

THE IGBO PROVERBS AND THE IMAGE SCHEMAS: A PRAGMATIC APPRAISAL

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Abstract

*In the study of proverbs in Igbo language using pragmatic method, we carry out a comprehensive review of the proverb from multidimensional approach and also the implication of pragmatics in the use of proverbs. This is because proverbs carry a lot of aphoristic imports that defile semantic interpretation. The objective of the study is to determine how the metaphorical mappings of image schemas could assist in analysing Igbo proverbs. In doing this we engage ourselves in reviewing literatures on both proverbs and image schemas. In this research, we discover that pragmatics is the seat of proverbs. We also discover that proverbs and metaphors operate in the same level of language interpretation with the sole difference that while proverbs are non personal and non specific, the metaphor is personal and specific. That is why we adopted metaphorical mappings of image schemas as our framework. We discover the image schemas of **causal, force, containment and path** in the use of proverbs in the Igbo language. In using this method, proverbs are grouped under the sub-heading of the image schema it is considered appropriate. We recommend that a similar research be carried to see if other image schemas could be identified in the language. Also important in the study is the revelation that proverbs are the exclusive preserve of the people and the culture of the owners. We equally notice that one proverb can serve a multiple purpose depending on the context.*

1.0 Introduction

Proverbs provide the salt and pepper with which the conversations of an ideal Igbo man are beautified. This is because any conversation without the use of a proverb is regarded as unskillful. Based on this an Igbo man regards the quality of speech in the light of how that speech is punctuated with proverbs. Proverbs constitute the oil with which the Igbo language is eaten. The values of proverbs to the Igbo man are very indispensable. The use of proverb is the mark of a mature speaker. It is often used to begin address, especially when one aims at making an impressive and powerful speech before an audience of respectable, experienced or elderly people and always connote a didactic value. The *Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary* defines proverb as ‘short well-known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice’. The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* sees a proverb as a ‘short sentence etc..., usually known by many people, stating something commonly experienced or giving advice. Though the Dictionaries quoted above see a proverb as a general statement known by many people, not all have the ability of understanding proverbs and hence the proverb ‘A tũṛṛ ọmára ọmára... A tũṛṛ ọfèkè ò féyí ísì n’ọhjá’ meaning that only the wise will understand the proverb when it is being used. Proverb, though a property owned by Igbo people in general has its own dialective values hence the saying “Ndi baanyi siri” (Our people say).

The Igbo man’s reputation as a good speaker or as a successful oral artiste, to a large extent depends on his ability to use the proverb. While some ethnic groups quote the Bible, or works and maxims of wise men or from a carefully worked out code of law, the Igbo man quotes proverbs to buttress

his point and give authority and authenticity to an idea or a disputed fact. Any speech or literary composition that is not punctuated with apt proverbs and idioms is regarded as “naked”, that is, as lacking in the expression force which makes a listener nod his head in approval and admiration. Such unadorned expressions are seen as roughly equivalent to a pot of watery soup lacking in the necessary ingredients. Proverb is a way of putting a bitter truth through the medium of smooth words. It is essentially the first conscious step toward an artistic use of language. Proverbs are highly figurative, and as such, they have high forms of linguistic sophistication. The need to acquire the ability to understand and use proverb cannot be overemphasised.

In this study, Proverb is defined as a ‘brief, apt and striking sentence which expresses an acknowledged truth or shrewd observation about life, and which is perpetuated through oral tradition’. Proverb constitutes the language of diplomacy among the Igbo. It is often used as language of settling bride price, commerce and in short oratory. No wonder Igwe (1986) sees proverb as a language of exclusion. To him, proverb enables the people to talk before strangers in a way the strangers will not understand. Proverbs are essential for effective communication of ancient culture. Although Igbo proverbs have attracted the attention of Africans; much of this interest has resulted largely in collection, description of most general sort, and explanation of the employment of proverbs traditionally or by modern writers. But there has been very little analysis of proverbial forms, structure and pragmatics, or of the content of proverbs in Igbo language. This forms the thrust of this study of the pragmatics analysis of Igbo proverbs.

In this research, we adopted the **framework of Lakoff (1987) image schemas of metaphorical analysis**. Metaphor has traditionally been viewed as the most important form of figurative language use, and is usually seen as reaching its most sophisticated form in literary or poetic language (Saeed 2003:345). Metaphor is viewed as something outside normal language and which requires special forms of interpretation from listeners and readers. Metaphor is seen as a departure from literal language, defected as anomalous by the hearer, who then has to employ some strategies to construct the speaker’s intended meaning. Searle (1979:114 in Saeed 2003) has this to say about the assumption of the sentence:

“Sam is a person”. Suppose he hears the utterance “Sam is a pig”. He knows that cannot be literally true, that the utterance, if he tries to take literally, is radically defective. And indeed, such defectiveness is a feature of nearly all the examples that we have considered obvious falsehood, semantic nonsense, violations of rules of speech act, or violation of conversational principles of communication. This suggests a strategy that underlies the first step: where the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning (Saeed 2003:346).

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.0. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the aspect of study which, according to Robinson (2006) is a subfield of linguistics which seeks the ways in which context contributes to meaning. The meaning is not derived solely from the meaning of the words used in the sentences. The meaning is far-fetched from the

combination of the words or phrases which make up the sentences. Pragmatics is the study of the speaker's meaning, not focusing on the phonetics or grammatical form of an utterance, but instead on what the speaker's intention and beliefs are (cf Dijk 1977). Accordingly, Carston (2002) sees pragmatics in linguistics as the meaning in context, and the influence that a given context can have on the message. This requires the knowledge of the speaker's identity and the place and time of the utterance. Grice (1989) is of the opinion that pragmatics is the study of implicature. I.e. the things that are communicated even though they are not explicitly expressed, while Thomas (1975) discusses pragmatics in language use as the study of relative distance that is both social and physical between speakers in order to understand what determines the choice of what is said and what is not said. Vaschueren (1999) on his own part aligns pragmatics with the study of what is meant as opposed to the intended meaning i.e. that which is unsaid and unintended or unintentional.

Robinson (2002) uses information structure to analyse pragmatics. To him, pragmatics is the study of how utterances are marked in order to effectively manage the common grounds of referred entities between speakers and hearers. It encompasses speech act theory,, conversational implicature, talk in iteration and other approval to language behaviour in philosophy, sociology and linguistics.(Austin1962). Unlike semantics which examines meaning that is conventional in a given language, Brown and Levinson (1978) see pragmatics as one that studies how transmission or meaning depends not only on structural and linguistic knowledge e.g. grammar, lexicon etc. of the speech listener but also the context of the utterance, any pre-existing knowledge about those involved, the inferred intent of the speaker, and other factors. In this respect, pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity, since meaning relies on the manner, place, time etc of the utterance (Mey1993, Clark1996).

As an ideal Igbo speaker, when we hear some proverbs, we normally try to understand not only what words mean, but what the writer or speaker of those proverbs intend to convey. According to Yule (1996) pragmatics is the study of intended meaning. Accordingly, Couthard (1985:58) sees conversational analysis as a first step towards achieving “a naturalistic observational discipline to deal with details of social interaction in a rigorous, empirical and formal way”. Bell (1991:112) sees a language context as the one which can be recognised by the knowing insider who can bring the brute fact together as social facts. He goes further to say that the specification of the context of utterance can, unlike the description of the situation, be much more implicit since it assumes the totality of the shared knowledge possessed by the participants in the communicative act.

2.1.2 Image Schemas

Image schemas, according to Saeed, (2003:353) is our physical experience of being and acting in the world-of perceiving the environment, moving our bodies, exerting and experiencing force etc. Johnson (1987) describes image schemas as ... the primitive level of cognitive structure underlying metaphor and which provide a link between bodily experience and higher cognitive domain such as language. The initial identification of image schemas was mainly achieved through the cross-linguistic analysis of concepts of motion and spatial relations. (cf Hampe, 2005; Dodge & Lakoff 2005; Talmy 2005; Johnson 2005).

Since the 1987 publication of the classical books “ **women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Revealed about the Mind**” and “ **The Body in the Mind**” by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson respectively in which they canvassed the ways in which embodied experiences

manifest itself at the cognitive domain are in terms of image schema, many image schema theories have in different areas of study like literary criticism (Turner 1987); poetics (Lakoff & Turner 1989); psychology (Mandler 1992); psycholinguistics (Gibbs, 1994, Gibbs & Colston, 1995); cognitive grammar (Lakoff 1987); mathematics (Lakoff & Nunez 2000); neuro-biology and neuro-computational terms (Gallese & Lakoff 2005); neuro-science (Dodge & Lakoff 2005); mental simulation (Gibbs 2005); neural simulation (Narayanan 1997); cognitive Igbo semantics (Uchechukwu 2001, Edogo 2012, Okeke 2013 & Ogbonna 2013). For the pragmatic analysis of the Igbo proverbs, a combination of different image schemas will be employed in order to capture the complex structures of the proverbs. Such image schemas includes: PATH, FORCE, CAUSAL, and CONTAINMENT/CONTAINED will be adopted.

2.1.1. Theoretical Review of Proverbs in Igbo.

Proverbs are oral compositions and their various stylistic constituents are derived from all layers of what we described as the hierarchy of socio-cultural value systems of the people. They point to the individual, domestic and collective life pattern of the society from which they are derived. In other words, proverbs adopt material from people's environment. Obiechina (1975:156) perceives proverbs as "a collection and/or representations of people's way of life". Obiechina's observation is quite obvious because in any proverb one is likely to see the culture of the people that own the proverb.

Proverbs actually came from the depth of tradition, reflecting the intellect and wisdom of the people. Proverb in Africa, are wise sayings and, a special prerogative of the elders. The elders are always exalted as the custodians of the wisdom in Africa. Any African elder that lacks this power of the mind and words may lose his respect, no matter his importance in the society. Nwoga (1976:83) says that "a proverb is the wisdom of many and the wit of one; the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression; and the edge tools of speech."

Two things are clear about Nwoga's definition. First, proverbs make speech to be short, in other words, it is an economic way of using words. Secondly, proverbs bring out the wisdom and tradition of the people. Abraham (1964:61) in his own words defines proverbs as the "the aphoristic saying enjoying traditionally handed down currency...having protean powers of interpretation". The protean powers of interpretation may enjoy a certain universality of application, but essentially proverbs reveal the culture in which they exist.

2.1.2 Empirical Studies

Igbo proverbs are useful in speech because they cover the entire range of human existence. Igbo proverbs describe a wide variety of natural occurrence and give a characteristic Nwadike (2009) collected 85 Igbo proverbs and classifies them into 36 sub-headings. Some of these proverbs have literal meanings as well as explanations while others he gives the literal meanings only without any further explanations. Nwadike (2009: 35) under **admonition**:

(1) O bu mmiri agba oso

One who carries water needs not run. It means: one in a position of trust should not be found wanting. It can also mean that those who live in glass house should not throw stone.

In (p.56) under **love**, we have the following:

(80) Iwe nwanne anaghị eru n'okpukpu

Anger for a blood relation does not get down to the bone.

(81) asọ nwanne a naghị agbụli ya elu

Saliva splitting on a blood relation is not raised high.

Under **fear** he has this:

(82) Nkume rja elu, ụjọ atụwa itemmiri

When the stone climbs up, fear grips the water pot.

Though this work by Nwadike (2009) shows various proverbs of Igbo world view, it is purely literal. It enhances this present study in the sense that it lists the types of proverbs in Igbo language and the categorisations of such proverbs but it differs with this present study in the area of context. The pragmatics of these proverbs is what motivates the present study using image schemas as our analytical tool.

From the foregoing theoretical and empirical reviews on the cognitive studies, none of the works examine the Igbo proverbs. Though they all use image schemas to determine the semantic imports of the verbs of their choices, this present study uses image schemas to determine the applicability or the otherwise of these image schemas to Igbo proverb constructions. It is against this backdrop that the present study seeks to find out how such image schemas like: **path, force containment/contain and causal** play important roles in highlighting the context of proverbs. The method that was adopted in gathering the data for this present study was purely **library research method**. All the existing works on proverbs, semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics formed the pools through which we drew our data.

3.0 Analysis

Having given much exclusive description of pragmatics as a subfield of linguistics, which is interested in studying context meaning, it is ripe now to delve into the analysis of some Igbo proverbs based on their contexts using the image schemas as our analytical tools.

3.1.0. CAUSAL schema

Grady (2005:41-41) sees causal schema as a concept which proves useful even in the absence of a clear, shared definition of the term. He says that causal attribution is analogous to the judgement that two entities are similar. He asserts that it is a subjective interpretation (sometimes automatic and unconscious), which may or may not be traceable to any objective truth about a situation. He concludes that **causal** (belief) need not be metaphorical nor tied to any particular sensory experience. (cf Lakoff & Johnson 1997:170-178; Talmy 1988).

Qhjá ná-àsọ nkàtà épúkwálá éró

Bush Rel.cl. refuse basket Not sprout mushroom

‘A bush that detests a basket should not grow mushroom’

This is a proverb of warning in Igboland. It could also be seen as a proverb that dares one to do something and see the consequence. If the bush happens to grow mushrooms, that basket that it detests must enter it and thereby desecrate it. This proverb relates to the Igbo proverb that says “Ónyé kpátará nkụ áhụhụ kporọ ngwèrè òrírí meaning that he who brings an ant infested faggot invited lizards to pay him homage. If one does not respect oneself in the public, one should not be surprised to see oneself being insulted by the irresponsible people. It portrays that for one to be respected, one has to respect oneself. It is also unethical for one who says that she/he does not eat

rat to use her/his teeth to share the same rat for children. One has to be careful so that one does not experience unpleasant consequences.

2. Nwátà búlie ònà yá élú oḡoḡo áyochie yá ányá.
Child carry father him up cloth fall-cover him eyes
'If a child lifts his father up, his (father) cloth will cover his eyes.'

If a child tries to undo his father, he will be undone as well by the gods of the land. Anybody who does the abominable will be ready to face the consequences. No person is allowed to commit a crime and get away with it.

- (3) Áká ájá ájá nà-ébúté ọ̀nụ mmánu mmánu
Hand sandy sandy Aux carry come mouth oily oily
'A sandy hand will bring about oily mouth'

Whoever that is working on the farm must look tattered and haggard throughout the period the farming lasted. But during the harvest time, the same person rejoices either by enjoying the proceeds of his farm or making money out of them. He then uses the money to purchase other things he is in need of. The Igbo people believe that for one to eat, one must work because food does not fall from heaven. Conversely, the proverb encourages hard work with the hope that the later days will be better. In other words, hard works yield wealth.

In the proverbs above, there are **causes and effects**. In the first, the cause of sprouting mushrooms brings the effect of desecration by the entrance of the basket while in the second; the cause of lifting the father up brings the effects of the cloth covering the eyes and in the third the cause of soiling hands brings the effects of oily mouth.

3.1.1 Force Schema

The force schemas, according to Johnson (1989) include the basic force schema of compulsion where a force vector F acts on an entity U . He says that force schema is a movement along a trajectory which may be blocked or may continue. Where the force meets obstruction; it acts in various ways; being diverted, or continuing on by moving the obstacle or passing through it.

- (4) Ényí ná-émé àlà, àlà à ná-àḡḡi yá ógólógó
Elephant Aux do land, land Aux stretch it tall
'When the elephant is maltreating the land, the land stretches tall'

As the elephant walks heavily on the land, the land in turn stretches it tall. So the elephant receives its own recompense from the same land it thinks that it punishes. The force with which it tramples the earth is the same force with which the earth stretches it. This proverb is associated with the people who maltreat their villagers or their neighbours when they receive their own share of wickedness one way or the other. Some of the bad medicine men who prevented their brothers' wives from getting pregnant by blocking their wombs sometimes have their own daughters being barren. At times, they produce children in large numbers but these children will become thorns in their flesh. This proverb is one of the ways of saying that wickedness rebounds.

- (5) Áná àmụ nwá n'áhjá, ànaghị ákpàchí ụkwụ
When born child in market one not block legs
'When delivering a child in the market there is no need to block the legs.'

The woman that is delivering a child in the market place must despise the shame of exposing herself in the public. This is because if the woman tries to conceal herself before the public views, it will result to unpleasant consequence that could lead the death of both the woman and the baby. The baby will be forcing itself out and when it meets the obstacle, the baby will either overcome the obstacle or force itself through or the blockage will lead to the death of both. When an issue is brought before the public, there is no need to conceal any secret. The public must know what the matter is in order to give adequate solution. But if the truth of the matter is hidden, the problem will continue. This is another way of saying that one should not hide what has become a public view.

All the proverbs above employ the image schemas of **force**. In 4 above, we see the force of the elephant on the earth and even its own negative share of the same force and in 6, the force of labour makes the woman to undress herself in the market and the force continues moving against any obstacle until it comes through.

3.1.2. CONTAINMENT Schema.

Johnson (1987:21-23) gives the example of the image schema of containment as the human body itself which serves as container.

- a. Containers are kind of disjunction: elements are either inside or outside the container
 - b. Containment is typically transitive. If the container is placed in another container the entity is within both, if I am in bed and my bed is in my room, then I am in my room.
- (6) Anàghì anọ n'ụlọ ama ihe zuru n'ahịa.
 One not stay in house and know what traded in market.
 One does not stay in ones house and know what goes on in the market place

For one to know what transpires in the market place one must leave ones house. This is because man is not all-knowing. One should not conclude that something is good or bad when one has not tested or experimented such a thing. The proverb discourages people from sitting in a place and reaches a conclusion on a particular matter that needs investigation.

- (7) Nwa àkwọ n'àzụ àmàghí nà íjè bụ ọrụ
 Child carry in back know not that walk is tedious
 A child that is being carried on the back does not that walking is tedious.

One who has not come face to face with the realities of the world thinks that everything is easy in life. Such a person has not seen the ups and downs that characterise the human existence. A person who has people that protect and cover them in all situation does not understand what people who do not have that back-up suffer in the society. When attending community gathering, such people will not attend and their parents and guardians will stand and defend them and nobody will penalise them. When considering making a contribution to any project, such people will suggest big amount of money because they can easily get it from their wealthy benefactors while others will oppose the suggestion. Such people have never experienced hardship in life. They can boast anyhow because they have god-fathers.

Here, the image schemas of **containment/ contained** is employed. If a man is in the room and the room is in the house, then, the man is in the house. Here the house is the containment while the

man is the contained. Likewise, if the child is on the back and the back is on a person, the child is contained in the person. The person is the containment while the child is the contained.

3.1.3. PATH Schema

Johnson (1987) asserts that **part schema** reflect our everyday experience of moving around the world and experiencing the movement other entities. He says that our journeys have beginning and an end, a sequence of places on the way and direction. Other movements, according to him include projected paths, like flight of a stone thrown through the air. Based on such experiences the path schema contains a starting point marked A and end point marked B.

- (8) ónyé tuxu òkwuté n'ímé áhjá ámàghị mà ọ bụ nné yà kà ọ gá-ádà
 Person throw stone in market know not whether it be mother him that it will fall
 'One who throws a stone inside a market does not know whether it will hit his mother'.

A person who wishes to do evil must think of the resultant effect of what he intends to do. Most of the times one gets involved one way or the other in the evil he intends for his enemy. The implication of the proverb is that one should not think of doing evil because it could boomerang.

- (9) O ji ọsọ àgbákúrú ọgá ámàghị n'ọgụ bụ ọnwụ.
 He take run approach fight know not that fight is death
 'He who rushes to engage himself in a fight does not know that fighting leads to death'.

The proverb discourages thoughtlessness in an individual. It emphasises on looking carefully before takes an action. This is because what one loses in a second may not be recovered in a life time. There is need for calculation in whatever one engages oneself to do. If one gets into a venture without learning what it will take, the same person will come out counting his loses.

In the proverbs above, the image schema of **path** is employed. In 8 we see the path which starts from the release of the stone and the movement in the air and the landing point which is the market and in 9, we see the movement to the fighting scene and the duration of the fight and the end point of the fight which is death.

4.0 Findings and Conclusion

4.1 Findings

In this study, we discovered that the proverbs are the exclusive prerogatives of the people who own it. This is because a stranger, no matter how powerful a scholar he is, cannot jump into the analysis of Igbo proverbs. The attempt by Austin J Shelton to show the relativism and reciprocity in Igbo proverbs “failed as it was evident that he was analysing the proverbs by mere stitching of words as he found them in the Igbo-English Dictionary. Take for instance his analysis of the proverb “Ewe [sic] sị na ọ fọdurụ nwa ntịntị ma iku arụọ ya mma” He gave the meaning as “monkey says that he would have remained a little child but his eyebrows produced his beauty (adult appearance). No real Igboman would like to see the language dragged to the mud especially the proverbs. That was why Echeruo rebuffed all the analysis done by Shelton in its entirety and dismissed them as messing up the language. Echeruo went further to explain the proverb of the monkey as an insider who understands the context of the proverb. “The monkey thinks that his eye –lashes nearly cost him his beauty. The cognitive linguistic of image schemas lend more credence to the metaphorical sentences of which proverbs are part of them. In this study, we discover the schemas of **causal, force, containment** and **path** operative in Igbo proverbs. The image schemas used in this study do not constitute a closed set because others can still be discovered in future researches.

4.2 Conclusion

The proverbs are deep-rooted in the pragmatics of the said proverbs which is beautified by the analytical tools of metaphorical mappings using image schemas. This is to say that for one to understand Igbo proverb the person must be able to decipher the context of the said proverb. Otherwise the person will be like a fool who attended a gathering and yet go home empty-handed (not knowing what was discussed).

Igbo proverbs embody the accumulation of the Igbo experience throughout the history of the Igbo. In the absence of any written history, proverbs serve as the medium through which much can be learnt about the Igbos-their philosophy, family structure, their politics and religion. A thorough knowledge of Igbo proverb will, therefore enable any person to predict the reaction of the Igboman to a situation; it will enable him to understand his attitude, his mind, and those of his kinsmen generally. Therefore, proverbs are sine qua non in conversation amongst the mature minds in Igboland.

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