

BODY-PARTS METAPHOR IN THE IGBO LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

In the Igbo language, body-parts are sources of metaphors. A particular trait that may at times be perversely used is attributed to the body part thus used. The head, the brain, the heart, the mouth, the tongue, the belly etc. have been used metaphorically. This paper examines metaphors that have been based on body-parts and the conceptualization of these metaphors in Igbo. What do these metaphors highlight? What effect do they have in the Igbo world? We will thus make a contextual analysis to enable us determine the under lying meaning. The paper will equally give the equivalence of these metaphors in the English language.

Key words: body-parts, metaphor, contextual analysis, under-lying meaning.

0. Introduction

“Metaphor is a figure of substitution based on similarity” Lodge (1981:10). The two things being considered must be similar as to be substituted, one for the other. It is based on similarity between things that are otherwise dissimilar and separate in space and time. Metaphorical statements assert something to be what it is known not to be. In the Igbo language body-parts are commonly used in metaphorical statements.

Discussing the body, Skara (2004: 184) says: “The name BODY is of larger signification than the word MAN. It is a source of patterned symbolism. It covers a huge portion of our experience”. Many concepts are defined in relation to the body, e.g. a legislative body (a group of individuals organized for some purpose) the body of the discussion (the main, central, or essential part) bodyclock (body's natural needs to sleep, eat, etc. at particular times) body language (non-verbal communication, gestures). In the above statement, the body has been used metaphorically indifferent senses. The whole body is structured to perform activities in order to reach and circulate information from our natural and cultural environment. The head, ears, eyes, mouth, and hands etc. depend on the body as a whole. Our body, our language, mirror reality and follow changes in the body. Body-part metaphors occur in varieties. The organs for example can be used to describe simple or complex things. Musolff (2004:66) noted such usage as the heart of Europe as if Europe was a human with a heart in the sentence “Britain may be advised that it can’t be the heart of Europe if it is detached from its arteries”. Here, other countries of Europe have metaphorically been described as arteries. In our work, we are concerned with the use of body-parts as the target domain in the Igbo language.

1.0. Metaphor in the Igbo world

Metaphorical expressions abound in languages around the world and body-parts symbolize phenomena as represented in different cultures. A careful examination of body-parts centred expressions reveals significant aspects of modes of thinking in each language and culture. It focuses on interpersonal relationships, on expressive modes such as affective or emotive modes. According to Black (1979:21), metaphorical statements appear to “be perversely asserting something to be what it is plainly known not to be”. Metaphorical statements used for body-parts are assertions

about a person, his conduct and his general behavior. The Igbo conceptualize realities implicitly especially when they do not want the “uninitiated” to understand the discussion at hand. In Igbo language, body-parts have been sources of metaphors which conceptualize and concretize the Igbo world. In the words of Okoye (1992:176), Igbo body-based metaphors mediate on analogy or a structured correspondence. Body based metaphors achieve these objectives by associating human traits-strengths and frailties, beauty, ugliness, kindness as well as wickedness with certain parts of the body. The belly is wickedness or kindness because these qualities are located in it and they become inseparable. The use of body metaphors results from the fact that the Igbo attach central importance to their bodies. We will examine different body parts used metaphorically in the Igbo language. The Igbo body-part metaphors used in this work were collected from journals and also by contact and interviews of some traditionalists of Igbo origin.

2.0. Ihu – The face

Nwoye (1992: 169) posits that “among the Igbo, face as a body-based metaphor has many folk interpretations. That face features prominently and constantly in many of their utterances attests to the overall and central importance attached to it”. The face houses the eyes, the nose, the ears and the mouth. It is the area above the neck and is the frontal area of the head. The face can be used metaphorically to depict shame, bad or good fortune, hypocrisy and cheerfulness.

2.1. The face depicting shame

If one behaves in a way that depicts that he/she is shameless, the person can metaphorically be described as: *Onye ihere n’adighi n’ihu* (There is no shame on his face) = one who has no shame. The person brings shame/dishonor to his/herself and more importantly to the community of Igbo as a whole. If such a person has brought shame to other people: the family, the community, and friends, such a person is referred to as *onyemechuru mmadu ihu/onyeboro mmadu*. For example in the traditional Igbo community, if a young girl gets pregnant out of wedlock, she is said to have brought shame to the family/kindred and the community as a whole. The mother can be ostracized by her fellow women for failure to bring up her daughter in the tenets and beliefs of the people. The same goes for anyone who steals. Such a person will be ostracized for bringing shame to the community. Thus the face in Igbo is “conceptualized as atwo dimensional phenomenon, comprising of (sic) individual and group face” (Nwoye 1992: 178). Thus the fear of *mmechuihu* (shame) is the beginning of wisdom.

2.2. The face depicting bad or good fortune

The face can bring success to ones daily activities. The Igbos believe that *onye kporo mmadu ihu ututu* (the first person one meets and greets) excluding family members when one wakes up in the morning has an influence over what happens to that one during the whole day. If the person has *ihu oma* (good face) (not in the sense of beauty), that one will have good fortune and things will go well with him throughout the day. On the other hand, if the person has *ihu ojoo* (bad face), the oneconcerned will have misfortune. The same goes with the person who buys first from a trader in a day (*Onye mbu kporo ya ihu ahia*) If the person has *ihu oma*, the trader will sell all his/her wares in a short while. Whereas the reverse is the case if the first buyer has *ihu ojoo*. Anyone who receives money first thing in the morning touches the money on the face so that good fortune or more money would come ones way that day. This particular incident happened as I was writing this paper. After a technician fixed my refrigerator by 7.30 am, I paid him with 500 naira mint. He touched the money on his face and said *ya gazie taa* meaning may it continue to be like this today.

2.3. The face depicting hypocrisy and cheerfulness.

That the Igbo attach importance to the face is shown by the ritual of washing the face first thing in the morning as soon as one wakes up before performing any other duty or interacting with other people “for fear of contaminating them with the unwholesome influences from the encounter with the evil spirits of the previous night”. (Nwoye 1992:172). A hypocrite in Igbo is described as having two faces: *onye ihu àbụọ* (one who has two faces). A hypocrite cannot be relied on because of his way of life. He pretends to be what he is not that is why the Igbo describe him as having two faces. The Igbo like cheerfulness and a cheerful person can easily succeed in life. Such a person is described as *Onyenwere ihu ọcha* (one that has white face) meaning one that is cheerful.

3. Obi/Afọ –The heart / The belly

We are discussing *obi* and *afọ* (heart and belly) together because the Igbo use the two organs interchangeably to represent emotions like kindness, contentment, wickedness and anger in *obioma/afọ oma* (goodheart/belly = kindness), *ọhụ juru m obi/afọ* (happiness has filled myheart/belly), *obi ọjọọ/afọ ọjọọ* (bad heart/bad belly = wickedness) *iwejuru yaobi/ iwe juru yaafọ* (anger fills his heart/belly = he is full of anger). Here both *obi* heart and *afọ* belly are seen as containers that can be filled with one emotion or the other. In the case of *afọ juru ya* (hisbelly is full), it can be in the sense of being satisfied or in the sense of being rich hence we have such title as *Eze afọ juru* (the king whose bellyis full meaning a rich/wealthy king) *Ọnụma jurum obi/ afọ* (Bitterness fills my heart/belly = I am filled with bitterness) meaning I am bitter against someone. It can be rightly said that in Igbo, such emotions mentioned above have the heart *obi* and the belly *afọ* as their locations.

Even though the heart and the belly can be used interchangeably in some areas in the Igbo language, there are areas where they cannot. You cannot say *obiime, obi ọbara* but you can say *O nwere obi oma* (He is kind).

3.1. The heart as seat of emotions

In Igbo, *obi* can be translated to mean heart, mind, and chest. It is the centre of emotions, thought and volition. It is the centre for decision making. The heart metaphorically is said to judge someone who has committed wrong in *obi ya na-ama ya ikpe* (His heart has judged him to be guilty).The heart can be hard/strong as in *obike*. (*O nwere obike* =he/she has a hard/strong heart)The heart has been depicted as dry (*obikporo nku*) for someone who finds it difficult to forgive, bitter (*obi ilu*) sweet (*obi uto*), soft, kind (*obi mmiri*), weak (*obi ida mba*) crooked (*obi mgbago*). For someone whose dealings with people is not straight forward, such a person is described as *Onye nwere obi mgbago* (One who has acrooked heart), heartless (*obi okwute*): He is heartless (*O nwere obiokwute*).

The Bible in Jeremiah chapter 17 verse 9 describes the heart as being “treacherous more than anything else”(obi di aghugho karia ihe obula). The Igbo people also depict the heart as being treacherous or deceitful in the use of *obi aghugo*. (A deceitful or treacherous heart). The heart can equally be heavy in *obiukwu* (heavy heart).

In Igbo, belly *afọ* has a wide range of meanings: intestines, entrails, belly, stomach, abdomen, and womb. The meaning can be discerned from the usage or context: *afọime* (pregnancy), *afọ ọbara*

(bloody stomach =dysentery), *afōike* (strong stomach = constipation), *afō oma* (good belly =good will) *O nwere afō oma* (He is good willed).

3.2. The heart as a container

The heart is seen as a bag: *Obi bu akpa onye obula nya nke ya* (the heart is a bag, each person carries his /her own). The Igbo believe that each person has his own way of life or is entitled to his or her own opinion and so responsible for any decisions made. No one knows what is going on in another person's heart or what another person is thinking.

4. Ire - The tongue

The Bible in James chapter 3 verse 6 describes the tongue as “a fire that can set the whole body ablaze”. It sets the whole body on fire in that the tongue can say something that can destroy or harm an individual, or a community. For example, in the past in Igbo land, verbal reports have been known to make communities go to war, families against one another or individuals against themselves. The wrong usage of the tongue has been known to cause problems in the family. Women have been known to be beaten by their husbands because such a woman could not hold her tongue but talked unendingly or in a manner she is not supposed to talk. The tongue is thus dangerous. The Igbos see the tongue as dangerous hence it has also been described as sharp (*ire nkọ* = sharp tongue), sweet (*ireuto* = sweet tongue), without gauge (*ire na-agba ka ugba* = tongue that splits like oil bean). When someone talks in a manner to hurt other people such a person is said to have *ire nkọ*. Someone who talks with the intent of being deceitful and as such is capable of manipulating people, that one has *ire utọ*. The one who talks carelessly as if without gauge and also talks too much is said to have *ire na-agba ka ugba* (tongue that spits like oil bean) – a flippant.

5. Ukwu - The feet

Before the advent of modern means of transport – lorries, cars, wagons, trains etc. the Igbo made good use of their feet as a means of transportation for their goods to neighbouring villages or towns. The feet are thus very important as they serve individuals to move about. The right foot is seen by the Igbo as the lucky foot *ukwu oma* and the left as the unlucky foot *ukwu ojọ*. The feet are used metaphorically in some instances. For example, if one embarks on a journey and hits the left foot on a stump (*ogwu kporo ya n'ukwu akaekpe* – He hit his left leg on a stump), the person has to turn back as this is a warning sign of bad omen on the journey being embarked on since the stump hit the left leg. If it is the right foot that hits the stump, it is a good omen. So the feet like the face bring fortune or misfortune.

The Igbo are known for their hospitality. In the Igbo tradition, if someone is eating and another person arrives, such a person is invited to join in the meal. The invitee is said to have lucky feet *ukwu oma* and it can also be said *I nwere ukwu oma* – You have lucky feet. Should the meal end just before someone arrives, the person is normally told *ukwugi joro njo*, (Your feet are bad = You have unlucky feet). In other words, it is unfortunate that you did not meet me while I was eating to join me. The Igbos see the feet as very important as confirmed by the following words: “The Igbo confers primacy to the feet (...). The primacy accorded the feet might account for the Igbo predilection to wear the anklets for *ozo* title on the feet rather than any other part of the body. That way it is visible to all and sundry and marks out the wearer as one who has achieved the highest social and economic rank attainable in the society” (Okoye 1992:173).

The Igbo refer to a restless person (someone that finds delight in always staying outside instead of in the family enclave) metaphorically as, *ukwu ako n'ezi/ ukuwu gamgamgam*. A wayward girl can also be metaphorically referred to in the same way *ukwu ako n'ezi* her feet are always outside. If a man wishes to marry a girl and is told *ukwu di ya n'ezi*, the message is clear: The girl is wayward stop further action. She can equally be described as *onye nwere ukuwu agamaga* (one who goes about, a prostitute). The feet can be taken into the house (*ichiba ukuwu n'ulo*), or exposed (*ichiputa ukuwu n'ezi*). A situation of settling down to marriage is described as *ichibaukuwu n'ulo*. They are exposed when friends who are supposed to protect one another's interests reveal the other's secrets. If such is the case, the one exposed can say *I chiputala m ukuwu n'ezi* (you have brought my legs outside, meaning you have exposed me). It can equally be used if a family member, a friend or close associate brings shame to the family or friends by stealing or getting pregnant outside wedlock etc. It could be said: *O chiputala anyi ukuwu n'ezi* (she has brought our feet outside). Meaning, she has brought shamed on us. *Gbaa ya ukuwu* literally means to kick someone but can equally mean opposing someone. The feet are also important because the human frame rests on the feet. But when one says *ukwu ejiela m* (my legs are broken) it can mean I have been restrained or I am no longer strong as a result of old age. A fast person has been described as *onye ukuwu nko*.

6. Other body-part metaphors

Other body-parts have been used metaphorically as in:

anya ime obi (eye inside the heart) = mind's eye

daa nti (put ear together) = put heads together

ida nti (to put ear together) = heart to heart talk

ihunanya (to see with the eyes) = love, affection

imeghe obi (to open one's heart) = to reveal one's inmost thoughts

mkpuru anya (eye ball) The eye ball is seen as a seed *mkpuru*.

uburu aturu (brain sheep) = a dunce. Here a dunce is referred to as having the brain of a sheep.

7. Igbo body-parts linked metaphorically to inanimate objects:

Igbo body-parts have been metaphorically linked to inanimate objects as could be seen from the following examples.

aka oche (hand + chair) arm of the chair

azu ite (back + pot) outside of pot

ihu akwa (face + cloth) = face of the cloth

isi ego (head + money) capital

isi mmiri (head + water) = head of the river

isi okwu (head + speech) = heart of the matter

isi oche (head + table) = head of a table

nti oka (ear + corn) = ear of the corn

olu ite (neck + pot) = neck of the pot

olu ololo (neck + bottle) = neck of the bottle

onu mmiri (mouth + water) edge of the river

onu ite (mouth + pot) = top of an open pot

ukwu oche (leg + chair) = leg of a table

8. Inanimate objects used in naming body-parts

Inanimate objects have equally been used in naming body-parts thereby creating a metaphor:

aka nri (hand + food) = right hand
akpa amụ (bag + testicles) = scrotum
akpukpọ ahụ (covering+ body) = skin
mkpuru anya (seed + eye) = eye ball
mkipara abụ (stick + pus) = arm pit
oba aka (calabash + hand) = palm
opi nkọlọ (horn + throat) = Adam's apple

9. Body-parts used in naming other body-parts

Body-parts have also been metaphorically used to name other body-parts as the examples below show.

azụ olu (back + neck) = back of the neck
azụ aka (back + hand) = back of the hand
onụ ara (mouth + breast) = nipples
onụ amụ (mouth + penis) = mont venaris

10. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to show with examples Igbo body-parts used as metaphors. To obtain this objective we have examined Igbo-body parts and observed that body-part metaphors have been used to describe body functions or that of the organs. Body-part usage occurs in several varieties and can be used to describe simple or complex things, emotions or feelings. Metaphors of sadness and happiness have been expressed with the heart and belly. Our description and analysis of body-part metaphors show us that these are used to describe a huge portion of our experience, of our physical, mental and inner world: the Igbo world. The Igbo man unconsciously projects himself into the external world, describing it in terms of his own measures. Body-parts have been used to conceptualize the non-human world (outside): *aka oche*, (hand of a chair) *isi mmiri* (head of a river) etc. Thus body-part metaphors have been seen to be used extensively in the Igbo world.

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