Ableism in Yoruba Communicative Culture: A Critical Analysis of Proverbs

[1]Oso Ibitayo Olamide, PhD., [2]Ajayi, Temitope Michael, PhD., [1]Bankole, A.M., [3]Oyinlade Morenike Busayo

[1]Ekiti State Polytechnic, Isan Ekiti

[2]Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

[3]College of Health Sciences and Technology, Ijero Ekiti, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs in Yoruba play an important communicative feature as they strongly propagate ideologies. One of such ideologies that the Yoruba proverbs have been observed to have reproduced is the ableist ideology. Hence, this study focuses on how Yoruba proverbs encode and reproduce ableist ideology in everyday discourse. Drawing data purposively from Owomoyela's Yoruba Proverbs, this study uses the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Disability and Conceptual Metaphor Theories to analyse data. The data showed that Yoruba proverbs reproduce ideologies by portraying the disabled as incapable, dependent, and deficient and as people that cannot achieve their goals. The paper shows how disability is portrayed in the Yoruba context and calls for a re-education of language users towards the plight of the disabled.

Keywords: Ableism; Yoruba proverbs; disability discourse; communicative ableism; Critical Discourse Analysis; ideology

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than just a medium of communication. It helps preserve how people see the world around them and also interact with it. Proverbs, in Africa particularly among the Yoruba speaking people, are valued resources of social communication. They are used for varying reasons-give authority to speech, show proficiency in language and also show wisdom. This has made proverbs a worthy subject for ideological analysis. We can say that proverbs do not just reflect societal beliefs; they help reproduce its assumptions.

This paper focuses on how disability is represented in Yoruba proverbs and how such representations may portray ableist ideology. Ableism can be defined as a system of thought and practice that able-bodiedness as the norm while construing disability as lack, defect, burden, danger, incapacity, ridicule, or inferiority. Bogart and Dune (2019) define ableism as stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities. This means that people with disabilities are seen as second class citizens who are a departure from the representation of everything considered as normal and acceptable.

Proverbs and the importance among the Yoruba people

Proverbs are the poetry and the moral science of the Yorùbá nation (Ajibola, 1979). Proverbs in Yoruba play a significant role in discourse. Among the Yoruba, proverbs are vital tools for teaching, identity, and social order. For the Yoruba, proverbs are not decorative sayings; they are central instruments for moral formation, cultural continuity, identity, effective communication, and informal governance, now being adapted for schools, technology, and contemporary social issues. Proverbs can be used for didactic purposes, for warning, for informing for cultural transmissions etc. Adegboyega, (2017), opines that among the Yoruba speaking tribes of Nigeria…proverbs are believed to be a „conversational condiment" used to flavour speech, taking into

consideration its cultural and moral relevance. Proverbs encode and teach the ideal Yorùbá character, *omoluabi*—patience, respect, honesty, hard work, courage, and dignity in labour. Yoruba proverbs are not only just a significant part of the daily life of the Yorùbá people, they constitute a rich integral part of the linguistic repertoire of the speech community (Ehineni, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ableism in African Language and Culture

Ableism is not simply a matter of discriminatory action, but a system of ideas and practices in which a certain kind of bodily and mental ability is assumed as a norm, and disability is conceived as a lack of ability. In such a system, disability is typically constructed as inferior, abnormal, or in need of correction. More recent scholars have further developed this concept by arguing that ableism is not just a matter of ideas, but a matter of structures, policies, and norms that constantly reinforce abledness as a norm, or standard, of full humanity (Lundberg & Chen, 2024; Havercamp et al., 2025).

Ableism is often seen as neutral and natural and this has made it more prevalent. In this regard, Siebers' (2008) notion of the ideology of ability remains highly relevant, since it explains how ability functions as the tacit benchmark against which human worth is measured. Recent studies likewise show that ableism operates not only through overt exclusion but also through subtle assumptions about competence, independence, productivity, and bodily normalcy (Gooderham et al., 2025; More, 2025). These assumptions shape everyday interactions and institutional practices in ways that marginalise disabled people while presenting such marginalisation as reasonable or inevitable. Disability, therefore, is not simply a private medical issue; it is also a social and political identity through which the exclusions built into dominant ideas of the normal and the fully human are exposed (Siebers, 2008; Gooderham et al., 2025).

Looking at these various submissions, we can safely conclude that ableism is not biologically driven; rather it is ideologically produced and socially reproduced. How is ableism ideologically reproduced? It is done through language. Language is not a neutral medium, it is a major tool through which ableist ideology circulates. Language is what helps stabilize the ideology by naming, classifying, metaphorising, ridiculing and normalising bodily and mental difference. This is done through everyday expressions, labels, media descriptions and conversational assumptions. In this sense, language does not simply reflect pre-existing ableism; it actively participates in its reproduction by making ableist meanings appear commonsensical, memorable, and culturally legitimate. This is why a linguistic study of disability is theoretically important: it reveals how ideology enters ordinary discourse and how social domination is sustained through routine communicative forms.

Looking at recent scholarship on disability, it is possible to argue that ableism is not biologically determined; rather, it is ideologically produced and socially reproduced. Contemporary disability studies increasingly conceptualise ableism as a structural and normative order that privileges able-bodiedness and able-mindedness while marginalising those marked as disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill, or otherwise outside dominant standards of normalcy and productivity. In this regard, Lundberg and Chen (2024) define structural ableism as a system of historical and contemporary policies, institutions, norms, and practices that devalue and disadvantage disabled people while privileging those positioned as able-bodied and able-minded. In a related way, Brinkman, Rea-Sandin, Lund, Fitzpatrick, Gusman, and Boness (2023) show that disability is increasingly being understood not as a personal deficit but as a category shaped by broader social and ideological arrangements. From these positions, ableism can be understood as a socially organised way of valuing some bodies and minds over others.

Ableism in African language and culture may be understood as the ways in which disability is framed, interpreted, and responded to within culturally authorised systems of meaning. Recent African disability scholarship shows that ableism in African contexts is not simply a matter of individual prejudice; rather, it is embedded in social norms, religio-cultural perceptions, communal expectations, and everyday practices that shape who is recognised as fully belonging within the social order. Chisale (2020), for instance, demonstrates that fear of disability in African contexts may be informed by religio-cultural perceptions and stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion, especially against women with disabilities. At the same time, Lorenzo

(2025) and Sefotho (2021) caution against reducing African culture to a single disabling logic, showing instead that African philosophies such as Ubuntu can also provide resources for dignity, interdependence, and inclusion.

Across many African societies, proverbs, idioms, oral narratives, labels, praise forms, and everyday descriptions are not merely expressive devices; they are repositories of communal knowledge and social judgment. Because such forms are often treated as carriers of wisdom and common sense, they can naturalise assumptions about disability as lack, shame, misfortune, dependency, or incapacity. In a study of Akan proverbial discourse, Gyan, Abbey, and Baffoe (2020) show that proverbs and oral traditions are capable of institutionalising prejudice and inequality by presenting discriminatory meanings as culturally legitimate. Although their focus is gender, the insight is directly relevant to disability studies in Africa, since it shows how oral forms can function as ideological instruments through which exclusionary meanings are preserved and circulated.

For the present study, the implication is clear: ableism in African language and culture should be approached as a discursive and ideological formation. It is reproduced when disability becomes a metaphor for weakness, foolishness, impurity, dependence, or social undesirability, and when such meanings are circulated through respected cultural forms such as proverbs. Yet, as Sande (2026) argues in relation to postcolonial Zimbabwe, African cultural and spiritual frameworks are not only sites of stigma; they are also sites of contestation where belonging can be reimagined in more inclusive ways. Thus, a study of ableism in African language and culture is important not only for identifying stigma, but also for exposing the cultural logics that sustain it and for opening interpretive space for more affirming understandings of disability.

Proverbs and Ideology in Yoruba

Among the Yoruba, proverbs are not merely ornamental expressions; they are culturally authorised forms of speech through which communal wisdom, moral values, and social expectations are articulated and transmitted. As Owomoyela (2005) shows in his extensive study of Yoruba proverbial tradition, proverbs occupy a central place in Yoruba verbal art and social communication because they condense experience into memorable, reusable forms. In a similar vein, Olanrewaju (2020) argues that Yoruba proverbs function as expressions of socio-cultural identity, revealing how a people encode and preserve their worldview in language. This cultural authority makes proverbs especially important for ideological inquiry, since what is repeatedly circulated as "wisdom" often carries socially sanctioned assumptions about persons, relationships, and the proper order of society.

Ideology, in this context, may be understood as the system of beliefs, values, and assumptions that discourse helps to naturalise and sustain. Yoruba proverbs are deeply implicated in this process because they do not simply mirror social reality; they also participate in shaping it. Ademola-Adeoye (2022) notes that Yoruba proverbs embody socio-cultural precepts and moral orientations, while Aragbuwa (2020) demonstrates, through a feminist critical discourse analysis of selected Yoruba proverbs, that proverbial discourse can encode and reproduce ideological constructions, especially around gender. What this suggests is that proverbs are not ideologically innocent. They may reinforce respect for age, legitimise authority, regulate sexuality, or stigmatise difference. Because proverbs are conventionally treated as ancestral wisdom, the ideological positions embedded in them often acquire an appearance of naturalness, permanence, and unquestionable truth.

For this reason, the study of Yoruba proverbs is also a study of ideology in language. Proverbs provide access to the underlying worldviews that organise Yoruba communicative culture, and they reveal how discourse can sustain both social cohesion and social inequality. This is evident in scholarship showing that some Yoruba proverbs preserve moral order and communal responsibility, while others encode patriarchal or exclusionary assumptions (Aragbuwa, 2022; Adegbola & Olumilua, 2021). A critical reading of Yoruba proverbs, therefore, helps to establish that language is never a neutral vehicle of meaning; rather, it is one of the principal means through which culture, power, and ideology are expressed, circulated, and maintained. In this sense, Yoruba proverbs remain an important resource not only for the study of oral tradition, but also for understanding how social beliefs are stabilised through routine discourse. This is particularly relevant to the present study, since Yoruba proverbs serve as discursive sites through which ableist ideology can be encoded, normalised, and transmitted within everyday communicative culture.

Previous works on proverbs in Yoruba

Previous studies on Yoruba proverbs have examined the subject from archival, pragmatic, philosophical, socio-cultural, and critical perspectives. Owomoyela (2005) remains important for documenting Yoruba proverbs as a major repository of communal wisdom and social thought. Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji (1997) approach Yoruba proverbs from a pragmatic angle and show that their meaning depends heavily on context, communicative competence, and shared cultural knowledge. More recent studies have widened the focus. Olanrewaju (2020) examines Yoruba proverbs as expressions of socio-cultural identity, while Aragbuwa (2020; 2022) shows that proverbial discourse can encode and reproduce gendered ideologies. In addition to these, Fayemi (2009) makes a significant intervention by arguing that Yoruba proverbs should not merely be treated as fixed relics of tradition but as complex cultural texts whose meanings have sometimes been distorted and therefore require conceptual deconstruction. He also shows that proverbs function across a wide range of African social life and should be understood as tools for clarifying discourse, preserving indigenous knowledge, and transmitting cultural values

Similarly, Osoba (2014) studies the nature, form, and functions of Yoruba proverbs from a socio-pragmatic perspective and demonstrates that they perform educational, rhetorical, and anecdotal functions in Yoruba society. His analysis further shows that Yoruba proverbs are marked by figurativeness, brevity, stylistic density, and context-sensitive usage, making them important instruments of social instruction, moral regulation, and persuasive discourse

Taken together, these studies establish that Yoruba proverbs are not merely ornamental features of speech; they are culturally weighty forms through which knowledge, values, and ideology are preserved and circulated.

Despite these important contributions, existing scholarship has paid limited attention to how Yoruba proverbs construct disability and reproduce ableist ideology, leaving the intersection of proverb, disability, and ideological exclusion underexplored

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), while Critical Disability Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory serve as supporting frameworks. CDA provides the main analytical tools for examining Yoruba proverbs as discourse through which ideology, power relations, and social hierarchies are produced and sustained. Since proverbs are culturally authorised expressions, CDA makes it possible to show how they do not merely reflect social beliefs about disability, but also participate in legitimising and reproducing ableist meanings within Yoruba communicative culture. In this sense, the framework is suitable for revealing how proverb functions as a site of ideological construction.

Critical Disability Theory supports this framework by providing the disability-sensitive lens through which such discourses can be interpreted. It helps the study move beyond seeing disability as a natural or individual condition and instead foregrounds ableism as a socially and ideologically produced system that devalues certain bodies and minds. Through this lens, disability in Yoruba proverbs can be examined not simply as representation, but as a discursive category shaped by cultural assumptions about normalcy, competence, dependence, and human worth. This makes the theory particularly useful for identifying the oppressive meanings that underlie apparently ordinary proverbial expressions.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory further strengthens the analysis by explaining how disability terms in proverbs may function figuratively. Many proverbs draw on bodily and sensory conditions such as blindness, deafness, lameness, or madness to communicate broader meanings about ignorance, stubbornness, weakness, disorder, or social failure. Conceptual Metaphor Theory helps to show how such metaphorical mappings are not innocent, since they repeatedly associate disability with negative qualities and thereby reinforce ableist ideology. Together, these three frameworks make it possible to analyse Yoruba proverbs as discursive, ideological, and metaphorical sites in which disability is represented and ableism is reproduced.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design. The data for the study consist of disability-related Yoruba proverbs purposively extracted from Oyekan Owomoyela's *Yoruba Proverbs* (2005). The choice of Owomoyela's collection is informed by its richness, wide coverage, and status as one of the most comprehensive documented compilations of Yoruba proverbs. From this corpus, proverbs that contain explicit or implied references to disability, bodily difference, sensory impairment, or conditions associated with incapacity were selected for analysis.

The selected proverbs were subjected to qualitative textual analysis within the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Disability Theory, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The proverbs were examined to identify the linguistic and discursive patterns through which disability is represented, the ideological assumptions underlying such representations, and the metaphorical mappings that connect disability with socially negative meanings. Through this method, the study investigates how Yoruba proverbs function as cultural texts that encode and reproduce ableist ideology.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this research, Yoruba proverbs that are ableist are classified as disability as incapacity and exclusion from agency, disability as dependency and diminished personhood disability as ridicule and social mockery, disability as lack and deficiency, and disability as blocked aspiration. Proverbs will be discussed under these classifications

1. Disability as incapacity and exclusion from agency

There are Yoruba proverbs that portray disability as incapacity. In fact, the Yoruba word some use for a disabled person is 'alaabo ara' which translates as someone with 'half body'. This shows that they see people with disability as incomplete therefore, they are incapacitated to do anything meaningful. Since they are incapable, they are also to be excluded from other 'normal' people. These proverbs will be given below and analysed within the theoretical framework of the study.

a. Afọ́jú kì í ṣe aṣáájú ọ̀nà

The blind doesn't lead the way

This proverb may appear at first to be a harmless statement about physical limitation, but within the framework Critical Discourse Analysis, it functions as a discursive structure that naturalises exclusion. In this proverb, blindness is presented not as one human condition among many, but as an unquestionable basis for social disqualification. In proverb form, the statement acquires even greater authority because proverbs circulate as repositories of communal wisdom. What is therefore being legitimised through this utterance is not merely an observation about navigation, but an ideology of who is fit to guide, direct, and occupy positions of authority. The proverb works discursively to produce blindness as incompatible with leadership and, by implication, to define the sighted body as the normative basis of competence.

From the perspective of Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is deeply revealing because it encodes disability not simply as difference, but as deficiency. In this proverb, blindness is not treated as a sensory condition that exists within a variety of human experiences; it is turned into a marker of incapacity and social unsuitability. The ideological implication is that disability disqualifies a person from directing others. In this way, the proverb reproduces an ableist hierarchy in which bodily conformity to the norm becomes the condition for social value. Critical Disability Theory helps us see that the issue here is not blindness itself, but the social meaning attached to blindness. The proverb reflects and reinforces a culture in which the disabled subject is imagined as perpetually dependent, permanently lacking, and unsuitable for positions of agency.

The proverb becomes even more ideologically loaded when examined through Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Here, blindness does not remain at the level of literal sensory impairment; it becomes a source domain for

broader cultural meanings. The proverb draws upon a familiar conceptual mapping in which SEEING IS KNOWING, SEEING IS COMPETENCE, and LEADING IS VISION. By contrast, BLINDNESS becomes associated with IGNORANCE, INCOMPETENCE, MISDIRECTION, and DEPENDENCE. These metaphorical mappings are powerful because they shift blindness from a bodily condition to a symbolic shorthand for inadequacy. In such a framework, the blind person is not only one who cannot see physically, but one who is presumed unable to know, judge, direct, or guide. The proverb is therefore not an innocent cultural expression. It is a discursive act that participates in the reproduction of ableist ideology by teaching that leadership belongs to the sighted and that blindness is incompatible with guidance, authority, and social direction. In this sense, the proverb exemplifies how everyday language can function as a subtle but powerful mechanism for the normalisation of disability stigma within Yoruba communicative culture.

b. Arọ kì í jagun; ó máa ń dúró síwájú ilé.

"The lame do not go to war; they stay in front of the house."

This proverb functions as a discursive mechanism for assigning disabled people to fixed social positions. Its structure is categorical and exclusionary. The lame person is defined not by what they may do under varying circumstances, but by what they supposedly cannot do. The first clause, Arọ kì í jagun ("The lame do not go to war"), excludes the lame body from action, struggle, and public responsibility, while the second clause, ó máa ń dúró síwájú ilé ("they stay in front of the house"), relocates that body to a passive and domesticated space. This movement is ideologically important. The proverb does not simply contrast mobility and immobility; it creates a social geography in which war belongs to the able-bodied and the house-front belongs to the disabled. Through this contrast, disability is discursively framed as a legitimate basis for exclusion from collective struggle and socially valued action. Because the statement comes in proverbial form, it gains the force of common sense and ancestral wisdom, thereby disguising prejudice as truth. In this way, the proverb naturalises a hierarchy of bodies and spaces: the able body belongs in the sphere of action, courage, and public significance, whereas the disabled body is confined to stillness, dependence, and marginal presence.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb reveals how disability is culturally constructed as incapacity and social redundancy. The lame person is not represented as someone who could contribute to war in another capacity, participate in strategy, offer intelligence, give support, or occupy any meaningful role within the collective. Instead, lameness is treated as total disqualification from action. This is central to the ableist logic of the proverb. It assumes that bodily difference necessarily translates into social uselessness in domains associated with strength, bravery, and public value. The lame subject is therefore denied agency before any action begins. War in many traditional imaginaries stands for courage, masculinity, social recognition, and contribution to collective survival. To say that the lame do not go to war is therefore not only to exclude them from a physical activity; it is to exclude them symbolically from honour, valour, and full membership in the community's most valued forms of participation. The second half of the proverb intensifies this exclusion by assigning the lame person to the domestic threshold, a space of waiting rather than doing. Critical Disability Theory helps us see that the issue here is not simply mobility, but the ideological conversion of impairment into inferiority. The proverb constructs the lame body as naturally passive, non-participatory, and peripheral to the serious business of society.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb becomes even more revealing because both "war" and "house-front" carry meanings beyond their literal sense. In metaphorical terms, WAR often stands for struggle, agency, competition, public engagement, and social relevance. By contrast, standing "in front of the house" suggests passivity, immobility, dependence, and exclusion from the centre of meaningful action. The proverb therefore rests on a set of metaphorical mappings such as PUBLIC ACTION IS WAR, SOCIAL VALUE IS PARTICIPATION IN STRUGGLE, and LAMENESS IS INACTION/INEFFECTIVENESS. Once these mappings are activated, lameness ceases to refer only to a mobility impairment; it becomes a symbolic shorthand for non-performance, incapacity, and marginality.

Taken together, these three frameworks show that the proverb is not a neutral cultural observation but a compact expression of ableist ideology. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, it normalises exclusion by dividing social space into zones of action and zones of passivity. Through Critical Disability Theory, it constructs the lame

subject as inherently unfit for meaningful participation and strips them of agency, honour, and public value. Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it transforms lameness into a metaphor for ineffectiveness and peripheral existence.

2. Disability as dependency and diminished personhood

Disability as dependency refers to an ableist construction in which disabled people are imagined primarily as people who must always rely on others for movement, decision-making, communication, survival, or social participation. In this view, disability is interpreted not simply as bodily or sensory difference, but as permanent neediness. The problem with this construction is that it treats dependence as the essence of disabled existence rather than asking how social arrangements, inaccessible environments, and exclusionary norms create or intensify dependency.

a. Ẹni tí ojú rẹ̀ kò ríran, àwọn ọmọ rẹ̀ á máa darí i.

“One whose eyes cannot see will always be directed by their children.”

This proverb constructs blindness as a condition of inevitable dependence and reverses the normative social order in a way that marks the blind subject as deficient. In many Yoruba cultural contexts, age carries authority, and parents are conventionally positioned as guides of their children. This proverb disrupts that hierarchy by presenting the blind adult as one who must be led by those who would ordinarily be under their care. The discursive effect is powerful: blindness is not simply described as a sensory impairment but as a condition that displaces the person from the socially valued position of guide to the diminished position of the guided. The future marker “á máa” gives the statement a habitual and enduring quality, suggesting permanence rather than circumstance. Thus, the proverb naturalises dependency by making it seem that once a person is blind, they are destined to occupy a subordinate relation within the family.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is significant because it constructs disability not merely as need, but as reduced personhood through enforced dependency. The blind person here is not represented as someone who may require support in particular contexts while still retaining agency, judgment, and dignity. Instead, the proverb reduces the person to one who must always be directed. The use of children as the directing agents intensifies this meaning. It is not only that the blind person depends on others; it is that they depend on those culturally positioned as junior, inexperienced, and socially subordinate. This representation symbolically diminishes the blind person’s adult identity and social authority. The proverb therefore participates in an ableist logic that interprets blindness as loss of competence, loss of self-direction, and erosion of full social standing.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb reveals an important mapping between vision, authority, and self-governance. It rests on familiar metaphorical associations such as SEEING IS KNOWING, SEEING IS CONTROL, and LEADING IS VISION, while the absence of sight becomes associated with lack of direction and inability to govern oneself. The phrase “àwọn ọmọ rẹ̀ á máa darí i” does not merely describe physical guidance; it metaphorically encodes a transfer of authority. To be directed is not only to be shown a path but to be positioned as one who cannot chart one’s own course. The blind person is turned into a figure of one who cannot lead, cannot know, and cannot direct even their own movement without subordinate others. This metaphorical structure is deeply ideological because it converts a sensory condition into a sign of incapacity and reduced worth.

b. A kì í gbéra fún ẹni tí kò lè gbé ara rẹ̀ fún ara rẹ̀.

“You cannot elevate one who cannot elevate themselves.”

This proverb constructs worthiness for assistance around the ideal of self-sufficiency. Its central claim is that a person who cannot “raise” themselves is not a viable candidate for being raised by others. At the level of discourse, this is not merely a statement about effort; it is a moral judgment about who deserves support, recognition, or advancement. The proverb presents help as conditional upon prior self-capacity, thereby naturalising the idea that those who cannot independently initiate their own elevation are unworthy of collective

investment. The structure is especially ideological because it disguises exclusion as common sense: support is withheld not because society is unjust, but because the individual supposedly lacks the internal capacity to be helped. This logic gains authority as inherited wisdom, and the result is a discourse that legitimises social abandonment while appearing rational and morally sound.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is deeply implicated in ableist assumptions about autonomy, productivity, and personhood. It privileges a particular model of the human subject: the self-directing, self-activating, independently capable person. Anyone who cannot meet that norm is constructed as a failed subject. This is precisely where the proverb becomes dangerous for disability discourse. It therefore devalues those whose lives do not fit the ideal of autonomous self-elevation. More critically, it suggests that the one who cannot "lift" themselves is beyond meaningful uplift from others, thereby collapsing support need into diminished social worth.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb rests on a powerful vertical mapping. The verb "gbéra" ("raise oneself" or "elevate oneself") draws on the conceptual metaphor UP IS VALUE / SUCCESS / DIGNITY / ADVANCEMENT, while the inability to rise becomes associated with lack, stagnation, or unworthiness. This means that physical elevation is being used to structure a broader moral and social idea of human worth. The proverb thus activates a set of metaphorical mappings such as SELF-ELEVATION IS SELF-WORTH, UPWARD MOVEMENT IS CAPABILITY, and INABILITY TO RISE IS FAILURE. Once this metaphorical structure is in place, those who cannot "raise themselves" are no longer merely people with constraints; they become figures of incapacity and non-deservingness.

3. Disability as ridicule and social mockery

Disability as ridicule and social mockery refers to an ableist construction in which disabled people are made into objects of laughter, derision, insult, or entertainment. In this construction, disability is not treated as a neutral aspect of human variation but as something amusing, embarrassing, inferior, or inherently laughable. Mockery may take the form of direct jokes, insulting labels, exaggerated imitation, proverb-based ridicule, metaphorical abuse, or casual comparisons in which disability terms are used to belittle others.

a. Òdì tó ń gbìyànjú láti kọrin, ó ń mú ẹ̀rín bá àgbàlá.

"A mute who tries to sing brings laughter to the neighborhood."

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this proverb constructs disability as a legitimate object of public ridicule. Its discursive force lies in the relationship it establishes between disabled effort and communal laughter. The mute person is not simply represented as unable to sing; rather, their attempt to sing is framed as something laughable, a spectacle that invites mockery from the wider social space, here represented by àgbàlá ("the neighborhood" or compound). This is important because the proverb does not merely describe an unsuccessful act; it organizes a social response to disability. It teaches that when a disabled person attempts to perform an action associated with normative bodily capacity, the appropriate communal reaction is amusement rather than respect, support, or empathy. In this way, the proverb naturalises ridicule. The disabled subject is thus discursively positioned as one whose aspiration itself is comic. That is the ideological violence of the proverb: it does not only mark the person as impaired; it marks their effort toward participation as socially inappropriate and publicly laughable.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb reveals a deeply ableist logic in which the disabled person is denied dignity when they attempt to act beyond the limits socially assigned to them. The mute person is not allowed the status of an agent experimenting with voice, expression, art, or participation. Instead, their action is stripped of seriousness and converted into entertainment for others. The proverb implies that disabled aspiration is itself ridiculous. It constructs the disabled subject as one who should remain within the confines of what society deems appropriate for their body. Once they move beyond that boundary, they become an object of social correction through laughter. The proverb therefore reproduces ableist ideology by denying the mute person full personhood as a feeling, aspiring, expressive subject and reducing them instead to a figure of communal amusement.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb draws on a metaphorical structure in which failed performance becomes comic exposure. Singing here is not only literal; it also stands for expression, participation, display of talent, and entrance into a socially valued space of audibility and presence. The mute person's attempt to sing therefore carries a broader symbolic meaning: it represents a disabled subject trying to inhabit a normative expressive role.. In metaphorical terms, the structure can be expressed as DISABLED EXPRESSION IS COMIC FAILURE and PUBLIC LAUGHTER IS SOCIAL JUDGMENT. The mute body becomes a metaphorical sign of mismatch between aspiration and capacity, and that mismatch is rendered ridiculous. The proverb thus transforms muteness from a speech condition into a symbolic shorthand for futility and embarrassment. More importantly, it suggests that when disabled people attempt to cross into spaces coded for normative ability, what follows is not admiration but derision.

4. Disability as Lack and Deficiency

Disability as lack and deficiency refers to an ableist construction in which disability is interpreted primarily in terms of what is presumed to be missing from the person. In this framing, attention is focused not on the person as a whole, nor on the social conditions within which they live, but on an assumed absence: absence of sight, hearing, speech, mobility, strength, speed, rationality, or productivity. Disability is therefore read through a deficit model. The disabled person is not first recognised as a human subject with agency and social value; rather, they are defined by what they are thought not to have.

a. Ojú tí kò ríran kì í gbádùn àwọ̀ àṣọ.

"Eyes that cannot see cannot enjoy the color of cloth."

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this proverb constructs blindness as a condition of lack by defining visual impairment in terms of deprivation. It presents the blind person as excluded from pleasure, appreciation, and aesthetic experience. The categorical form of the proverb is important here. It does not say that a blind person experiences cloth differently; rather, it declares that they cannot enjoy it. In this way, the proverb transforms a sensory difference into a totalising judgment about the limits of perception and enjoyment. What is being naturalised is the idea that blindness necessarily entails a reduced relation to beauty and value. This representation gains the authority of communal wisdom and circulates as self-evident truth. Thus, the proverb does ideological work by reducing blindness to lack and by framing that lack as sufficient to exclude the blind subject from a significant domain of human experience.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is significant because it reflects the ableist assumption that disability is best understood through what the disabled person is presumed not to have. Blindness is not approached here as one mode of embodiment with its own forms of perception and meaning-making; it is represented as deficiency. The blind person is imagined primarily through absence: absence of sight, and therefore absence of pleasure in colour. The proverb also privileges a narrow sensory norm by assuming that enjoyment of cloth inheres only in colour. It leaves no room for texture, quality, warmth, symbolic meaning, social value, or other sensory and affective engagements with cloth. In that sense, the proverb is not simply about vision; it is about the cultural privileging of one sensory mode and the corresponding devaluation of those who do not access the world through that norm.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb rests on a wider symbolic association between sight and full appreciation. It draws on familiar mappings such as SEEING IS KNOWING, SEEING IS APPRECIATING, and VISION IS FULL ACCESS TO VALUE. Within this structure, blindness becomes associated not only with not seeing, but with not fully participating in pleasure, beauty, and refined judgment. The proverb therefore activates the metaphorical logic that LACK OF SIGHT IS LACK OF ENJOYMENT. This is ideologically potent because it extends a literal sensory condition into a broader semantic field of deficiency. Colour here functions as more than physical appearance; it stands for beauty, delight, elegance, and sensory richness. Once the blind person is positioned as unable to "enjoy the color of cloth," blindness becomes a metaphor for exclusion from aesthetic fullness itself.

b. A kì í fi aṣọ funfun fún afọ́jú; ó ò mọ ìyàtọ̀.

"You do not give white cloth to a blind person; they do not know the difference."

This proverb constructs blindness as a condition of irrelevance and non-discernment. Its logic is not merely that the blind person cannot see colour, but that because they cannot visually distinguish, they are unworthy of being given something marked by distinction, value, or refinement. The key ideological move lies in the second clause: "ó ò mọ ìyàtọ̀" ("they do not know the difference"). This shifts the statement from a sensory condition to a judgment about cognition, appreciation, and worthiness. Blindness is thus discursively framed not just as lack of sight, but as lack of meaningful discernment. The utterance therefore naturalises the assumption that those who cannot perceive according to normative visual standards do not merit access to fine, differentiated, or prestigious things. In this way, the proverb reproduces an ableist discourse in which blindness becomes grounds for exclusion from valued goods.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is important because it reduces the blind person to deficiency and then uses that constructed deficiency to justify withholding. The blind person is represented not as someone who may engage cloth through texture, quality, symbolism, usefulness, status, or social meaning, but as someone for whom visual distinction is the only distinction that matters. This is a deeply ableist assumption because it privileges one sensory norm and dismisses all other possible modes of valuation. Blindness is turned into a rationale for excluding the disabled subject from choice, taste, and material dignity.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb draws on a set of symbolic mappings that intensify its ideological effect. The phrase "mọ ìyàtọ̀" ("know the difference") exceeds literal colour recognition. It evokes discernment, judgment, appreciation, and the capacity to distinguish what matters. Within this metaphorical structure, SEEING IS DISCERNING, VISUAL DIFFERENCE IS VALUE, and BLINDNESS IS INABILITY TO APPRECIATE DISTINCTION. Once these mappings are activated, blindness becomes more than lack of sight; it becomes a metaphor for non-discrimination, non-appreciation, and inability to recognise worth. White cloth, in turn, may function symbolically as purity, beauty, elegance, prestige, or something specially set apart. To say it should not be given to the blind person is therefore to imply that such value would be wasted on them.

5. Disability as blocked aspiration

Disability as blocked aspiration refers to an ableist construction in which disabled people are imagined as naturally unable to pursue, attain, or even legitimately desire certain goals, roles, or forms of achievement. In this framing, disability is treated not simply as difference, but as a barrier to ambition, progress, fulfilment, and self-realisation.

a. Ẹsẹ̀ arọ kì í gbé e lọ ibi tí ó fẹ́.

"The legs of the lame cannot take them where they wish to go."

This proverb constructs disability as a condition of frustrated desire and restricted possibility. Its discursive force lies in the contrast between wish and movement. The lame person is represented as one who possesses desire but lacks the bodily means to realise it. This is significant because the proverb does not simply describe difficulty in mobility; it turns that difficulty into a general statement about the limits of disabled aspiration. The categorical phrasing makes the claim appear universal and self-evident: the lame person cannot get to the place they wish to reach. What is being normalised, then, is the idea that disability naturally blocks fulfilment. The disabled subject is discursively positioned as someone whose desires are inherently constrained by bodily inadequacy.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is revealing because it frames disability through lack and blocked aspiration rather than through social barriers or alternative possibilities. The lame person is not imagined as someone who might use support, adaptation, assistive means, communal arrangements, or different routes to reach their goal. Instead, the burden of limitation is placed entirely on the body itself.

Critical Disability Theory helps us see that this is not a neutral statement about mobility; it is a cultural representation of disabled life as inherently curtailed. The lame subject is constructed as one whose agency is perpetually interrupted by bodily insufficiency. In that sense, the proverb reproduces ableist ideology by presenting the disabled person not merely as someone with a mobility difference, but as one whose aspirations are naturally destined to remain unrealised.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb becomes even more ideologically dense because movement here is doing more than literal work. The phrase "lọ ibi tí ó fẹ́" ("go where they wish") does not refer only to physical travel; it also evokes the broader human ideas of progress, freedom, achievement, purpose, and self-determination. The proverb therefore rests on familiar metaphorical mappings such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, ACHIEVEMENT IS MOVEMENT FORWARD, and DESIRE IS A DESTINATION. Within this structure, the lame legs become a metaphor for incapacity to advance toward one's aims. Thus, LAMENESS IS BLOCKED PROGRESS and INABILITY TO WALK IS INABILITY TO REALISE DESIRE. This is where the ideological force of the proverb intensifies. A mobility impairment is transformed into a symbolic shorthand for frustrated ambition and constrained future. The proverb therefore reproduces ableist ideology by constructing disability as a built-in obstacle to aspiration, movement, and self-realisation.

b. Ẹni kékeré tó bá gbìyànjú láti gun igi gíga, á ṣubú kí ó tó dé ìdajì.

"A small person who tries to climb a tall tree will fall before reaching halfway."

This proverb constructs bodily smallness as a natural limit to aspiration and achievement. The "small person" is represented as one whose bodily condition already determines the outcome of effort. The proverb does not say the person may struggle, or may require assistance, or may succeed through other means; it states with certainty that they will fall before even reaching the halfway point. That certainty is ideologically significant. It turns a culturally produced judgment about bodily inadequacy into an apparently self-evident truth. In proverbial form, the statement becomes communal wisdom, and what is being normalised is the belief that some bodies are simply unfit for ambitious pursuits. In that way, it reproduces a discourse in which non-normative embodiment is treated as a legitimate reason to restrict expectation, ambition, and social possibility.

Within Critical Disability Theory, the proverb is important because it frames bodily difference through incapacity and foreclosed aspiration. Even if "ẹni kékeré" is read broadly as physical smallness rather than strictly as disability, the proverb still participates in the same ableist logic that marks certain bodies as naturally unequal to demanding tasks. The small body is constructed as insufficient for height, ascent, and attainment. What matters here is not simply the bodily feature itself, but the cultural meaning attached to it. This is a familiar operation of ableist ideology: bodies that do not approximate the norm are represented as inherently incapable of reaching valued goals. The result is that aspiration is treated as unrealistic for those marked by bodily limitation. The "small person" becomes a figure of restricted possibility, someone whose effort is already imagined as doomed because their body is presumed unequal to the challenge.

Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the proverb is especially revealing because climbing the tall tree clearly exceeds literal meaning. The image activates familiar conceptual mappings such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, SUCCESS IS UPWARD MOVEMENT, ACHIEVEMENT IS ASCENT, and AMBITION IS CLIMBING HEIGHTS. Within this structure, the tall tree represents a lofty goal, a difficult aspiration, or a socially valued position, while falling before the halfway point signifies failure, defeat, and inability to attain one's objective. The "small person" therefore becomes the metaphorical figure of one whose bodily condition prevents progress toward high achievement. In this mapping, SMALLNESS IS INADEQUACY and FALLING IS FAILED ASPIRATION. That is where the proverb's ideological force lies. It converts bodily stature into a symbolic shorthand for limited reach, weak capacity, and inevitable collapse under the weight of aspiration. The proverb therefore reproduces an ableist logic in which bodily difference becomes the basis for predicting, and normalising, the collapse of aspiration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the foregoing analyses show that Yoruba proverbs are not merely repositories of communal wisdom; they are also discursive sites in which ableist ideology is encoded, circulated, and normalised. Across the proverbs examined, disability is repeatedly constructed through recurring ideological patterns such as incapacity, dependency, ridicule, lack, deficiency, and blocked aspiration. These representations do not simply describe bodily or sensory difference; they transform difference into social meaning by attaching it to weakness, inferiority, failed agency, and curtailed possibility. In this way, the proverbs participate in the cultural reproduction of ableism by presenting exclusionary assumptions as natural, memorable, and authoritative.

The study therefore contributes to scholarship on Yoruba communicative culture by showing that proverbs can function as vehicles of ableist thought even while appearing as harmless wisdom. This does not diminish the cultural value of proverbs as a form of verbal art; rather, it calls for a more critical engagement with them. By interrogating the ideological assumptions embedded in disability-related proverbs, the study opens up space for rethinking inherited expressions and for challenging the normalisation of disability stigma in everyday discourse. Ultimately, the analysis affirms that language matters profoundly in the social construction of disability, and that a critical reading of Yoruba proverbs is essential to any serious linguistic advocacy against ableism.

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