An Analysis of Denotative, Connotative, and Collocative Meaning in Tshivenḓa Proverbs: A Leech's Semantic Theory Perspective

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Abstract

The study aims to analyse the associative meaning of selected Tshivenḓa proverbs from the viewpoint of Leech's semantic theory (1974), focusing specifically on denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings. Proverbs are a significant aspect of Tshivenḓa oral tradition, serving as repositories of linguistic, cultural, and philosophical knowledge. However, a deeper semantic and cultural analysis of these proverbs is required as their meanings extend beyond literal interpretation. A qualitative research design was employed, combining document analysis with semi-structured interviews of Tshivenḓa language experts and elders, who were purposively sampled. Findings indicate that denotative meaning provides a literal foundation for interpretation. Connotative meaning introduces metaphorical and cultural depth, and collocative meaning structures proverbs through habitual word associations. Additionally, challenges in proverb interpretation arise due to linguistic gaps, translation difficulties, and evolving cultural contexts. The objective of the study is to examine, explore, and analyse the denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings of selected Tshivenḓa proverbs. The study concludes that Tshivenḓa proverbs are semantically rich and deeply rooted in cultural identity, requiring contextual knowledge for accurate interpretation. The findings contribute to African linguistic studies and oral literature by offering insights into semantic meaning construction in Tshivenḓa proverbs. Future research should examine the evolution of proverbs in contemporary discourse and their applicability in different social domains.

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Introduction and Background

Proverbs, which contain wisdom, moral lessons, and cultural values, are a crucial part of African oral literature (Finnegan 2012). Proverbs are used in Tshivenḓa society as a means of social control, education, and communication (Mugovhani 2017). They reflect the Vhavenḓa people's worldview and provide linguistic richness and cultural understanding. Proverbs' semantic analysis is complicated, nonetheless, because their meaning frequently goes beyond their literal interpretation (Mieder 2004).

Tshivenḓa proverbs are ingrained in customs, daily interactions, and traditional speech (Makhado 2025). As cultural markers that preserve traditional values and social norms (Rafapa 2018) and indigenous knowledge (Mieder 2004), they serve as moral and ethical guidelines that teach younger generations appropriate behaviour (Mbiti 1997) and occasionally as cognitive tools for reasoning and problem-solving. Even though Tshivenḓa proverbs are important, understanding them can be difficult, particularly for non-native speakers and younger generations who are not familiar with traditional metaphorical phrases (Mkhize 2020).

Many linguistic studies focus on proverb classification and functions, but fewer explore their semantic structures (Mieder 2004; Finnegan 2012). In Tshivenḓa, various authors have researched about proverbs in different dimensions. Raphalalani (2013) examined the significance and appropriateness of some Tshivenḓa proverbs in the new democratic order in South Africa. The research found that proverbs are not old-fashioned, as they are still appropriate in the new democracy in South Africa. Again, Raphalalani (2021) explored the "subject of gender inequalities as reflected in some Tshivenḓa proverbs" and concluded that there is gender bias in their coinage and figurative interpretations. Mafela (2008), on the other hand, in "Proverbs as Illustrative Examples in Tshivenḓa Bilingual Dictionary," explored the different meanings that proverbs hold. The studies mentioned above were good to reach their objectives; however, neither of them focused on the semantics of proverbs in the Tshivenḓa Language, specifically using Leech's theory of semantics as this study's intent. This study addresses this gap by analysing associative meaning in Tshivenḓa proverbs based on Leech's (1974) semantic framework, which classifies meaning into denotative, connotative, and collocative dimensions. Leech (1974) refers to denotative meaning as the literal interpretation of proverbs, which serves as a foundation for further semantic analysis. Connotative meaning extends beyond literal interpretation, incorporating cultural, emotional, and metaphorical associations (Makhado 2025). Collocative meaning explores how words within proverbs are habitually associated, influencing interpretation (Leech 1981).

By applying this framework, the study seeks to uncover how meaning is structured in Tshivenḓa proverbs and how different layers of meaning contribute to proverbial wisdom and cultural identity (Rafapa 2018). Despite the linguistic and cultural

significance of Tshivenḓa proverbs, their semantic complexity remains understudied in linguistic research. Many proverbs carry multiple layers of meaning, which can lead to misinterpretation, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Makhado 2025). Although Tshivenḓa proverbs are culturally and linguistically significant, their layered semantic structures, especially from an associative perspective, are often overlooked in scholarly research. This lack of focused analysis has resulted in a limited understanding of how literal meanings (denotative), metaphorical or culturally implied meanings (connotative), and habitual word pairings (collocative) work together to construct the rich, nuanced meanings that Tshivenḓa proverbs convey. This gap is particularly evident in the context of semantic theories, such as Leech's (1974), which offer a comprehensive framework for examining these layers of meaning.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings of selected Tshivenḓa proverbs using Leech's semantic framework. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) identify and interpret the literal meanings of these proverbs, (2) explore the deeper cultural and emotional connotations embedded within them, and (3) examine the common word associations that shape how these proverbs are traditionally understood. In addition, the study aims to investigate the challenges faced in proverb interpretation, particularly those arising from linguistic evolution, translation limitations, and shifting cultural contexts. This study contributes to African linguistic research by expanding the understanding of proverb semantics (Finnegan 2012), cross-cultural communication, offering insights into translation and meaning transfer of Tshivenḓa proverbs (Mieder 2004), as well as language preservation efforts, emphasising the role of proverbs in maintaining Tshivenḓa cultural heritage (Makhado 2025). By exploring the layered meanings of Tshivenḓa proverbs, the study enhances understanding of language, culture, and identity in African linguistics.

Theoretical Framework

This study, which focuses on the denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings in Tshivenḓa proverbs, is based on Geoffrey Leech's (1974) semantic theory. According to Finnegan (2012), language serves as a vehicle for cultural values and identity, in addition to being a medium of communication, especially in oral traditions where proverbs are highly valued. By analysing Tshivenḓa proverbs through Leech's framework, this study aims to uncover the depth of meaning that extends beyond mere words.

Leech (1974) identifies seven types of meaning in language: conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic meaning. However, this study focuses on three key types. Denotative meaning refers to the literal, dictionary definition of words or phrases (Leech 1974). In Tshivenḓa proverbs, this is the direct meaning before any cultural or figurative interpretation is applied. For instance, in the proverb "*Mmbwa i do lila na muṋe wayo*" (A dog will cry with its owner), the literal meaning

refers to a dog and its master. However, the deeper meaning emerges when considering connotative and collocative aspects. Connotative meaning refers to the additional, implied meanings beyond the literal interpretation, often shaped by culture, emotions, and social experience (Leech 1974; Cruse 2004). In the example above, the proverb connotes loyalty, shared suffering, and solidarity, highlighting the expectation that people should support their close relations in times of hardship.

Tshivenḓa proverbs frequently rely on metaphorical and symbolic interpretations, making connotation a crucial aspect of their meaning (Taylor 2019). Collocative meaning is derived from the habitual co-occurrence of words, which influences the interpretation of phrases (Leech 1981). Certain words in Tshivenḓa proverbs appear together consistently, creating fixed associations that contribute to meaning. For example, in the proverb "*Nwana wa mbevha ha hangwi mukwita*" (The child of a rat does not forget the path), the collocation of "*mbevha*" (rat) and "*mukwita"* (path) reinforces the cultural expectation that children should follow in the footsteps of their elders. The recurring pairing of such words shapes how meaning is understood in different contexts (Lakoff and Johnson 2003).

Leech's semantic distinctions help in analysing how proverbs encode cultural wisdom in multiple layers of meaning. In many African societies, including the Tshivenḓa-speaking community, proverbs function as didactic tools, conveying moral lessons and social norms (Gordon 1996). The ability to distinguish between denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning enables a deeper understanding of how proverbs reflect cultural identity and worldview (Mbiti 1997).

Because proverbs have a strong oral tradition foundation, historical and social settings influence their meaning. It is necessary to consider both linguistic structure and cultural background when examining associated meaning in Tshivenḓa proverbs (Finnegan 2012). Leech's theory offers a methodical approach to examining the layers of meaning found in proverbs, demonstrating their function in the dissemination of knowledge and the preservation of culture (Mieder 2004).

In addition to establishing the theoretical lens, this study contributes to the broader framework of linguistic scholarship by demonstrating the applicability of Leech's semantic theory to an understudied oral tradition: Tshivenḓa proverbs. This interdisciplinary application highlights how the trio of meaning types (denotative, connotative, and collocative) can illuminate cultural wisdom embedded in oral literary forms. Conversely, Leech's theory gains empirical depth and validation through its use in a real-world linguistic context, showing that his semantic categories are not just abstract constructs but are instrumental in unpacking complex, culturally anchored meanings in proverbs.

By applying Leech's semantic theory, this study examines how denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning function in Tshivenḓa proverbs. This framework allows for a

structured analysis of both literal and figurative interpretations, highlighting the richness of Tshivenḓa oral traditions. Understanding these meanings is essential for appreciating how language, culture, and identity are intertwined in proverbial expressions.

Literature Review

The study of semantic meaning in proverbs has long been a significant area of inquiry in linguistics, particularly in understanding how cultural values and worldview are embedded in language. This section reviews existing literature on Tshivenḓa proverbs, Leech's semantic theory, and the role of denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning in proverbial interpretation.

Tshivenḓa Proverbs and Their Linguistic Significance

Proverbs represent a collection of wisdom, ethical direction, and cultural significance in African societies, particularly within the Tshivenḓa-speaking community (Finnegan 2012). Furthermore, Mbiti (1997) suggests that Tshivenḓa proverbs, similar to those found in other African languages, embody the experiences, beliefs, and societal norms of their users. Researchers have highlighted that proverbs are rich in metaphor and symbolism, often necessitating contextual understanding for proper interpretation (Mieder 2004).

Mugovhani (2017) contends that proverbs in Tshivenḓa serve as both linguistic constructs and cultural symbols, mirroring the historical and social experiences of the Vhavenḓa community. Nonetheless, grasping their significance necessitates an awareness of both explicit (denotative) and implicit (connotative) meanings. Additionally, Tshivenḓa proverbs often rely on patterns of collocation, where specific words commonly occur together, shaping the construction of meaning (Makhado 2025).

Leech's Semantic Theory and Its Application to Proverbs

Leech's (1974) semantic theory has been widely applied in the study of meaning, distinguishing between seven types of meaning in language. Different researchers like Hassan (2022) and Siliwangi (2020) concurred about Leech's (1989,61) semantics aspects on proverbs as used in Dixon (2010). Such aspects include denotative meaning, connotative meaning, collocative meaning, affective meaning, stylistic meaning, thematic meaning, and reflexive meaning. However, this study focuses on denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning, which are particularly relevant for proverbial interpretation.

Denotative Meaning

Denotative meaning, also referred to as conceptual or referential meaning, relates to the literal interpretation of words (Leech 1974). In denotative meaning Sulcova (2019, 47) postulates that "the literal meaning of a sentence is the meaning of the sum of its components that takes into account the meaning of the individual morphemes, lexemes

and sentence elements and how they work together to create a meaningful whole." Moreover Grzybek (2014, 80) concurs that "the literal meaning of an utterance derives from interpretation of each word using its common lexical meaning, but new meanings can arise if we assign figurative or metaphorical meaning to each word." The meaning of each word or morpheme is important in the denotative meaning.

Hassan (2022, 603) further postulates that "denotative meaning is the ordinary dictionary everyday meaning of a word or expression." Siliwangi (2020,144) also posits that:

> Compared to the organization and structure to the syntactic and phonological levels of language, denotative meaning is the primary among others. The basis of denotative meaning are the two structural principles that seem to be basis of all linguistics patterning namely the principle of contractiveness and the principle of structure.

In the case of Tshivenḓa proverbs, denotation forms the foundation upon which deeper meanings are constructed. For example, in the proverb "*Tshikovha tsha thaba a tshi fani na tsha vhudziki*" (A hill tortoise is not the same as a river tortoise), the literal meaning differentiates between tortoises from different environments. However, a deeper analysis reveals its connotative implications regarding social differences and personal identity (Rafapa 2018).

Connotative Meaning

Connotative meaning refers to the additional, cultural, and emotional associations of a word or phrase (Cruse 2004). Connotative meaning has the power of implying or suggesting something in addition to what is explicit. Siliwangi (2020, 144) suggests that "the meaning was the communicative value as an expression has by virtue of what it refers to over and above its purely conceptual contents is called connotative meaning." Furthermore, Hassan (2022, 603), in support of Siliwangi, affirms that:

> Connotative meaning is the argument essence of a word which is valid to what it denotes to more than its neatly conceptual content. It is related to that meaning of utterance, but it relays rigidly on surrounding text and different from history, culture or individual point of view.

Proverbs often function metaphorically, with meanings shaped by the cultural background of the speakers. For instance, the proverb "*Mushonga a u bvi kule*" (Medicine does not come from far) has a denotative meaning about the availability of medicine, but connotes that solutions to problems are often found within one's immediate environment (Mugovhani 2017). This highlights how Tshivenḓa proverbs use connotative meaning to convey philosophical and practical knowledge.

Collocative Meaning

Collocative meaning brings about different meanings in a sentence. Siliwangi (2020, 145) asserts that "Collocative meaning reflects the meaning which arises in cases when a word has a multiple conceptual meaning or polysemous, when one sense of a word form part of our response (or reaction) to another sense." Collocative meaning emerges from habitual word combinations that create predictable interpretations (Leech 1981). Certain words in Tshivenḓa proverbs appear together consistently, shaping how their meaning is understood. According to Mashige (2018), collocations in Tshivenḓa proverbs reflect social hierarchies, roles, and expectations. For example, the proverb "*Nwana wa nngu u fula mulenzhe*" (A lamb follows the footsteps) suggests that children must follow their elders' guidance. The collocation of "*nngu*" (sheep) and "*mulenzhe*" (footsteps) is significant, as these words frequently co-occur in cultural narratives about obedience and mentorship.

Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on Semantic Meaning in Proverbs

From a cross-linguistic perspective, the semantic meaning of proverbs reveals both universal and language-specific features, particularly in their denotative, connotative, and collocative dimensions. Denotative meaning refers to the literal or primary meaning of words within a proverb, which can often be directly translated across languages. However, while some denotative meanings may appear similar, their cultural relevance and usage may differ significantly. For instance, the English proverb "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" has a denotative equivalence in many languages, such as the Tshivenḓa proverb "*U luma mukosi u sa zwi ḓivhi*" (You celebrate before knowing the outcome), but the imagery and metaphors reflect different ecological and cultural settings (Norrick 2014). This highlights that although the surface meanings might align, their underlying cultural meanings are shaped by localised experiences.

On the other hand, connotative and collocative meanings in proverbs are more deeply embedded in culture, making them more resistant to direct translation. Connotation involves the emotional or cultural associations tied to a proverb's words, which vary across linguistic contexts. For example, animal imagery in African proverbs often carries moral or spiritual symbolism that may not resonate similarly in Western cultures (Yankah 1989). Furthermore, collocative meaning, which deals with the habitual co-occurrence of words, adds another layer of complexity. Certain words tend to appear together within specific linguistic contexts to convey established meanings, and such patterns often do not translate well due to differing collocational norms across languages (Crystal 2018). Therefore, a cross-linguistic analysis of proverbs must account not only for their literal translations but also for the culturally specific connotations and word pairings that shape their semantic richness.

Studies on proverbs in other African languages have also demonstrated the interplay between denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning. For instance, in a study on Yoruba proverbs, Owolabi (2019) highlights how proverbs often rely on connotative

meaning to convey moral teachings, with deeper interpretations depending on cultural familiarity. Similarly, in a study on Zulu proverbs, Mkhize (2020) notes that collocative meaning plays a crucial role in the predictability and structure of proverbial expressions. These findings align with Tshivenḓa proverbs, where meaning is constructed through a combination of literal references, figurative extensions, and fixed-word associations (Makhado 2025).

Moreover, the role of metaphorical and symbolic meaning in proverbs is widely acknowledged across different languages (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). African proverbs, including those in Tshivenḓa, rely on familiar images and shared cultural references to convey wisdom, which is why contextual and collocative meaning must be considered in their interpretation (Mieder 2004).

Challenges in Interpreting Tshivenḓa Proverbs

Although the meanings of Tshivenḓa proverbs can be profound and enlightening, they also pose challenges for interpretation, particularly for those who are not native speakers or are unfamiliar with Vhavenḓa culture (Rafapa 2018). Mugovhani (2017) points out the challenges associated with directly translating Tshivenḓa proverbs, as their implied and contextual meanings often lack direct counterparts in other languages. This challenge is especially significant in legal and educational settings, where reasoning based on proverbs may be misunderstood because of language differences (Mkhize 2020).

Moreover, evolving social dynamics have affected the contemporary interpretation of Tshivenḓa proverbs. Proverbs that once carried significant collocative meanings may diminish in cultural importance in today's society, as younger generations increasingly encounter global languages and digital forms of communication (Makhado 2025).

Summary of Key Findings in Literature

The literature reviewed provides important insights into the semantic structure and cultural function of Tshivenḓa proverbs. Key findings include:

Proverbs act as cultural and linguistic instruments that convey moral teachings, wisdom, and identity (Mbiti 1997; Finnegan 2012). Utilising brief and metaphorical language, they communicate ethical teachings, strengthen social norms, and maintain cultural heritage through generations. In numerous African communities, including those that speak Tshivenḓa, proverbs are not merely sayings but frameworks for interpreting life, guiding behaviour, and reinforcing a collective sense of belonging.

Leech's semantic differences aid in analysing the denotative, connotative, and collocative levels of meaning expressed in Tshivenḓa proverbs (Leech 1974; Cruse 2004). Proverbs may denotatively allude to actual events or things, but their potency is found in the connotative interpretations that arouse feelings, moral implications, and

cultural knowledge. An animal proverb, for instance, can symbolise social duties or human behaviour. By using common word associations that are familiar in the Tshivenḓa linguistic environment, collocative meaning further strengthens this and aids listeners in deciphering implicit messages through shared cultural knowledge. Together, these semantic layers give proverbs their richness as identification and communication tools.

Given that many proverbs contain implicit or symbolic meanings, connotative meaning is essential to understanding them (Mugovhani 2017; Mieder 2004). These idioms use culturally rooted connotations to convey societal critiques, moral teachings, or deeper truths beyond their exact meaning. Even while a single proverb may allude to a typical occurrence, it can also convey intricate concepts like humility, respect, or communal ideals. Therefore, to fully understand the meaning and value of proverbs within their cultural context, one must have a solid understanding of connotation.

Proverbs' word structures are influenced by collocative meaning, which reinforces particular social and cultural themes (Makhado 2025). Certain words naturally occur together in Tshivenḓa proverbs, not only to maintain grammatical coherence but also to support recurrent cultural and social themes like hard effort, respect, kinship, and communal living. Because the expected word pairings elicit a shared understanding based on history and lived experience, these collocations direct listeners towards the intended interpretations. The proverb's influence and resonance within the community are increased by this interaction of well-known forms and deeper meaning. Cross-linguistic studies confirm the universality of associative meaning in proverbs, with many African languages showing similar patterns in semantic interpretation (Owolabi 2019; Mkhize 2020). Challenges in proverb interpretation arise from translation issues and changing social contexts, affecting how meaning is perceived in contemporary settings (Rafapa 2018).

The review of literature establishes that Tshivenḓa proverbs are semantically rich expressions that require both linguistic and cultural competence for proper interpretation. Using Leech's semantic theory, this study will analyse selected proverbs to explore how denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings interact in meaning construction. Understanding these meanings is essential for appreciating the depth of Tshivenḓa oral traditions and their role in cultural preservation.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings of Tshivenḓa proverbs using Leech's (1974) semantic framework. A descriptive and interpretive approach was used to analyse selected proverbs, providing insights into their linguistic structure and cultural significance (Creswell 2013).

A qualitative research approach is suitable for this study as it focuses on in-depth analysis of language and meaning (Tarrant 2017). Since proverbs are embedded in oral tradition and cultural context, their interpretation requires a contextual and semantic analysis rather than quantitative methods (Cameron 2001). The qualitative research method enhances a fair analysis in this kind of study. The methodology is appropriate as it includes social and other observational matters. Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. Qualitative researchers are interested in people's beliefs, experiences, and meaning systems from the perspective of the people (Haradhan 2018). In addition, Mohajan (2018,1) posits that "Qualitative research is inductive in nature, and the researcher generally explores meaning and insights in a given situation." In the study on the semantics of proverbs in the Tshivenḓa language, the researcher generally examined the meaning and insights of different selected proverbs. Furthermore, De Jaeghere et al. (2020) also insist that it aims to provide a detailed understanding of human behaviour, emotion, attitudes, and experiences.

The study uses a descriptive research design, which allows for a detailed examination of the meanings embedded in Tshivenḓa proverbs (Bryman 2016). By applying Leech's semantic distinctions, the research aims to classify proverbs according to their denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings and explore how these meanings interact in the Tshivenḓa language and culture.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of Tshivenḓa-speaking individuals and linguistic experts, particularly elders, educators, and scholars of African linguistics who are familiar with the meanings and usage of Tshivenḓa proverbs (Mugovhani 2017). Such people stay in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

A purposive sampling technique is used to select 20 Tshivenḓa proverbs that exhibit clear examples of denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning (Mieder 2004). Ten key informants, comprising three elders from Vhembe District, four well-known language experts, and three educators from three different schools around Ṱhohoyanḓou, provided insights into cultural context, usage, and interpretations. The selection of proverbs is based on their frequency of use, richness, and relevance to Tshivenḓa culture (Makhado 2025). This non-probability sampling method ensures that the study captures in-depth linguistic and cultural insights rather than just random proverb selections.

Data was collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. During semi-structured interviews, elders and language experts were interviewed to gather native speaker interpretations of selected proverbs (Rafapa 2018). Open-ended questions were used to explore the literal (denotative) meaning of each proverb, the cultural and figurative (connotative) meaning as understood in Tshivenḓa society and the collocative patterns in proverb construction and interpretation. Interviews were

audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis (Creswell 2013). For document analysis, Tshivenḓa proverb collections, oral literature texts, and linguistic studies were analysed to extract relevant proverbs (Mieder 2004). Furthermore, proverbs were categorised according to their denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings, following Leech's (1974) framework. Lastly, secondary sources (books, journal articles, and proverb anthologies) were reviewed to establish existing interpretations (Finnegan 2012; Mbiti 1997).

A thematic analysis method was employed to analyse the gathered data (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, proverbs were categorised into denotative, connotative, and collocative groups according to Leech's (1974) classifications. Secondly, meanings were explored by looking at how they are used in Tshivenḓa culture (Mugovhani 2017). Thirdly, shared themes and consistent semantic patterns were recognised (Makhado 2025). Additionally, results were contrasted with prior research on African proverbs and the creation of meaning (Mieder 2004; Mbiti 1997). Finally, triangulation involves comparing document analysis, interviews, and literature to verify accuracy and confirm meaning (Tarrant 2017).

Ethical consideration, an essential aspect of research, is ensured by obtaining informed consent from all participants before interviews (Bryman 2016). Again, issues of confidentiality and anonymity are ensured in handling personal data (Creswell 2013). For educators, ethical approval was sought from the Limpopo Province Department of Education (Patton 2014).

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the denotative, connotative, and collocative meanings of selected Tshivenḓa proverbs. The results are systematically interpreted through Leech's (1974) semantic framework, aligning empirical findings with theoretical categories to deepen analytical insight.

Denotative Meaning in Tshivenḓa Proverbs

Denotative meaning refers to the literal or referential meaning of words in a proverb. The analysis revealed that many Tshivenḓa proverbs indeed contain straightforward, dictionary-like meanings, precisely aligning with Leech's conceptual category of denotation and affirming its applicability to oral literary forms (Leech 1974).

For example, the proverb:

- "*Tshikovha tsha thaba a tshi fani na tsha vhudziki*" (A hill tortoise is not the same as a river tortoise).

At the denotative level, it merely compares two types of tortoises. However, the theoretical lens of denotation confirms how this initial literal comparison sets the groundwork for deeper semantic layers. Our findings show that the presence of a clear denotative base consistently functions as a springboard into connotative and collocative interpretation (Rafapa 2018).

Connotative meaning in Tshiveṇḓa proverbs

Connotative meaning refers to the emotive or cultural associations beyond the literal (Leech 1974). The study confirms that many proverbs embed rich associations, a validation of Leech's theory that connotation is integral in proverb analysis.

Example:

- "*Mushonga a u bvi kule*" (Medicine does not come from far).

Denotatively, this suggests solutions are nearby. Connotatively, it implies reliance on local resources and wisdom. Here, the theory aids in systematically distinguishing the layers of meaning, affirming connotation's pivotal role in cultural communication (Makhado 2025; Mbiti 1997).

Collocative Meaning in Tshiveṇḓa Proverbs

Collocative meaning arises from habitual word pairings that shape interpretation (Leech 1981). Our findings demonstrate that collocative patterns are consistent and laden with cultural expectation—showing how Leech's collocative category operationalises the interpretation of recurring linguistic patterns.

Example:

- "*Ṅwana wa nngu u fula mulenzhe*" (A lamb follows the footsteps).

Though literal, the frequent pairing of "*nngu*" (sheep) and "*mulenzhe*" (footsteps) affirms cultural values of following elders. This reinforces that collocations anchor social norms—a realisation only possible with the analytical categories provided by the theory.

Challenges in proverb interpretation

Interpretive challenges stem from linguistic and cultural gaps, evolving contexts, and translation limitations. The theoretical framework again proves essential, by clarifying why certain proverbs resist straightforward interpretation when connotative or collocative meanings don't translate directly (Makhado 2025; Mieder 2004; Rafapa 2018).

Conclusion

This study examined the associative significance of Tshivenḓa proverbs through Leech's (1974) semantic framework. The key findings indicate that, first, denotative meaning offers a literal base for understanding proverbs. Second, connotative meaning enhances proverbs with symbolic, metaphorical, and cultural connections. Third, collocative meaning organises proverb understanding via typical word patterns that uphold social values. Finally, difficulties in proverb interpretation emerge from linguistic differences, evolving cultural contexts, and translation issues.

The study validates that Tshivenḓa proverbs possess linguistic and cultural intricacies, necessitating semantic examination and cultural understanding for precise interpretation. Future studies ought to investigate the evolution of proverb meanings within modern Tshivenḓa society and their significance in education, legal matters, and social interactions.

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Expand Proverb Documentation through Paremiography.**

Collect a broader and more diverse corpus of Tshivenḓa proverbs using field-based methods such as interviews with elders, community sources, and social media techniques. This aligns with paremiographic practices that emphasise collecting proverbs directly from speakers, especially in communities with limited written heritage.

- **Integrate Semantic Annotation via Linguistic Linked Open Data (LLOD).**

Develop an annotated digital repository of Tshivenḓa proverbs using LLOD frameworks. Doing so enhances interoperability, sustainable data use, and richer semantic metadata—benefits highlighted in open linguistics infrastructure development.

- **Explore Digital Language Resource Partnerships (e.g., SADiLaR).**

Collaborate with organisations such as the South African Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) to digitise, preserve, and share Tshivenḓa proverb corpora as part of broader indigenous language resource initiatives

- **Employ Computational Semantic Models (e.g., Word Embeddings).**

Experiment with word embedding techniques to model semantic similarity and collocative patterns in Tshivenḓa proverbs computationally. Similar models have proven effective for low-resource African languages.

- **Assess Language Models via Probes for Semantic Knowledge.**

Apply probing techniques to pretrained language models tailored to African languages to examine how well they encode semantic features similar to denotative, connotative, and collocative meaning, echoing recent advances in probing methodologies.

- **Adopt a Cultural Linguistics Perspective.**

Frame future proverb semantics research within Cultural Linguistics to better understand how Tshivenḓa proverbs reflect cultural schemas, metaphors, and group cognition. This theoretical lens can deepen insights into worldview encoding in language.

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