derivation beyond the basic requirements of sentence formation in Lamnso'. Proverbs formation does not respect basic lexical insertion rules and constituents whose semantic value can be implicitly decoded are deleted. SVC enables proverbs to represent a series of actions while sharing a single internal argument. We have explained this economy of derivation within the tenets of the MP of Chomsky (1992, 1995).
- b) Proverbs present abstract meanings. Their metaphoric characteristic removes them from the class of basic sentences. This feature requires that their interpretation is beyond the meaning of the

words in use. In addition, we have shown that a proverb does not have a static interpretation. Proverbs are multi-layered and rely heavily on the context of situation for their immediate meaning. Apart from being a reflection of the world view of the native speakers, proverb derivation must respect the socio-cultural restrictions.

To appropriately employ and comprehend Lamnso' proverbs one requires a little more than being competent in Lamnso'. Lamnso proverbs do not employ an elaborate style. Whole words and phrases can be deleted and the prosaic form changed to permit a more poetic utterance. Proverbs represent profound knowledge which the Nso' people have chosen to call "...*the language of the soil*..."

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Abbreviations

prog	progressive
non-prog	non-progressive
sm	subject marker
AM	associative marker
neg	negative marker