

# Typology of Grammatical Complexity in African Proverbs

Pete Unseth  
Dallas International University  
Pete\_Unseth@diu.edu

The poster presents the results of a comparative study of grammatical complexity involving quotations in African proverbs from over 75 language communities.

Many proverbs contain quotations and identified speakers:

One quotation: Majang: *"The hawk said, 'I will not be hungry as long as the hen exists'."*

Two quotations: Tigrinya: *They asked, 'Mule, who is your father?' 'My uncle is a horse,' he replied."*

I find the following pattern of distribution of grammatical complexity in proverbs.

- No grammatical complexity: None of a language community's have quotation proverbs.
- One degree of complexity: Some of a language community's proverbs contain one quotation.
- Two degrees of complexity: Some of a language community's proverbs contain one quotation.

This can be diagrammed as an implicational hierarchy:

No quotations > One quotation > two quotations

The diagram means that if a category of quotation types is found in the proverbs of a language community, they will also have proverbs from the categories to the left.

If a language community has proverbs with one quotation, it will also have proverbs with no quotations. If a language community has proverbs with two quotations, it will also have proverbs with one quotation as well as proverbs with no quotations.

The same diagram also applies to the percentage of proverbs in each category in each language. That is, there will always be more proverbs in the left category than a category to the right. In the proverb inventory of any language community, the number of proverbs with no quotation will be the largest. If there are proverbs with one quotation, these will be fewer proverbs than the number of proverbs with no quotations. There will be fewer proverbs with two quotations than proverbs with one quotation.

No quotations > One quotation > two quotations

In any language community, proverbs with less grammatical complexity involving quotations are always more numerous than proverbs that involve more grammatical complexity involving quotations.

The same diagram also applies to the number of language communities that have each category of complexity in proverbs. That is, the number of language communities that have proverbs with no complexity is the largest and the number of communities whose proverbs have the highest grammatical complexity is the smallest.