

Parataxis in Wungu Proverbs

Proverbs have an enormous social significance as they carry enduring pieces of the wisdom of the community. The wisdom of proverbs is concealed in intricate linguistic structures attested in world languages and has been subjects of intense study. This paper reports on an analysis of the structure of proverbs of the Bungu community of southwestern Tanzania. The language of the community, Kibungu (iso 639-3 wun; Guthrie (1967-71) F25), is an undocumented language spoken on the shores of Lake Rukwa. In Bungu culture, as in other cultures, expressive forms of language, imagery, and expression of abstract ideas through allusive phraseology, metaphors, and parallelism are abundant in proverbs. This paper examines one of the common proverb structures in Kibungu, namely, parataxis. Parataxis is a construction in which two or more constituents are linked without explicit formal devices, such as conjunctions. We address two questions: (a) How is parataxis used in Bungu proverbs? (b) Since there is no formal conjunction, what devices help speakers or listeners correctly interpret the coordination, subordination, or contrast in proverbs? The proverbs were collected in an ethnographic investigation of Bungu folklore. They were audio-recorded and transcribed. For this study, the proverbs were subjected to sentence structure analysis. The analysis reveals that the interpretation of paratactic coordinate and complex sentences in proverbs is facilitated by verbless copula, subjunctive, alliteration, parallelism and agreement. The study demonstrates that the value of proverbs in Bungu community reflects what happened in the past and contemporary and future Bungu life. It illustrates how ancient wisdom is encoded in complex syntactic structures in a manner that is consistent with other languages of the world. As part of the documentation effort, this study contributes by bringing materials from an undocumented language and thus expanding the empirical base of Bantu structures and the different folklore genres they share. The data presented enrich studies of universal structures of proverbs.