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The Invariability of Tshivenda Proverbs: Linguistic Stability and Cultural Continuity in Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Avhatakali Jonathan Makhado 

Department of African Languages, University of Venda, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the structural and semantic stability of Tshivenda proverbs through a Construction Grammar-informed morphosyntactic analysis and an examination of variation across oral and digital communication. While African proverbs have long been recognised as repositories of indigenous knowledge and moral instruction, limited attention has been paid to the linguistic mechanisms underlying their resistance to structural change. The study examines how morphosyntactic constraints contribute to the invariability of Tshivenda proverbs within Indigenous Knowledge Systems. A qualitative approach was adopted using a corpus of twenty Tshivenda proverbs collected from elders, language educators, and cultural practitioners in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, cultural discussions, and documentary analysis, and analysed using morphosyntactic segmentation, interlinear glossing, thematic analysis, and Construction Grammar. The findings show that Tshivenda proverbs are highly entrenched constructional schemas characterised by clausal economy, noun class agreement, invariant copular constructions, and constrained associative and instrumental morphology. These grammatical features preserve conventionalised form–meaning pairings and limit structural variation across generations. Although contemporary youth discourse and digital communication exhibit truncation, ellipsis, and code-switching, such variation occurs at the level of discourse and pragmatic adaptation rather than within the grammatical structure of the proverbs. The study concludes that the invariability of Tshivenda proverbs results from the interaction of morphosyntactic constraints, constructional entrenchment, and cultural transmission, ensuring linguistic stability while accommodating limited pragmatic flexibility.

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Avhatakali Jonathan Makhado, Department of African Languages, University of Venda, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa;
Email: avhatakali.makhado@univen.ac.za

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 20 January 2026 | Revised: 2 March 2026 | Accepted: 10 March 2026 | Published Online: 23 March 2026
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v8i3.13555>

CITATION

Makhado, A.J., 2026. The Invariability of Tshivenda Proverbs: Linguistic Stability and Cultural Continuity in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 8(3): 24–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v8i3.13555>

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Keywords: Tshivenda Proverbs; Construction Grammar; Morphosyntax; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Constructional Entrenchment; Bantu Linguistics; Linguistic Stability; Oral Tradition

1. Introduction

Proverbs constitute one of the most enduring forms of verbal art within African oral traditions. Across the continent, they function as repositories of communal knowledge, cultural memory, and social values, serving as concise but powerful expressions through which communities interpret experience and regulate social behaviour^[1,2]. As culturally sanctioned forms of discourse, proverbs transmit ethical principles, social expectations, and collective wisdom across generations, thereby contributing significantly to the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems^[1,3].

Within African societies, proverbs occupy a position that extends beyond their rhetorical function. They are frequently employed in dispute resolution, leadership discourse, storytelling, moral instruction, ceremonial communication, and everyday interpersonal interaction. Their authority derives not only from their cultural significance but also from their recognisable and reproducible linguistic form^[2]. The ability of proverbs to retain both their structure and meaning over extended periods of time has long attracted scholarly attention within folklore studies, linguistics, anthropology, and paremiology.

Tshivenda-speaking communities in South Africa provide an important context for investigating proverb stability. Within these communities, proverbs continue to be used in family interactions, community gatherings, traditional ceremonies, educational contexts, and public discourse. Their persistence within everyday communication demonstrates the continued vitality of oral traditions despite increasing urbanisation, multilingualism, and technological transformation. Proverbs remain central to the transmission of indigenous knowledge because they encapsulate culturally validated interpretations of social life and human behaviour^[4,5].

The persistence of proverbs raises an important linguistic question: why do proverbs remain remarkably stable despite continuous language change? Traditional explanations have largely attributed proverb stability to cultural repetition, memorability, and social authority^[1,2]. While these factors undoubtedly contribute to preservation, contemporary

linguistic theory suggests that structural stability may also result from cognitive and grammatical mechanisms that constrain variation. Construction Grammar, for example, conceptualises linguistic expressions as conventionalised form–meaning pairings that become entrenched through repeated usage^[6]. Recent developments in Sign-Based Construction Grammar further emphasise that linguistic knowledge can be modeled through structured networks of constructions in which formal properties and semantic interpretations are systematically associated^[7]. From this perspective, proverbs are not merely collections of words but stored linguistic constructions whose internal structure resists modification.

Usage-based approaches similarly argue that repeated exposure strengthens cognitive representations of linguistic forms, resulting in highly entrenched constructions that speakers retrieve as holistic units rather than generating anew in each communicative event^[8]. Such entrenchment may explain why proverb structures remain stable even when surrounding linguistic systems undergo change. Repeated transmission reinforces particular grammatical configurations, thereby preserving both linguistic form and cultural meaning.

The issue of stability is particularly significant in Tshivenda because the language exhibits a highly structured noun class system characteristic of Bantu languages^[9]. Noun class agreement, subject–verb concord, copular constructions, and associative morphology impose grammatical constraints on acceptable linguistic variation. These morphosyntactic features potentially contribute to proverb invariability by limiting the degree to which lexical substitution or structural modification can occur without affecting grammaticality or cultural acceptability.

At the same time, contemporary communication environments introduce new contexts for proverb usage. Digital platforms, social media interaction, multilingual discourse, and youth linguistic practices create opportunities for adaptation and innovation. Recent developments in African language technologies demonstrate that indigenous languages are increasingly entering digital environments through computational resources such as multilingual news classification

and language processing tools^[10,11]. These developments provide new contexts in which traditional linguistic expressions may be preserved, analysed, and adapted while remaining connected to cultural identity and traditional meaning systems.

Although considerable scholarship has examined African proverbs as carriers of wisdom, morality, and cultural identity, comparatively little research has focused on proverb invariability as a morphosyntactic phenomenon. Existing studies have tended to emphasise cultural preservation while paying less attention to the grammatical mechanisms that contribute to structural stability^[2,12]. Furthermore, few studies have applied Construction Grammar to the analysis of African proverbs, particularly within Tshivenda. Consequently, limited understanding exists regarding the relationship between constructional entrenchment, morphosyntactic constraint systems, and proverb stability.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the linguistic foundations of proverb invariability in Tshivenda. Specifically, it examines how morphosyntactic structures contribute to the preservation of proverb form and meaning across generations and communicative contexts. By combining Construction Grammar with ethnolinguistic and oral tradition perspectives, the study seeks to demonstrate that proverb stability emerges from the interaction of grammatical constraints, cognitive entrenchment, and cultural transmission.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Paremiology, Ethnolinguistic Theory, and Oral Tradition Theory. These frameworks collectively provide a foundation for understanding proverbs as linguistic constructions, cultural artefacts, and vehicles for indigenous knowledge transmission.

2.1. Paremiology

Paremiology, the systematic study of proverbs, provides a foundational framework for analysing proverb structure, meaning, and usage. Proverbs are generally understood as conventionalised expressions characterised by relative fixity, metaphorical content, social authority, and recognisable communicative functions^[2,12].

Unlike ordinary utterances, proverbs are culturally established expressions whose meanings are shaped by collective acceptance and repeated transmission. Their stability emerges from the interaction between linguistic form, cultural expectations, and repeated social use. Within paremiological research, proverb stability has long been recognised as one of the defining characteristics of proverbial language. Proverbs tend to maintain their linguistic structure across generations, enabling communities to preserve culturally valued knowledge, social norms, and collective interpretations of experience^[2,11]. This relative fixity contributes to their authority because speakers recognise them as inherited expressions rather than individual innovations.

Paremiology therefore provides a useful lens through which proverb invariability may be examined. It highlights the relationship between formulaicity, memorability, and cultural continuity while offering important insights into the role of fixed linguistic structures in the preservation of communal knowledge.

2.2. Ethnolinguistic Theory

Ethnolinguistic theory emphasises the intimate relationship between language and culture. Language is understood not merely as a communication system but as a repository of cultural experience, social values, and community-based interpretations of reality^[4]. Linguistic expressions are therefore understood as reflections of the cultural worldviews of the communities that produce and maintain them.

Recent scholarship on Indigenous Knowledge Systems further emphasises that indigenous linguistic resources represent active knowledge frameworks rather than static cultural artefacts. Their preservation depends on continued community use, intergenerational transmission, and recognition within educational and social institutions^[13].

Tshivenda proverbs therefore represent both linguistic structures and epistemological resources through which cultural knowledge is maintained.

2.3. Oral Tradition Theory

Oral Tradition Theory focuses on the mechanisms through which knowledge is transmitted in societies where oral communication has historically played a central role. Oral traditions survive through repeated performance, col-

lective participation, memory, and social validation^[1].

Within oral traditions, proverbs occupy a particularly important position because they are frequently reproduced in recurring social contexts such as storytelling, conflict mediation, public speaking, and ceremonial discourse. Continuous repetition reinforces their memorability and contributes to the preservation of stable linguistic forms^[1].

Oral Tradition Theory therefore provides an explanation for the persistence of proverbs over time. Through repeated performance and communal validation, proverb structures become socially entrenched and resistant to significant alteration.

Taken together, Paremiology, Ethnolinguistic Theory, and Oral Tradition Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding proverb invariability. While paremiology highlights formal stability, ethnolinguistics emphasises cultural meaning, and oral tradition theory explains mechanisms of transmission. Combined with Construction Grammar and usage-based linguistic perspectives, these theories support a multidimensional analysis of Tshivenda proverb stability.

2.4. Construction Grammar and Usage-Based Linguistic Theory

Construction Grammar provides the principal linguistic framework for this study. Construction Grammar argues that linguistic knowledge consists of conventionalised pairings between form and meaning known as constructions^[6,7]. These constructions range from simple lexical units to complex grammatical patterns.

Sign-Based Construction Grammar expands this perspective by modelling constructions as structured linguistic signs in which formal properties, syntactic organisation, and semantic interpretation are integrated within a unified representation^[7]. This approach is particularly relevant to proverbial expressions because proverbs frequently involve fixed relationships between grammatical structure and culturally specific meanings.

From this perspective, proverbs may be analysed as highly entrenched constructions. Their meanings are not derived exclusively from the meanings of individual words but from established relationships between linguistic form, cultural knowledge, and communicative function.

Usage-based linguistic approaches further explain how

such constructions become stable. Frequent exposure strengthens cognitive representations, increasing accessibility and reducing the likelihood of structural modification^[8,14]. Through repeated use, speakers store frequently encountered expressions as integrated units.

This theoretical position is particularly relevant to proverb invariability. Tshivenda proverbs are repeatedly encountered in culturally meaningful contexts, resulting in strong associations between specific grammatical structures and particular meanings. Their stability is therefore understood as the result of interaction between linguistic structure, cognitive entrenchment, and cultural transmission.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Proverbs as Constructional Units in Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Proverbs occupy a central position within Indigenous Knowledge Systems because they function as repositories of collective memory, cultural values, and socially validated knowledge. Across African societies, indigenous knowledge has historically been preserved and transmitted through oral forms such as narratives, songs, rituals, praise poetry, and proverbs^[1,13]. These forms constitute important mechanisms through which communities maintain continuity between past and present generations.

Within this broader framework, proverbs serve as highly condensed expressions of communal experience. They encapsulate observations about human behaviour, social relationships, morality, leadership, conflict resolution, and environmental knowledge. They communicate lessons concerning human behaviour, morality, leadership, relationships, responsibility, and environmental awareness^[2,12]. Consequently, proverbs function not merely as rhetorical devices but as culturally authoritative statements that guide behaviour and reinforce social norms.

African scholars have long emphasised the importance of oral expressions as vehicles of knowledge transmission. Such expressions preserve community philosophies and provide frameworks through which social behaviour is interpreted. Proverbs are therefore not merely decorative forms of speech but culturally authoritative statements that influence decision-making and social interaction.

From a linguistic perspective, however, proverbs are

more than repositories of cultural meaning. Contemporary theories of language increasingly view them as conventionalised constructions consisting of stable form–meaning relationships^[6,7]. Within Construction Grammar, linguistic knowledge is organised as a network of constructions, each associated with particular structural and semantic properties.

This perspective provides an important shift from traditional approaches that treat proverbs primarily as literary or folkloric artefacts. Instead, proverbs become part of the grammatical knowledge of speakers. Their stability can therefore be examined through linguistic mechanisms rather than cultural repetition alone. Such an approach is particularly relevant for Tshivenda, where proverb usage remains closely integrated into everyday communicative practice.

Achebe’s observation that proverbs function as essential tools of communication within African discourse illustrates their social importance^[15]. From a constructional perspective, their effectiveness depends partly on the fact that speakers recognise and retrieve them as established linguistic units.

3.2. Morphosyntactic and Structural Properties of Proverbs

One of the most frequently discussed characteristics of proverbs is their relative linguistic stability. Although proverbs vary across languages and cultures, they often exhibit structural features that promote memorability and facilitate transmission. These features include brevity, parallelism, rhythmic organisation, metaphorical imagery, and formulaic expression^[2,12].

Research in paremiology suggests that proverb structures tend to display reduced syntactic complexity and highly conventionalised patterns^[2]. Such structures facilitate retrieval from memory and increase the likelihood that proverbs will be reproduced accurately across generations. Comparative studies of African proverbs similarly demonstrate that recurring morphological patterns, grammatical structures, and conventionalised expressions contribute to the stability and interpretability of proverbial forms across generations^[13].

Jakobson’s work on linguistic patterning and poetic structure further suggests that recurrent formal arrangements contribute to memorability and communicative effectiveness^[16]. Parallelism, repetition, and balanced clause struc-

tures are frequently observed across proverbial discourse because they support both cognitive processing and oral transmission.

The role of metaphor has also received considerable attention in proverb studies. Proverbs frequently employ images drawn from agriculture, animals, family relations, nature, and everyday activities to express abstract concepts such as morality, wisdom, responsibility, and social order^[12].

In Tshivenda, proverb imagery frequently reflects local ecological, social, and cultural realities. References to family structures, livestock, agriculture, communal labour, and traditional authority systems provide culturally meaningful source domains through which broader social lessons are communicated. Importantly, these metaphorical meanings are typically realised through stable grammatical patterns rather than through unrestricted linguistic creativity.

Proverbs frequently employ images drawn from agriculture, animals, family relations, nature, and everyday activities to express abstract concepts such as morality, wisdom, responsibility, and social order^[12]. Speakers do not generate proverbial meanings through spontaneous metaphorical reasoning alone; rather, they access established form–meaning pairings that have become culturally and cognitively entrenched. Consequently, proverb stability is linked not only to cultural significance but also to the persistence of particular morphosyntactic configurations.

3.3. Linguistic Stability and Constructional Entrenchment

Traditional explanations of proverb stability have often focused on cultural authority, collective memory, and repeated transmission^[1,2]. While these factors remain important, contemporary usage-based linguistics offers additional explanations grounded in cognitive processes.

Usage-based theory argues that linguistic structures emerge and stabilise through repeated exposure and interaction^[8,14]. Frequent exposure strengthens cognitive representations of particular linguistic patterns, increasing their accessibility and reducing the likelihood of structural modification. As constructions become entrenched through repeated use, they are increasingly processed as holistic units rather than as novel combinations of grammatical elements.

Construction Grammar extends this argument by proposing that all linguistic knowledge consists of learned

pairings of form and meaning^[6,7]. Repeatedly encountered constructions become stored within speakers' mental grammars, resulting in highly stable linguistic patterns. Proverbs represent an extreme manifestation of this process because their cultural significance encourages continual reproduction across generations.

Entrenchment is particularly relevant to proverb invariability because it helps explain why many proverbs remain resistant to lexical substitution and syntactic restructuring. When speakers encounter a proverb frequently, the construction becomes cognitively entrenched as a fixed unit. Altering its structure may disrupt recognisability and reduce its communicative effectiveness.

Within African oral traditions, repeated performance further reinforces entrenchment. Proverbs are repeatedly used in culturally significant contexts such as storytelling, leadership discourse, ritual communication, and conflict mediation^[1,13]. These recurrent performances strengthen both linguistic form and cultural meaning, contributing to long-term stability.

The concept of constructional entrenchment therefore provides a useful explanatory framework for understanding proverb invariability. Rather than viewing stability solely as a consequence of cultural preservation, it highlights the role of cognitive and grammatical processes in maintaining conventional linguistic structures.

3.4. Tshivenda Proverbs as Morphosyntactic Constructions

The grammatical structure of Tshivenda provides additional insight into the mechanisms underlying proverb stability. Tshivenda belongs to the Bantu language family and exhibits many of the morphosyntactic features characteristic of Bantu languages, including extensive noun class systems, agreement morphology, and complex verbal structures^[9].

Noun classes constitute one of the most important organisational principles within Tshivenda grammar. Agreement relationships between nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other grammatical elements impose constraints on permissible linguistic combinations^[9,17]. Because proverb structures are embedded within these agreement systems, opportunities for unrestricted lexical substitution are limited.

Recent computational research on African languages further demonstrates the importance of detailed morpholog-

ical and grammatical analysis. Work on part-of-speech annotation for typologically diverse African languages shows that accurate computational modelling depends on recognising language-specific morphological patterns, agreement systems, and grammatical categories^[11]. Such approaches provide additional evidence for the complexity and structural organisation of African languages.

Many Tshivenda proverbs also employ invariant copular constructions involving the copula *ndi*. These constructions establish identity relationships that are grammatically fixed and resistant to modification. Similarly, associative and instrumental constructions marked by the prefix *nga* frequently occur within conventionalised proverbial expressions. Such constructions display relatively stable structural configurations that contribute to proverb invariability.

Subject-verb agreement morphology further reinforces grammatical stability. Changes to lexical elements often require corresponding changes throughout the agreement system, increasing the complexity of structural modification. As a result, proverb forms tend to remain relatively fixed over time.

Relative clause constructions provide another example of grammatical constraints. Proverbs that incorporate relative clauses often rely on highly conventionalised patterns involving agreement morphology, negation, and clause compression. These patterns contribute to the formation of stable constructional templates that are readily recognisable within the speech community.

From a Construction Grammar perspective, these grammatical features operate as components of larger constructional schemas^[6,7]. Tshivenda proverbs are consequently not merely sequences of words but integrated linguistic constructions whose meanings emerge from the interaction between grammatical form and cultural knowledge.

3.5. Variation and Pragmatic Recalibration

Although proverb stability represents a defining characteristic of proverbial discourse, contemporary linguistic environments have introduced new contexts for variation. Urbanisation, migration, multilingualism, formal education, and digital communication have transformed language practices among many African language communities^[10,18].

Usage-based approaches recognise that language is inherently dynamic and responsive to communicative

needs^[8,14]. Consequently, some degree of variation is expected even within highly entrenched constructions. However, variation does not necessarily imply structural instability.

Research on formulaic language suggests that adaptation often occurs at the level of discourse usage rather than grammatical organisation^[8]. Speakers may truncate expressions, omit predictable elements, or embed traditional forms within new communicative contexts while preserving their underlying structural framework.

Digital language development has created additional opportunities for examining how African languages function in technologically mediated environments. Research on African language digital resources, including multilingual news classification systems, demonstrates that indigenous languages can be supported through computational tools while maintaining linguistic diversity and cultural relevance^[10].

In contemporary Tshivenda discourse, examples of proverb adaptation include ellipsis, pragmatic abbreviation, and code-switching. Such practices are particularly evident in digital communication environments where brevity and rapid interaction are often prioritised. Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that these modifications rarely affect the core morphosyntactic architecture of the proverb itself.

Instead, variation appears to function as a form of pragmatic recalibration that allows proverbs to remain relevant within changing communicative environments. Their semantic core and grammatical structure remain largely intact even when surface realisations vary according to context.

This distinction between structural stability and pragmatic flexibility is particularly important for understanding proverb invariability. It suggests that proverbs may simultaneously exhibit resistance to grammatical change and adaptability to new modes of communication. Such a dual character helps explain their continued vitality within contemporary Tshivenda-speaking communities.

The literature therefore indicates that proverb stability emerges from the interaction of cultural authority, cognitive entrenchment, grammatical constraint, and repeated social transmission. These factors collectively provide a foundation for understanding the persistence of Tshivenda proverbs as both linguistic constructions and carriers of Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate the linguistic and cultural dimensions of Tshivenda proverbs, with particular emphasis on their structural and semantic stability. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand how speakers interpret, use, and preserve proverbs within naturally occurring social and cultural contexts. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining meaning-making processes, cultural practices, and language use as experienced by individuals and communities^[19].

The study employed a descriptive and interpretive orientation. The descriptive component focused on identifying and documenting the morphosyntactic characteristics of Tshivenda proverbs, while the interpretive component examined the cultural meanings and communicative functions associated with these expressions. This combined approach enabled the study to analyse proverbs as both linguistic constructions and cultural artefacts embedded within Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

In addition, the study incorporated elements of linguistic analysis informed by Construction Grammar. Proverbs were examined as conventionalised form–meaning pairings whose stability could be analysed through recurring morphosyntactic patterns and constructional constraints^[6,7]. This approach provided a framework for linking grammatical structure with cultural continuity.

4.2. Research Setting

The research was conducted within Tshivenda-speaking communities located in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The Vhembe District is widely recognised as the principal geographical and cultural centre of the Tshivenda language and culture. It comprises a range of rural, peri-urban, and urban communities in which Tshivenda continues to function as the primary language of communication.

The district was selected because it offers access to speakers with extensive knowledge of traditional oral practices and indigenous cultural expressions. Proverbs continue to be actively used within community life, particularly during

storytelling sessions, traditional ceremonies, family gatherings, dispute mediation, religious activities, and everyday interpersonal communication. These conditions provided a suitable environment for examining the preservation and transmission of proverbial knowledge.

The research setting also allowed for the inclusion of participants from different sub-regional areas, thereby facilitating the observation of possible dialectal variation while maintaining focus on shared linguistic structures and cultural meanings.

4.3. Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of two primary categories:

1. Tshivenda proverbs used within traditional and contemporary communicative contexts;
2. Native Tshivenda speakers possessing knowledge of traditional proverbial discourse.

Participants were selected from three groups that play important roles in the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge:

- Elders;
- Tshivenda language educators;
- Cultural practitioners.

Elders were regarded as particularly important because of their role as custodians of oral traditions and community memory. Language educators were included because of their familiarity with standardised forms of Tshivenda and their involvement in language transmission through formal educational institutions. Cultural practitioners were selected

because of their active participation in cultural events, ceremonies, and traditional practices where proverbs continue to be used.

Together, these participant groups provided complementary perspectives on the structure, interpretation, and contemporary usage of Tshivenda proverbs.

4.4. Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants and textual materials relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it enables the selection of information-rich cases capable of providing detailed insight into the phenomenon under investigation^[19].

A corpus of twenty Tshivenda proverbs was compiled for detailed analysis. The selection process involved three stages.

First, an initial list of proverbs was compiled from published Tshivenda proverb collections, oral literature texts, and relevant scholarly sources. Second, the preliminary list was presented to elders and language educators for verification of authenticity and contemporary recognisability. Third, only proverbs consistently recognised by at least two participant categories were retained in the final dataset.

The final corpus was selected on the basis of:

- Frequency of use;
- Cultural significance;
- Recognisability among participants;
- Representation of diverse thematic domains.

The study involved fifteen participants drawn from the three participant categories, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profile (n = 15).

Participant Group	Age Bracket	Gender Distribution	Area/Dialectal Influence
Elders (n = 5)	60–80 years	3 Female, 2 Male	Thohoyandou, Sibasa, Mutale
Tshivenda Language Educators (n = 5)	30–55 years	3 Female, 2 Male	Thulamela, Makhado
Cultural Practitioners (n = 5)	35–65 years	2 Female, 3 Male	Nzhelele Valley, Tshikundamalema, Mutshindudi

Overall, the sample included eight female and seven male participants. Geographical coverage extended across Thulamela, Makhado, Mutale, Nzhelele, and surrounding settlements within the Vhembe District.

Participants were recruited through purposive and

snowball sampling procedures. Initial contacts were established through local schools, community leaders, and cultural organisations. These participants subsequently identified additional individuals with recognised expertise in Tshivenda oral traditions.

Inclusion criteria required participants to:

- Be fluent the Tshivenda speakers;
- Have long-term residency within the Vhembe District;
- Possess familiarity with traditional proverb usage;
- Demonstrate knowledge of both formal and informal communicative contexts in which proverbs are used.

4.5. Data Collection Methods

Multiple methods of data collection were employed to facilitate triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings. These methods included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and informal cultural discussions.

4.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary method of data collection. Interviews were conducted in Tshivenda and typically lasted between thirty and sixty minutes.

The interview schedule focused on:

- Proverb meanings;
- Usage contexts;
- Perceived changes over time;
- Interpretations across generations;
- Views regarding proverb stability and variation.

The semi-structured format provided flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Interviews were conducted in natural community settings, including homes, schools, and cultural gathering spaces. These environments promoted participant comfort and facilitated authentic responses.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed. Where necessary, Tshivenda data were translated into English during transcription while preserving original meanings and linguistic features relevant to the analysis.

To enhance accuracy, transcripts were reviewed by two bilingual Tshivenda speakers familiar with local dialectal variation.

4.5.2. Document Analysis

Documentary sources were analysed to verify proverb forms and meanings and to provide additional contextual

information. Document analysis is particularly useful in qualitative research because it enables comparison between naturally occurring data and previously recorded knowledge sources^[19].

Documents examined included:

- Published Tshivenda proverb collections;
- Oral literature texts;
- Educational materials;
- Scholarly publications;
- Relevant linguistic studies.

Document analysis enabled a comparison between oral and written versions of proverbs and provided an additional basis for evaluating linguistic stability.

4.5.3. Informal Cultural Discussions

Informal discussions were conducted with elders and cultural practitioners during community interactions and cultural activities.

These discussions provided supplementary contextual information regarding:

- Traditional proverb usage;
- Social norms governing proverb interpretation;
- Historical continuity of specific expressions;
- Contemporary patterns of proverb transmission.

Although less structured than formal interviews, these discussions generated valuable insights into the lived cultural contexts within which proverbs function.

4.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through several interconnected stages.

The first stage involved transcription, translation, and organisation of interview data. Proverbs identified during interviews and documentary analysis were compiled into a single analytical corpus.

The second stage involved morphosyntactic analysis. Proverbs were segmented into constituent grammatical units, including nouns, verbs, agreement markers, copular elements, locative markers, and associative constructions. Interlinear glossing techniques were used where appropriate to facilitate detailed examination of grammatical structure.

The third stage involved thematic analysis. Proverbs

were grouped according to recurring cultural themes, including communal values, morality, leadership, responsibility, communication, and social relations. The thematic analysis process followed established procedures involving familiarisation with data, systematic coding, development of themes, review of thematic patterns, and interpretation of relationships among categories^[20].

The fourth stage involved semantic analysis. Participant interpretations were compared across groups to determine the degree of consistency in proverb meaning and cultural understanding.

The final stage involved constructional analysis informed by Construction Grammar^[6]. Proverbs were examined as conventionalised form–meaning pairings, with attention given to recurring structural patterns, morphosyntactic constraints, and evidence of constructional entrenchment^[7].

To evaluate claims of invariability, oral versions of proverbs were compared with documented written forms. Instances of variation were analysed to determine whether they affected grammatical structure, semantic interpretation, or only discourse realisation.

4.7. Trustworthiness of the Study

The study adopted established qualitative procedures to enhance trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was evaluated in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability^[19].

4.7.1. Credibility

Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation involving interviews, document analysis, and informal discussions. The use of multiple sources enabled cross-verification of findings and strengthened confidence in the interpretations generated from the data^[3].

Participant perspectives were also compared across different groups to assess consistency in proverb interpretation and usage.

4.7.2. Dependability

Dependability was promoted through detailed documentation of research procedures, including sampling strategies, data collection methods, transcription processes, coding procedures, and analytical decisions.

This audit trail facilitates transparency and allows fu-

ture researchers to understand the procedures through which conclusions were reached.

4.7.3. Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participant accounts and documentary evidence rather than personal assumptions. Analytical decisions were continuously checked against the data to minimise researcher bias.

Direct linguistic evidence from the proverb corpus was used wherever possible to support interpretive claims.

4.7.4. Transferability

Although the study focused on Tshivenda-speaking communities within the Vhembe District, detailed contextual descriptions are provided to enable readers to assess the potential applicability of the findings to comparable linguistic and cultural settings.

4.8. Ethical Approval, Consent, and Research Transparency

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

All participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews or discussions. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Personal identifying information was excluded from transcripts and research records.

5. Results

The findings are presented according to the major stages of analysis undertaken in the study. These include the identification of Tshivenda proverbs, morphosyntactic analysis, constructional analysis, semantic interpretation, thematic categorisation, and variability testing across contemporary communicative contexts. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that Tshivenda proverbs exhibit a high degree of linguistic and semantic stability while simultaneously displaying limited forms of pragmatic adaptation in modern

discourse environments.

The results indicate that proverb stability is supported by both grammatical constraints and cultural transmission practices. Morphosyntactic evidence reveals highly structured constructional patterns characterised by noun class agreement, invariant copular constructions, restricted morphological variation, and recurring clause templates. Semantic analysis further demonstrates strong consistency of interpretation across participant groups. Although contemporary forms of communication introduce certain adaptive practices, these modifications do not fundamentally alter the underlying grammatical architecture of the proverbs.

5.1. Identification of Tshivenda Proverbs

A corpus of twenty Tshivenda proverbs was compiled from oral interviews, informal cultural discussions, and documentary sources. Participants consistently identified these proverbs as familiar and culturally significant expressions that remain actively used within Tshivenda-speaking communities.

The selected proverbs represent a variety of communicative functions, including moral instruction, leadership guidance, conflict management, social regulation, and community cohesion. Participants reported encountering these proverbs in a wide range of social contexts, including family interactions, traditional ceremonies, educational settings, storytelling sessions, community meetings, and informal conversations.

A recurring observation among participants was that proverb acquisition occurs primarily through participation in community life rather than through formal instruction. Elders frequently emphasised that children and younger community members learn proverbs through repeated exposure during everyday interaction, storytelling, and observation of culturally competent speakers. This finding supports previous observations concerning the role of oral tradition in the transmission of indigenous knowledge^[1,13].

Participants further indicated that the continued relevance of proverbs derives from their capacity to provide concise yet authoritative guidance on social behaviour. Because proverbs are widely recognised within the community, they possess persuasive force that extends beyond ordinary conversational statements.

The consistency with which participants recognised

and interpreted the selected proverbs provided an initial indication of their cultural entrenchment and linguistic stability.

5.2. Morphosyntactic Analysis of Tshivenda Proverbs

The morphosyntactic analysis focused on identifying recurring grammatical patterns within the proverb corpus. Particular attention was given to clause structure, agreement systems, copular constructions, relative clause formations, and morphological marking (see **Appendix A**).

The analysis revealed a high degree of structural consistency across the dataset. No examples were identified in which alternative grammatical forms were accepted as equivalent versions of the same proverb. This finding suggests that proverb transmission is characterised by strong structural conservatism.

5.2.1. Clause Structure and Word Order

The majority of proverbs analysed display either simple declarative clause structures or equative constructions. Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) ordering was the most frequently observed pattern.

Example:

Mulomo u la mbilu

Morphological segmentation:

Mulomo | u-la | mbilu

mouth | SM-eat | heart

Literal translation:

“The mouth eats the heart.”

Idiomatic interpretation:

“Harmful speech causes emotional damage.”

This proverb exhibits a straightforward monoclausal structure consisting of a subject noun phrase, a verb phrase, and an object noun phrase. The grammatical simplicity of the construction contributes to memorability and facilitates accurate reproduction during oral transmission.

Across the corpus, similar clause structures were repeatedly observed, indicating the existence of preferred proverb templates in Tshivenda.

5.2.2. Copular Constructions

Several proverbs employ equative constructions involving the invariant copular element *ndi*.

Example:

Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu

Morphological segmentation:

Muthu | ndi | muthu | nga vhathu

person | COP | person | through people

Literal translation:

“A person is a person through other people.”

Idiomatic interpretation:

“Human identity is realised through social relationships.”

The copular element “*ndi*” remained invariant across all observed examples. Participants did not recognise alternative copular forms as acceptable substitutions within proverb contexts.

This structural rigidity suggests that copular constructions function as highly conventionalised grammatical frames whose stability contributes directly to proverb invariability.

5.2.3. Relative Clause Structures

A number of proverbs incorporate relative-clause constructions involving embedded modification and negation.

Example:

Nwana a sa lili u fela ngozwini

Morphological segmentation:

Nwana | a-sa-lili | u-fela | ngozwini

child | REL-NEG-cry | SM-die | in the sling

Literal translation:

“A child who does not cry dies in the sling.”

Idiomatic interpretation:

“One who does not express a need may fail to receive assistance.”

This proverb illustrates a biclausal structure in which a relative clause modifies the subject noun phrase. The relative construction contains agreement marking and negation morphology that together form a highly constrained grammatical pattern.

Participants consistently reproduced this proverb using the same relative-clause structure, indicating strong resistance to structural modification.

5.2.4. Morphological Marking

Morphological analysis revealed several recurring grammatical features across the proverb corpus:

- Noun class prefixes (e.g., *muthu*, *nwana*).
- Subject agreement markers (*u-*, *a-*, *vha-*).
- Negation markers (*sa-*).
- Locative morphology (*-ni*).
- Associative and instrumental prefixes (*nga-*).
- Invariant copular forms (*ndi*).

These grammatical elements are integral components of Tshivenda morphosyntax and contribute significantly to proverb stability.

Importantly, participants reported that substitutions affecting agreement morphology or noun class relationships would generally be perceived as grammatically incorrect or culturally inappropriate. This observation suggests that proverb stability is partly maintained through the broader grammatical system of the language rather than through memorisation alone.

5.3. Constructional Analysis

While the preceding section described observable grammatical patterns, the present section interprets these findings through the lens of Construction Grammar^[6,7].

Sign-Based Construction Grammar provides a particularly useful perspective because it treats constructions as structured pairings of linguistic form and meaning rather than as isolated combinations of words. Within this approach, grammatical patterns are represented as networks in which syntactic organisation, semantic interpretation, and contextual associations interact^[7].

5.3.1. Proverbs as Entrenched Constructions

The analysis indicates that Tshivenda proverbs function as highly entrenched form–meaning pairings. Rather than being generated anew during each communicative event, they appear to be stored and retrieved as conventionalised linguistic constructions.

Participants frequently reproduced proverbs in identical forms despite differences in age, gender, educational background, and geographical location. Such consistency suggests that proverb structures have become cognitively entrenched through repeated exposure and long-term usage^[8,14].

From a Sign-Based Construction Grammar perspective, the stability of these expressions results from the association between their formal structure and culturally established meanings^[7]. The proverb is therefore preserved not only be-

cause speakers remember individual words, but because the entire construction has become a recognised linguistic sign.

The findings therefore support the argument that proverbs constitute learned linguistic constructions whose form and meaning are preserved through continual cultural reproduction.

5.3.2. Morphosyntactic Constraints as Mechanisms of Stability

Construction Grammar proposes that constructions vary in their degree of schematicity and flexibility^[6,7]. The proverbs analysed in this study occupy the highly entrenched end of this continuum.

Several grammatical mechanisms contribute to this stability:

- Noun class agreement constraints;
- Fixed copular constructions;
- Stable argument structures;
- Recurrent relative-clause templates;
- Conventionalised associative morphology.

These features collectively reduce opportunities for structural variation and reinforce the recognisability of proverbial expressions.

5.3.3. Constructional Locked Frames

The findings further suggest that Tshivenda proverbs operate as what may be described as “constructional locked frames.”

Within such constructions, lexical items and grammatical relationships occupy highly constrained positions. Alteration of one element frequently requires modification of multiple related elements within the agreement system.

Consequently, speakers tend to reproduce the proverb in its established form rather than generating alternative versions.

The concept of constructional locked frames therefore provides a useful explanation for the remarkable degree of structural continuity observed across generations of speakers.

5.4. Semantic Analysis of Tshivenda Proverbs

In addition to structural stability, the analysis examined the extent to which proverb meanings remained consistent across participant groups. Semantic interpretation was assessed by comparing explanations provided by elders, lan-

guage educators, and cultural practitioners during interviews and informal discussions.

The findings revealed a high degree of interpretive consistency across all participant categories. Although participants occasionally used different wording when explaining individual proverbs, the underlying meanings remained substantially similar. This suggests that the cultural knowledge encoded within the proverbs is widely shared and transmitted with relatively little semantic variation.

The results indicate that proverb meanings are not interpreted solely at the level of literal lexical content. Rather, participants consistently drew upon shared cultural knowledge, social experience, and collective values when explaining proverb meanings. Such consistency reflects the existence of culturally entrenched interpretive frameworks that support semantic stability across generations^[4,13].

The following examples illustrate this pattern.

Example 1

Dzina lavhuḍi ḷi fhira lupfumo

Literal translation:

“A good name surpasses wealth.”

Participant interpretations consistently emphasised the importance of moral integrity, social reputation, and ethical conduct. Respondents agreed that the proverb teaches that personal character and honour are more valuable than material possessions.

Although individual explanations differed in wording, all participants associated the proverb with the prioritisation of moral standing over economic success.

Example 2

Muḍi u fhaṭwa nga vhane wawo

Literal translation:

“A home is built by its owners.”

Participants interpreted this proverb as emphasising collective responsibility, cooperation, and shared commitment within families and communities.

Elders frequently connected the proverb to traditional expectations regarding family unity and communal labour, while educators highlighted its relevance to contemporary social responsibility. Despite these differences in emphasis, the central meaning remained unchanged.

Example 3

Khotsi ha bebwi

Literal translation:
“A father is not born.”

Participants consistently explained this proverb as referring to leadership, responsibility, and social maturity. Rather than focusing on biological parenthood, respondents understood the proverb as expressing the idea that leadership is demonstrated through responsible action and social accountability.

The consistency of interpretation across participant groups suggests that the proverb possesses a highly stable conceptual meaning embedded within shared cultural understandings.

Semantic Stability across Participant Groups

Analysis of all twenty proverbs revealed similar patterns of interpretive consistency. Minor differences occurred primarily in explanatory detail rather than in core meaning.

The findings therefore indicate that semantic stability is reinforced through collective cultural cognition and shared interpretive conventions. Proverbs function as culturally recognised form–meaning pairings whose meanings are transmitted alongside their linguistic structures^[4,11].

5.5. Thematic Categorisation of Proverbs

To further explore the cultural knowledge encoded within the proverb corpus, the analysed proverbs were grouped according to dominant thematic content.

Four major thematic categories emerged from the data:

1. Communal values and social interdependence;
2. Moral behaviour and ethical conduct;
3. Responsibility and leadership;
4. Communication, wisdom, and social awareness.

These themes were consistently identified across participant groups and reflect central values within Tshivenda cultural life.

Theme 1: Communal Values and Social Interdependence

A substantial number of proverbs emphasised collective identity, cooperation, and interpersonal relationships.

Example:
Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu
“A person is a person through other people.”

Participants associated this proverb with principles of Ubuntu, mutual dependence, and social solidarity. The proverb expresses the view that individual identity is realised through participation in community life^[7].

The prominence of this theme demonstrates the importance of collective social relationships within Tshivenda cultural knowledge systems.

Theme 2: Moral Behaviour and Ethical Conduct

Several proverbs focused on questions of morality, reputation, honesty, and personal conduct.

Example:
Dzina lavhuḍi li fhira lupfumo
“A good name is better than wealth.”

Participants consistently linked this proverb to ethical behaviour and the importance of maintaining social respectability.

Such proverbs function as mechanisms for moral education by reinforcing culturally valued standards of behaviour.

Theme 3: Responsibility and Leadership

A third thematic category centred on responsibility, maturity, authority, and leadership.

Example:
Khotsi ha bebwi
“A father is not born.”

Participants interpreted this proverb as emphasising that leadership is acquired through responsible conduct rather than inherited status alone.

This theme reflects broader cultural expectations regarding accountability and social obligation.

Theme 4: Communication, Wisdom, and Social Awareness

Numerous proverbs addressed the consequences of speech, the value of wisdom, and the importance of careful communication.

Example:
Mulomo u la mbilu
“The mouth eats the heart.”

Participants explained that careless or harmful speech can damage relationships and cause emotional harm.

The recurrence of this theme indicates the importance

attached to responsible communication within Tshivenda society. The thematic analysis procedures used in this stage followed systematic coding, theme development, review, and interpretation principles associated with qualitative thematic analysis^[20].

5.6. Variability Testing: Contemporary Usage, Youth Speech, and Digital Communication

While the preceding analyses demonstrated strong evidence of structural and semantic stability, the study also examined whether contemporary communicative environments have introduced forms of variation into proverb usage.

To address this question, participants were asked to comment on proverb use among younger speakers and within digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media environments.

The findings revealed limited but observable forms of variation. Importantly, these variations occurred primarily at the level of discourse realisation rather than grammatical structure.

Contemporary African language technologies indicate that digital environments increasingly provide spaces where African languages can be represented, processed, and circulated. Computational projects focusing on African languages demonstrate that digital adaptation does not necessarily eliminate traditional linguistic forms but may create new contexts for their preservation and analysis^[10,11].

5.6.1. Compression and Abbreviation in Youth Speech

Participants reported that younger speakers sometimes employ abbreviated forms of proverbs in informal communication.

Example:

Standard form:

Mulomo u la mbilu

Observed digital forms:

- Mulomo u la mbilu
- Mulomo u la ...

In these examples, the proverb remains recognisable despite the use of emoji reinforcement or ellipsis. The omitted material is typically recoverable from shared cultural knowledge.

The findings indicate that abbreviation functions as a strategy of communicative efficiency rather than as a form of structural transformation.

5.6.2. Contextual Reframing and Pragmatic Reinterpretation

The data also revealed instances in which proverbs were employed as discourse fragments rather than complete utterances.

Example:

Standard form:

Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu

Observed shortened form:

Muthu ndi muthu

Participants reported encountering this truncated version in social media interactions and informal conversations.

Although the final prepositional phrase is omitted, the proverb continues to evoke the broader Ubuntu philosophy associated with the complete expression.

This pattern demonstrates that speakers may rely on shared cultural knowledge to reconstruct omitted elements.

5.6.3. Morphosyntactic Stability under Informal Conditions

Despite evidence of abbreviation and truncation, no participant reported changes affecting core grammatical structure.

The following features remained stable:

- Noun class morphology;
- Agreement markers;
- Verbal morphology;
- Copular constructions;
- Relative-clause patterns.

For example, subject agreement markers such as *u-* and *a-* remained intact even within abbreviated forms. Similarly, noun class markers were consistently preserved.

These observations indicate that morphosyntactic structure remains resistant to change even in highly informal communicative contexts.

5.6.4. Code-Switching and Hybridised Expressions

The most significant form of variation identified in the study involved code-switching.

Examples included:

- “Muthu ndi muthu, no matter what.”
- “A person is a person nga vhathu.”

In these cases, English lexical material is inserted into the proverb environment while key Tshivenda components remain unchanged.

Participants generally regarded such usage as characteristic of multilingual communication rather than as evidence of proverb replacement.

The findings therefore suggest that code-switching represents a form of pragmatic adaptation rather than structural erosion.

5.7. Evidence of Invariability across Oral and Written Sources

To further evaluate proverb stability, oral versions collected from participants were compared with forms documented in published Tshivenda proverb collections and oral literature sources.

Comparison revealed remarkable consistency between oral and written data.

Of the twenty proverbs analysed:

- Sixteen appeared in identical lexical and grammatical form across sources;
- Four displayed minor phonological or dialectal variation.

Importantly, none of the identified differences altered core grammatical structure or semantic interpretation.

Examples of variation were limited to pronunciation differences and minor lexical preferences associated with local dialectal usage. Participants generally recognised these variants as equivalent forms of the same proverb.

The findings therefore provide strong evidence that proverb transmission preserves both form and meaning across different modes of representation.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the linguistic foundations of proverb invariability in Tshivenda by examining the morphosyntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties of a corpus of twenty proverbs collected from

Tshivenda-speaking communities in the Vhembe District. The findings demonstrate that proverb stability is not solely a consequence of cultural preservation or memorisation, but is also strongly supported by grammatical constraint systems and constructional entrenchment within the Tshivenda language. This observation provides an important contribution to existing scholarship because it shifts the explanation of proverb stability from predominantly cultural accounts toward a more integrated linguistic and cognitive perspective.

The discussion is organised around four major findings: (i) morphosyntactic stability as a mechanism of proverb preservation, (ii) constructional entrenchment and proverb invariability, (iii) semantic continuity and cultural cognition, and (iv) pragmatic flexibility within contemporary communicative environments.

6.1. Morphosyntactic Stability as a Mechanism of Proverb Preservation

One of the most significant findings of the study is that Tshivenda proverbs exhibit a remarkably high degree of morphosyntactic stability. Across the corpus, participants consistently reproduced proverb structures with minimal variation, and comparison between oral and written sources revealed substantial agreement in lexical and grammatical form.

This finding supports observations in paremiological research that proverbs tend to display relatively fixed linguistic structures that facilitate accurate transmission across generations and meanings are associated with particular structural configurations^[2,9,21]. However, the present study extends this observation by demonstrating that proverb stability is closely linked to specific grammatical properties of Tshivenda.

The morphosyntactic analysis identified several recurring features, including noun class agreement, subject–verb concord, invariant copular constructions, relative-clause templates, and associative morphology. These structures create grammatical environments in which modification is constrained by broader agreement systems operating throughout the language^[13,22].

Within Bantu languages, noun class systems function as highly integrated grammatical networks in which changes to one constituent often require corresponding modifications elsewhere in the construction^[13]. The findings suggest that such grammatical interdependence contributes significantly

to proverb invariability. Proverbs are not merely memorised sequences of words; they are embedded within a morphologically regulated system that restricts opportunities for arbitrary substitution.

The stability observed in constructions such as *Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu* and *Nwana a sa lili u fela ngozwini* illustrates this principle^[23]. In both cases, agreement relationships and conventionalised grammatical structures limit acceptable variation. Consequently, proverb preservation is partly achieved through grammatical architecture rather than cultural repetition alone.

The findings therefore support the view that linguistic structure plays a central role in the maintenance of traditional knowledge systems. Proverbs persist not simply because speakers value them culturally, but because their grammatical organisation promotes stability and recognisability across repeated instances of use.

6.2. Constructional Entrenchment and Proverbial Invariability

A second major finding concerns the role of constructional entrenchment in maintaining proverb stability. Construction Grammar conceptualises linguistic knowledge as a network of conventionalised form–meaning pairings, or constructions, that vary in complexity and degree of schematicity^[11,21]. Within this framework, proverbs may be understood as highly entrenched constructions whose meanings are associated with particular structural configurations.

The findings strongly support this interpretation. Participants reproduced proverbs with remarkable consistency despite differences in age, occupation, educational background, and geographical location. Such consistency suggests that proverb structures have become deeply entrenched within the cognitive and linguistic systems of speakers.

Usage-based theories propose that repeated exposure strengthens mental representations of linguistic forms, making them increasingly resistant to modification^[12]. The transmission of proverbs through storytelling, family interaction, ceremonial discourse, and community participation creates precisely the conditions under which such entrenchment can occur. Frequent repetition strengthens the association between form and meaning, resulting in constructions that are retrieved as unified linguistic units rather than generated through productive syntactic processes.

The concept of constructional entrenchment helps explain why proverbs remain stable even when surrounding language varieties undergo change. Speakers may innovate in many areas of linguistic practice, yet highly entrenched constructions tend to resist restructuring because they possess strong cognitive representations and cultural significance.

The present study therefore supports a constructional interpretation of proverb invariability. Rather than viewing proverbs solely as folkloric expressions, the findings suggest that they form part of speakers' grammatical knowledge. Their stability emerges from the interaction of repeated use, cognitive storage, and conventionalised linguistic structure.

6.3. Semantic Continuity and Shared Cultural Cognition

The semantic analysis revealed substantial consistency in proverb interpretation across participant groups. Although individual participants occasionally differed in the wording of their explanations, the core meanings associated with each proverb remained remarkably stable.

This finding supports ethnolinguistic perspectives that regard language as a repository of cultural knowledge and social experience^[4]. Proverbs encode culturally shared understandings concerning morality, leadership, interpersonal relations, responsibility, and community life. Because these meanings are collectively maintained, they continue to be transmitted across generations with relatively little alteration.

The thematic categories identified in the study further illustrate this continuity. Themes relating to communal interdependence, moral conduct, leadership responsibility, and communicative wisdom appeared consistently throughout the corpus. Such themes correspond closely with broader African philosophical principles emphasising social connectedness, reciprocity, and collective well-being^[7,20].

The proverb *Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu* provides a particularly clear example. Participants consistently associated this expression with the principles of Ubuntu, despite differences in age and professional background. This consistency suggests that proverb meanings are supported by shared cultural cognition rather than by individual interpretation alone.

The findings therefore reinforce the argument that semantic stability is a key component of proverb invariability. Proverbs preserve not only linguistic structures but also

culturally sanctioned interpretations of social reality. Their continued use contributes to the maintenance of collective knowledge systems by ensuring that important cultural values remain accessible across generations.

Furthermore, the consistency of interpretation observed in the study suggests that proverb meanings function as socially established conceptual resources rather than contextually negotiated meanings. Although speakers may apply proverbs to different situations, the underlying conceptual content remains largely stable.

6.4. Oral Tradition and the Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The findings also provide support for Oral Tradition Theory, which emphasises the role of repetition, memory, and communal participation in the preservation of cultural knowledge^[1]. Participants consistently reported learning proverbs through observation, storytelling, family interaction, and participation in community life rather than through formal instruction.

This mode of transmission contributes significantly to proverb stability. Repeated exposure reinforces both linguistic form and cultural meaning, while communal monitoring ensures that deviations from established forms are often recognised and corrected. In this sense, proverb transmission operates as a collective process of cultural maintenance.

The continued use of proverbs in ceremonial discourse, dispute resolution, educational contexts, and everyday communication demonstrates that oral tradition remains an active component of contemporary Tshivenda society. Rather than existing as relics of a historical past, proverbs continue to function as practical communicative resources through which social knowledge is organised and transmitted.

The findings therefore highlight the importance of proverbs within Indigenous Knowledge Systems. By preserving conventional linguistic constructions and culturally valued meanings, proverbs contribute to the continuity of indigenous epistemologies and social practices.

This observation is particularly significant in the context of contemporary globalisation, where indigenous languages and cultural traditions often face increasing pressure from dominant linguistic and cultural systems. The persistence of proverb usage suggests that traditional forms of knowledge transmission continue to play an important role

in sustaining cultural identity and continuity.

6.5. Pragmatic Flexibility and Contemporary Adaptation

Although the study found strong evidence of structural and semantic stability, it also identified limited forms of variation associated with contemporary communication practices. Abbreviation, ellipsis, discourse fragmentation, and code-switching were observed particularly within youth discourse and digital communication environments^[24].

These findings provide an important qualification to traditional understandings of proverb invariability. The evidence indicates that proverbs are not entirely immune to change. Instead, they exhibit a degree of pragmatic flexibility that enables adaptation to new communicative contexts.

However, the nature of the observed variation is noteworthy. In most cases, adaptation affected surface realisation rather than grammatical structure. Participants frequently abbreviated proverbs or employed partial forms while retaining sufficient information for interlocutors to reconstruct the intended meaning. Similarly, instances of code-switching involved the incorporation of English lexical material without disrupting core proverb structures.

This distinction between structural stability and pragmatic adaptation is theoretically important. It suggests that proverb variation operates primarily at the level of discourse performance rather than grammatical organisation. The underlying construction remains intact even when speakers modify its presentation for particular communicative purposes.

From a Construction Grammar perspective, such behaviour is consistent with the notion that entrenched constructions may be pragmatically manipulated without losing their identity as conventionalised form–meaning pairings^[11,12]. Speakers continue to recognise the construction despite partial omission or contextual modification.

Consequently, the study proposes a revised understanding of proverb invariability. Rather than viewing invariability as absolute immutability, it may be more accurately understood as strong morphosyntactic stability accompanied by limited pragmatic flexibility. This formulation better captures the dynamic relationship between continuity and adaptation observed within contemporary Tshivenda proverb usage.

6.6. Methodological Limitations and Scope of Invariability

While the findings provide substantial evidence of proverb stability, certain limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study focused on a corpus of twenty proverbs drawn from a specific geographical and cultural region. Although these proverbs were widely recognised by participants, the dataset cannot be assumed to represent the full diversity of Tshivenda proverbial discourse.

Second, the participant sample consisted primarily of elders, educators, and cultural practitioners. These groups are likely to possess relatively strong knowledge of traditional forms and may therefore exhibit higher levels of conformity to established proverb structures than other segments of the population.

Third, the investigation of digital communication was exploratory rather than exhaustive. Additional research involving larger corpora of social media interactions and digital discourse may reveal further patterns of adaptation not captured within the present study.

Accordingly, the concept of invariability employed in this study should not be interpreted as absolute resistance to all forms of change. Rather, it refers to the relative stability of grammatical structure and semantic content within culturally authoritative contexts.

Future studies should examine proverb usage in multilingual urban environments, educational institutions, digital platforms, and diaspora communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of variation and continuity within contemporary Tshivenda discourse.

7. Recommendations

The findings of this study have implications for language preservation, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, linguistic research, and educational practice. Based on the evidence presented, the following recommendations are proposed.

7.1. Integration of Proverbs into Language Education

Tshivenda proverbs should be systematically incorporated into language and literature curricula at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. As culturally embedded linguistic

constructions, proverbs provide valuable resources for teaching grammar, vocabulary, discourse competence, and cultural knowledge simultaneously.

Educational programmes should encourage learners to engage with proverbs not only as literary expressions but also as repositories of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and cultural heritage. Such integration would contribute to the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge among younger generations.

7.2. Documentation and Digital Preservation

Efforts should be intensified to document Tshivenda proverbs in both printed and digital formats. Comprehensive proverb databases, electronic archives, and multilingual digital repositories would assist in preserving these cultural resources for future generations. Multilingual machine translation initiatives for African languages demonstrate the potential of computational tools to expand access to indigenous languages while supporting multilingual communication environments^[25].

Given the increasing role of digital communication in contemporary society, digital preservation initiatives should include audio recordings, video documentation, and community-based online collections that capture authentic pronunciation, usage contexts, and cultural interpretations.

7.3. Promotion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Government departments, cultural organisations, traditional leadership structures, and educational institutions should actively promote the use of Tshivenda proverbs as part of broader Indigenous Knowledge Systems preservation initiatives.

Community programmes, cultural festivals, storytelling events, and heritage projects should encourage intergenerational transmission of proverbs and related oral traditions. Such initiatives would contribute to cultural continuity and strengthen community identity.

7.4. Further Linguistic Research

Future research should extend the present study by investigating proverb usage across different sociolinguistic environments, including:

- Urban Tshivenda-speaking communities;
- Multilingual contexts;
- Youth discourse;
- Digital communication platforms;
- Diaspora communities.

Comparative studies involving other South African Bantu languages may further illuminate the relationship between noun class systems, constructional entrenchment, and proverb stability.

7.5. Corpus-Based and Computational Research

The development of electronic corpora of Tshivenda oral literature would enable more extensive quantitative analyses of proverb frequency, variation, and usage patterns.

Future studies may also employ corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, and discourse-analytic approaches to investigate how proverb constructions evolve across communicative contexts while maintaining structural integrity.

7.6. Indigenous Knowledge Policy Development

Policy-makers should recognise proverbs as valuable components of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and include them within language maintenance and cultural heritage policies.

Support for community-driven documentation projects, indigenous language promotion programmes, and cultural education initiatives would contribute significantly to safeguarding the Tshivenda linguistic heritage.

8. Conclusions

This study investigated the invariability of Tshivenda proverbs through an integrated analysis of their morphosyntactic structure, semantic interpretation, constructional organisation, and contemporary usage. Drawing on data collected from elders, language educators, and cultural practitioners in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, the study sought to determine the linguistic mechanisms responsible for the remarkable stability of proverbial expressions within Tshivenda.

The findings demonstrate that Tshivenda proverbs are

not merely culturally preserved expressions but highly entrenched linguistic constructions embedded within the grammatical architecture of the language. Morphosyntactic analysis revealed recurring structural patterns characterised by noun class agreement systems, invariant copular constructions, relative-clause templates, and fixed associative morphology. These grammatical features collectively restrict opportunities for structural modification and contribute significantly to proverb stability.

From a Construction Grammar perspective, the analysed proverbs function as entrenched form–meaning pairings stored and reproduced as holistic constructions rather than generated through productive syntactic processes. Repeated use across generations strengthens these constructions and reinforces their resistance to structural change. The findings therefore support the argument that proverb invariability emerges through constructional entrenchment operating within a morphologically constrained linguistic system.

The semantic analysis further demonstrated strong consistency in interpretation across participant groups. Despite differences in age, occupation, and social background, participants consistently associated proverbs with similar cultural meanings and social values. This semantic stability indicates the existence of shared cultural cognition through which Indigenous Knowledge Systems are maintained and transmitted.

At the same time, the study identified limited forms of variation within contemporary communicative contexts. Abbreviation, ellipsis, discourse fragmentation, and code-switching were observed particularly in youth discourse and digital communication. However, these adaptations affected surface realisation rather than underlying grammatical structure. Consequently, the findings suggest that Tshivenda proverbs possess an invariant grammatical core accompanied by a flexible pragmatic layer that enables adaptation to changing communicative environments.

The study therefore proposes that proverb invariability should not be understood as absolute immutability. Rather, it is more accurately characterised as strong morphosyntactic and semantic stability combined with constrained pragmatic flexibility. This distinction provides a more nuanced understanding of how proverbs remain simultaneously stable and adaptable across generations.

Overall, the study contributes to African linguistics,

paremiology, Construction Grammar, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems scholarship by demonstrating that proverb stability is best explained through the interaction of grammatical constraints, cognitive entrenchment, and cultural transmission. Within Tshivenda, proverb persistence is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a linguistic one, rooted in the structural properties of a noun-class-governed Bantu language. These findings underscore the continuing importance of proverbs as vehicles for the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity in contemporary society.

Funding

The study received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews or discussions. Participants were

informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Personal identifying information was excluded from transcripts and research records.

Data Availability Statement

Interview transcripts, coding materials, and the proverb corpus are available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and institutional restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing, improving academic writing, refining the structure and organization of the manuscript, and assisting with literature identification and reference formatting. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

Appendix A. Fully Glossed Corpus of Tshivenda Proverbs (N = 20): Morphosyntactic Segmentation, Interlinear Glossing, and Cultural Interpretation

Table A1. Tshivenda Proverbs with Morphological Glossing and Semantic Interpretation.

No.	Proverb	Morphological Segmentation	Interlinear Gloss	Literal Translation	Cultural/Figurative Meaning
1	<i>Mulomo u ja mbilu</i>	Mulomo u-ja mbilu	mouth 3SG.SM-eat heart	The mouth eats the heart	Speech can cause emotional harm
2	<i>Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu</i>	Muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu	person COP person through people	A person is a person through people	Ubuntu: identity is socially constructed
3	<i>Nwana a sa lili u fela ngozwini</i>	Nwana a-sa-lili u-fela ngozwi-ni	child REL-NEG-cry 3SG.SM-die sling-LOC	A child who does not cry dies on the sling	One must express needs to receive help
4	<i>Dzina javhudi li fhira lupfumo</i>	Dzina ja-vhudi li fhira lupfumo	name AGR-good 3SG.SM-surpass wealth	A good name surpasses wealth	Reputation outweighs material wealth
5	<i>Mudi u fhatwa nga vhane wawo</i>	Mudi u-fhat-wa nga vhane w-awo	home 3SG.SM-build-PASS by owners	A home is built by its owners	Collective responsibility sustains society
6	<i>Khotsi ha bebwi</i>	Khotsi ha-beb-wi	father NEG-bear-PASS	A father is not born	Leadership is defined by responsibility
7	<i>Nowa i ja mbilu ya yone</i>	nowa i-ja mbilu ya yone	snake 3SG.SM-eat heart of itself	A snake eats its own heart	Self-destruction harms the self
8	<i>Muthu ha fheli mbilu</i>	Muthu ha-fheli mbilu	person NEG-lose heart	A person does not lose heart	Perseverance is essential
9	<i>U luma mbilu a si u fa</i>	u luma mbilu a si u-fa	INF bite heart NEG COP INF-die	Enduring pain is not dying	Resilience in hardship
10	<i>A hu na mbilu ya nwana</i>	A hu na mbilu ya nwana	NEG EX COP heart of child	There is no heart of a child	Maturity requires courage
11	<i>Mutukana ha endi, hu enda mukalaha</i>	Mutukana ha-endi hu enda mukalaha	youth NEG-go it goes elder	It is not the youth who goes; the elder goes	Elders hold experiential authority
12	<i>Mulomo wa muthu u fhira ngoma u lila</i>	Mulomo wa muthu u fhira ngoma u lila	mouth of person 3SG.SM surpasses drum sound	The mouth is louder than a drum	Speech spreads faster than sound
13	<i>Mudinga ha na biso</i>	Mudinga ha-na biso	messenger NEG-have blame	A messenger has no blame	Message bearer is not responsible for content
14	<i>Tanzu jiswa li tikwa nga lilala</i>	Tanzu li-sw a li tik-wa nga lilala	cloth new 3SG.SM support-PASS by old	New cloth is supported by old one	Youth depend on elders
15	<i>Mmbwa hu zwima ya muambi</i>	Mmbwa hu-zwim-a ya mu-ambi	dog 3SG.SM-hunt-GEN of owner	A dog hunts for its owner	Loyalty benefits the master

Table A1. Cont.

No.	Proverb	Morphological Segmentation	Interlinear Gloss	Literal Translation	Cultural/Figurative Meaning
16	<i>Mahonda manzhi ha bwa mulindi</i>	Ma-honda manzhi ha-bwa mulindi	horns many NEG-break fence	Many horns do not break fence	Unity ensures strength
17	<i>Mapfumo a la vha vhandameli</i>	Mapfumo a la vha vhandameli	Spears belong to DEF warriors	Spears belong to warriors	Responsibility belongs to the assigned
18	<i>Midi mivhili yo kundisa pfuko u fhata</i>	Midi mivhili yo kundisa pfuko u-fhata	paths two PST cause fail hare build	Two paths caused hare to fail to build	Indecision leads to failure
19	<i>Maano a vhambwa nga luvhadzi</i>	Maano a vhamb-wa nga luvhadzi	plans 3PL test-PASS by experience	Plans are tested by experience	Experience validates ideas
20	<i>Mufali u la kaniwe tsilu lila kanzhi</i>	Mufali u la kaniwe tsilu lila kanzhi	wise 3SG.SM cry once fool cry many	Wise cries once, fool many times	Wisdom avoids r

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