

Igbo proverbs and loss of metaphors

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Abstract

One aspect of the heritage of the Igbo people woven into their language is proverb. Achebe popularized this in describing it as the oil with which the Igbo eat words, evidencing that the basic characteristic of Igbo speech is proverbs. This position of the Igbo proverbs has been the base for the rich attention given to it in research. Our work furthers this attention. It points out that contemporary realities such as globalization, current developments in science and technology and other factors like modernization have eroded some of the metaphors that capture the nuances of meaning of some of the proverbs. For example, the proverbs that hinge on words with reference of objects, things and events that existed or were common in the Igbo traditional society would need some more explanations to help the modern Igbo generation understand them. Some proverbs have been selected to illustrate this claim and the basic tenets of conceptual metaphor have been applied to the illustration. With recourse to this, the paper identifies documentation of the proverbs with annotation that incorporates specification of the metaphors. This, among other things, will serve to preserve the Igbo world view as contained in the proverbs and could be a veritable tool for the revitalization of the use of the proverbs by the younger generation.

Introduction

The Igbo society is known to have produced many sages who lived and made their marks in the sayings and way of life of the Igbo people. The wisdom of the wise is made manifest in their speech and behaviour which help in shaping their society. Most of them exhibit captivating eloquence in speech. Eloquence in the Igbo language is judged not only by the fluency of the speaker but also by the speaker's art of richly embellishing his speech with Igbo proverbs. This one important aspect of the speech of the wise, the Igbo proverbs, affects and even influences the general way of life of the Igbo people. The appropriate use of the Igbo proverbs signifies concise expression of Igbo wisdom, philosophy and general world view. No wonder Achebe (1962:5) describes the Igbo proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten.

The knowledge of Igbo proverbs and their actual application in utterances pertain to all spheres of human endeavour, entertainment, enlightenment, settlement of disputes, etc. This knowledge is demanded of from everyone in the Igbo society regardless of age or sex; hence, *Onye a tuorọ ilu kowaara ya, ego e ji luọ nne ya lara n'iyi* 'Anybody who fails to understand a proverb renders their mother's bride price worthless.' However, as a norm, children, women, and youngsters are not expected to be vast in their knowledge and use of proverbs. Expression of a vast knowledge and use of the proverbs is mainly associated with men. In fact, a man is respected or adjudged intelligent if he exhibits an excellent knowledge of the Igbo proverbs.

Proverbs belong to the oral genre. A major feature of the oral genres is lack of authorship. That is, no one can claim authorship of the Igbo proverbs. Many of them are very old and have been

handed down from one generation of Igbo speakers to another. Through this way, the proverbs mark a very strong connection the older, contemporary and future generations of the Igbo societies. In other words, they connect the modern generations to the wisdom and philosophy of the older generations. This point is implicit in the words of Afigbo (1975:22),

You may not know it, but it is true that every day, every minute, everywhere things are being said and done around you which carry some hint about the past. These pass the uninitiated person by, but to the interested and initiated they can be the beginning of inquiries which will lead to great discoveries about how our people lived and died, loved and hated, fought and made peace, worked and relaxed.

Of course, the position of the proverbs in the life of the Igbo people makes them productive vehicles of the things that are 'said ... around'. In this work, we assess this position in the face of contemporary realities such as globalization, current development in science and technology, religious indoctrinations, etc. The thesis therefore is that the Igbo proverbs are losing their position in the day-to-day communication activity in the Igbo society. This anchors on the effect of the factors already mentioned on the Igbo language as a whole. Practically, a lot of linguistic change is taking place in the Igbo language.

Dimmendaal (2011:126) comments, "Languages do not change overnight, neither in their phonological system, nor in

other parts of their grammatical structure. This also applies to semantic changes. There must be either an overlap or a transition towards a new system ...” We find out that this is true. The Igbo language spoken today is in transition to a new system. Part of this new system is what we observed happening to some Igbo proverbs. The Igbo proverbs have lost their original interpretation with some groups of Igbo speakers, especially the younger generations. This hinges on an irregular relation between contemporary realities and some of the denotation or connotation of key expressions in the proverbs. We argue that the irregular relation is occasioned or marked by ‘loss of metaphors’.

Metaphor is commonly associated with literary language in which it refers to a statement of identity between two things. The two things are therefore said to be in direct comparison (cf. Harris (n. d.) (online)). Current studies have however shown that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language. In other words, it is not just a device of poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish but a matter of ordinary language (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1983). Having identified and established metaphor as an operational element in ordinary language in contradistinction to extraordinary language, the term Conceptual Metaphor (henceforth, CM) has evolved. The major tenet of CM is that an idea is best understood in terms of another. In other words, the different ideas are juxtaposed for the explication of one another. While one of the ideas occupies the source domain, the other occupies the target domain. CM recognizes the fact that idea of the source domain is usually concrete while the idea of the target domain is abstract. This is most probably the basis of Deignan (2005) workings of CM: metaphor structure thinking, metaphor structure knowledge,

metaphor is central to abstract language, metaphor is grounded in physical experience, and metaphor is ideological.

As noted earlier, Igbo proverbs crucially form a part of primary communication in the Igbo society. Moreover, the major thing that qualifies them as a marker of intelligent and eloquent users of the language is their sophistication with concrete terms which analyse into abstract terms. Of course, the ability of users mapping the concrete terms to appropriate abstract terms towards achieving anticipated communication goal is the basis of *Onye a tūorọ ilu kowaara ya, ego e ji luọ nne ya lara n'iyi*. As hinted earlier, the younger generation of Igbo speakers have a great difficulty interpreting some Igbo proverbs. This is largely because some key constituent expressions of the proverbs as a result of globalization and other factors have lost currency of original usage in contemporary times. This is what we have called or we mean by 'loss of metaphors'. The basic consequence of 'loss of metaphors' is atrophy of the proverbs. Recognizing this fact, we identify some of the proverbs and illustrate the condition of 'loss of metaphors' with the main objective of providing material for revitalization.

In the section below, we present scholarly views and opinions about Igbo proverbs towards further emphasizing the prominent position it occupies in the Igbo language, especially in its use.

Some studies on Igbo proverbs

The Igbo proverbs have received elaborate attention, spanning through its use in literary works and simple print documentation to sociolinguistic, pragmatic and linguistic analyses.

Egudu (1982) points out that Igbo poets use some factors of imagery like proverbs, riddles and idioms in their poems. He acknowledges the communicative power of proverbs especially when they are adequately used in poems:

... proverbs have special appeal because they create vivid pictures, and they are witty and humorous. Thus almost invariably, those poems which contain enough of appropriate and integrated proverbs are likely to be more aesthetically satisfying than the ones which are lacking in them (p.90).

Umezi (2005) and Onwudufor (2008) are each a collection of Igbo proverbs. Whereas the former has 2133 proverbs organized into 100 headings according to their semantic implication, the latter has 861 placed under 62 chapters, also according to their meaning. Umezi gives an Igbo explanation of the real Igbo meanings of the proverbs. On his part, Onwudufor has four items under each serially numbered proverb- 'a' is the proverb, 'b' is its English rendition, 'c' is the Igbo explanation of the proverb, 'd' is its English explanation. The importance of proverbs in Igbo speech is emphasized in the foreword of both books- in Umezi (2005) by M. N. Okonkwo and in Onwudufor (2008) by Levi O. Igwe.

Nwankwere (2007) shows how the language of Igbo divination poetry is replete with Igbo proverbs, among other 'stylistic features' as metaphors, idioms and personification. In her words, "The dibija [diviner] made profuse use of proverbs ...

Example, *Onya huru, o ji anu* 'If a trap bends, it has caught a game'. The diviner has used the proverb euphemistically to express the death of a sick person represented by 'game' and trap representing the 'sickness causing the death'.

How women are portrayed in Igbo proverbs is the thrust of Onyejekwe (2001). She groups the proverbs pertaining to the womenfolk into the different stages women undergo and the various situations into which they find themselves such as 'women', 'wife/co-wife' and 'young woman'. Her study reveals that the portrayal of women in Igbo culture as encompassed in the Igbo proverbs is not disadvantageous to them. However, she points out that the cynical nature of some Igbo proverbs is not restricted to women alone.

Igbo proverbs are, according to Ukaegbu (2006:164), a key to Igbo worldview and culture and as such should be harnessed and revitalized not only "for the transformation of the contemporary Igbo society" but also to enhance social control that will breed peace and harmony. She claims that appropriate and enhanced use of Igbo proverbs will play a vital role in helping the Igbo society deal with contemporary social problems and protect the age-long moral and ethical values so much cherished by the Igbo.

Eme and Mbagwu (2008) illustrate the indigenesness of democracy to Igbo land using some selected Igbo proverbs. For them, democracy has been originally part of the life or one of the practices of the Igbo people. The proverbs converge on social equality whereby the contributions of every individual are sought after and appreciated; implying direct democracy. According to them, direct democracy is the pure version of democracy and thrives well in Igbo land because of the operation of small

segmentary lineage systems in the area. They recommend the sensitization of Nigerians as this will enable them understand democracy as a system even as it applies to Nigeria today, and consequently they will make their own positive contributions to its development and stability.

Ik-Iloanusi (2012) is a pragmatic analysis of selected Igbo proverbs to show that they can contribute in achieving good governance. Using the three categories of speech acts, locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, she demonstrates that some Igbo proverbs signal meanings whose effects could apply to “resolve disputes, manage crisis, encourage economic interest and stability, and also enhance unity, thereby paving way for the achievement of good governance” (p.1).

The foregoing point out clearly that there is no accessible record of any attention to Igbo proverbs in the perspective of this work. This work is therefore a new dimension to the study of proverbs in general and Igbo proverbs in particular.

Data and data analysis

The data for this work are of course Igbo proverbs. Onwudufor (2008) is the main source of the proverbs. However, a few have been supplied by the authors, being native speakers of the language. The proverbs selected from Onwudufor (2008) are marked by the page numbers where they appear. In all, 14 proverbs are used. The proverbs are organized by the prominent references highlighted by the key words on which they are framed. Three level annotation is given on each proverb, morpheme boundaries, morpheme-by-morpheme gloss and the full gloss, which represents the semantic import or the literal meaning of the proverb in its use. The basic tenets of CM as

A child does not wear a loin cloth to breastfeed.

4. Igbū ichi abughị idē ùlì. (468)

I-gbū ichi a-bụ-ghị i-dē ùlì

Inf.M-cut *ichi* VP-be-Neg Inf.M-press indigo

To incise ichi in the face is not the same as designing the body with indigo.

B. Hunger/play and sickness

5. Ànaghị èbu ọnū àgba abịa.

À-na-ghị è-bu ọnū à-gba abịa

VP-be-Neg VP-carry mouth VP-dance *abịa*

Abịa is not danced in an empty stomach

6. Èjighi abịa anọ egwu ọnwā. (336)

È-ji-ghi abịa a-nọ egwu ọnwā

VP-hold-Neg *abịa* VP-stay play moon

The *Abịa* dance is not used for moonlight plays..

7. Àgboghò nchiche birì imi bụ ya nà nne yā nwèzì nkàta. (269)

Àgboghò nchiche bì-rì imi bụ ya nà nne

Girl yaws touch-App nose be she and mother

yā nwè-zì nkàta

her own-now conversation

A girl who is infected by yaws has only her mother as a companion.

C. Humans/human parts

8. Àdighị èji aka àbụọ àchịta akī n'ùko. (104)

À-dì-ghị è-ji aka àbụọ à-chị-ta akī

VP-be-Neg VP-hold hand two VP-collect-in palm-kernel

n'ùko

in rafter

Two hands are never used to collect palm kernels from the rafter.

9. Ọ bụ nwatā b̄jara ịgū ọkụ nà-àgba àmà ihe e s̄nyèrè n'ọkụ.
(727)

Ọ bụ nwatā b̄jara ị-gū ọkụ nà-à-gba àmà
It be child come-Past InfM-count fire Prog-VP-shoot witness
ihe e s̄-nyè-rè n'ọkụ
thing IndPp set-give-App in fire

It is the child who comes to collect embers that reveals what is cooking on the fire.

10. Ọ d̄j̄r̄i is̄ m̄mā, ò d̄j̄r̄i agùba. (261)

Ọ d̄j̄-ì-r̄i is̄ m-mā, ò d̄j̄-ì-r̄i agùba
It be-OVS-App head Nm-be.beautiful it be-OVS-App agùba
(shaving implement)

If it is well with the head, it will be well with *agùba*.

11. Ọ bụ e lee kà chi nwatā hà, è w̄è k̄nye yā ọrụ

Ọ bụ e le-e kà chi nwatā hà, è
It be IndPp look-OVS that god child be.in.size IndP
w̄è-e k̄-nye yā ọrụ
take-OVS share-give him/her work

A child is given a task according to the size of his *chi*

D. Objects/animals

12. Ekwē ekwe nà-èkwe n'ute ekwerē

E-kwē-Ø e-kwe nà-è-kwe n'ute ekwerē
VP-accept-Neg VP-accept Prog-VP-accept in mat palm ropes
A stubborn person ends up on a mat of palm ropes.

13. Àdìghī àhapù iyī nūwa òkù. (68)

À-dì-ghī à-ha-pù iyī nū-wa òkù
 VP-be-Neg VP-leave-go.out oath swear-begin earthen-
 smoking pipe

Nobody leaves taking an oath for smoking.

14. Àdìghī àchụ ñgwèrè n'òba onye òzọ. (737)

À-dì-ghī à-chụ ñgwèrè n'òba onye òzọ
 VP-be-Neg VP-hunt lizard in barn person another

No one hunts lizards in another person's barn.

[Where VP – vowel prefix; OVS – open vowel prefix; Neg – negative; Prog – progressive; Ø – null element; IndPp – indefinite personal pronoun; App – applicative; Nm – nominative marker; Past – past tense; InfM – infinitival marker]

Data analysis

We identify the elements in the proverbs that we adjudge to belong to the source domain and by that demonstrate how they map to the target domain to reproduce the meaning the proverbs have in their usage: (1) *aji/ajì* (2) *ìchì* (3) *awà akwà* (4) *igbū ìchì/idē ùlì* (5) *àgba abìà* (6) *abìà/egwu ɔnwā* (7) *`nchiche* (8) *ùko* (9) *igbū òkù* (10) *agùba* (11) *chi* (12) *ute ekwere* (13) *iyī/òkù* (14) *`ngwèrè*.

The elements we identify as belonging to the source domain are evidently the key elements in the proverbs. That is, their meaning is the locus for the interpretation of the proverbs. Of course, they qualify in the source domain because they have the reference of concreteness. It is the concreteness that positions them as the locus for interpretation. For instance, *aji* (hair) provides an image for what *ajì* 'woolen dress', which of course is

hairy, designates. Pulling out the hairs of the woolen dress would lead to destroying the dress and inadvertently making the person wearing it naked. Mapping this into abstraction, we derive the fact that there is always something covering a secret. As soon as that thing is removed, the secret is revealed. It could also point to ignorance that could result in destroying something that is important. Whichever computation is dependent upon the conceptualization of *aji* ‘woolen material’. Today, this traditional dress has disappeared or is no longer common such that members of the younger generation who do not know about it would fail to compute the proverb in which it is used as appropriately as it is required. In fact, it is possible that many of them would make nothing out of the proverb, stopping at the literal interpretation which is a far cry from the semantic import of its use.

Ichī of (2) is an incision of hollow marks made in man’s face. Hence, the process of making the incision is called *igbuichī* ‘to cut in (marks) *ichī*’. The process of course is painful but it introduces the candidate into a noble cult of *ndī mgburichi* ‘those who have received *ichī*’. Equiano (1996:1) confirms that the *ichi* mark is ‘a mark of grandeur’. This mark is cut near the eye. Hence, the person who has just received it does not open his eyes wide. This concrete imagery maps unto the abstraction of carefulness motivated by a given situation. There are actions that are required in particular situations. Juxtaposing (2) and (4), we see the abstraction of grading of actions and situations. While *ichī* is incised ‘a painful exercise’, *ùlì* ‘indigo’ is drawn. Drawing a mark on the face of a man is of a less degree to cutting in the mark. This accounts for why *ichī* is a mark of initiation into a cult but *ùlì* is simply used to beautify the face. Of course, in life, there are things that are considered more serious than others. Only

members of generations who know about *ichī* and *ùlì* would derive this abstraction which accounts for the use of the proverb (4).

The loin cloth was worn by men in the olden days to cover basically their private part. The way it is worn involves some kind of tying, hence, *ìwà* ‘to tie’. Boys and infant males did not put on the loin cloth. The concept of maturity is therefore the case in (3). Particularly, it shows that the child does have anything to cover before its mother. This computation would be impossible for modern day speakers of Igbo who have not seen the loin cloth or men putting it on to appreciate its significance.

Abịà in (5) is reference of a war dance. This dance is performed with much energy. It is therefore a dance of warriors and those who are physically strong. Because much energy is required, it is engaged in after adequate feeding. A hungry man would not succeed in it. This points to the fact that there are always requirements for fulfilling certain obligations or playing some roles. This abstraction would not be derived by anyone who does know what *abịà* is especially in the face of war dances disappearing. The seriousness of *abịà* is emphasized in (6). It is not a dance for relaxation or entertainment. *Egwu ọnwā* ‘moonlight play’ is for relaxation and entertainment and *abịà* is not suitable for it. The concept of appropriateness is evident here. There are actions required for particular situations. The reference of *abịà* is of course the locus for this computation. In other words, speakers who lack this reference would fail to make the right abstraction out of the proverb.

There is categorization of diseases. Some are considered evil while others are not. Those suffering from the evil diseases could be isolated (quarantined) or cast into the evil forest to die there on

the premise of the belief that the infected persons incurred the wrath of the gods. *Nchiche* ‘yaws’ is one of the diseases that attracted isolation. Only the closest of the patient’s relative stays with the patient and usually the closest relative of a girl infected by yaws is her mother. Here, we see the abstraction of closeness. The farther away a relation is to one the farther away the relation would be committed to one’s welfare. The absence of the image of *nchiche* in the mind of users would impair adequate computation of the proverb.

Ùko ‘rafter’ is constructed over a fireplace and was used for storage. As (8) expresses one does not use two hands to collect palm kernels stored on the rafter. While one hand is used to support the body, the other hand could conveniently be used to collect the palm kernels. We see here that there are rules that must apply in doing certain things in particular areas. Violation of the rules could result in unpalatable experiences or yield wrong results. Adequate knowledge of the rafter and its use is required for this abstraction. In the modern times, the rafter is no longer used and the younger generation would not appropriately compute the proverb in which *ùko* is used.

The practice of going to a neighbour’s compound to fetch live coals to make fire, *igu oku* ‘to fetch fire’ is no more common. When it was the case, it was children who were sent and it was an avenue of knowing what the neighbour was preparing for breakfast, lunch or dinner. The older ones used it as a strategy to know what was happening in their neighbour’s home. An abstraction of free-mindedness of children is evident in (9). Usually, the children, revealing what they see is not to cause hurt. However, it is true that sometimes the adults who sends them on such an errand could take an advantage of that to pay an

unscheduled visit to the neighbour to enjoy the meal if it is the type that interests them; or, on the negative side, have information with which to derogate the neighbour.

Agùba is an implement used in shaving hair in the traditional Igbo society. In (10), we see that if it is not sharp enough to the comfort of the head whose hair is shaven; it would be subjected to wetting. Undergoing wetting is considered some inconvenience for the *agùba*. In other words, there is a connection of affectation between things that work or go together, where what affects one determines what affects the other. Even though, the image here applies to modern day equipment for shaving hair, one thing is sure the technology for sharpening the blades is different such that one would not construe sharpening a blade to wetting the *agùba*.

In (11), the practice in old times in Igbo land, when a few days after the birth of a baby boy, a tree was planted for him, is highlighted. The tree was regarded as his *chi* and was an altar of sort, where he was expected to sacrifice to his ancestors when he grew up. The size of the *chi* was used to mark his age and was considered in giving tasks to the child. The correspondence of ability to size is emphasized in this proverb and shows that people do not do what is beyond their ability. Of course, the computation of *chi* would be irregular with its true reference as used in the proverb without the knowledge as specified here.

In (12), *ute ekwerē* ‘palm ropes (strings) mat’ was a mat used in the old days for burying corpses. In the proverb it accounts for the consequence of stubbornness. *Ute ekwerē* is not known to the younger generation in what it was used for. In fact, it is hardly found: a situation that makes the computation of consequence of stubbornness as evident here impossible for them.

Taking oath was a common practice in the Igbo society. It served to resolve disputes and confirm the truth which was questioned. It was a serious event and was taken seriously. In (13), the seriousness oath-taking is highlighted by an analogy between it and smoking, which is for leisure or pleasure. The relation between *iyi* and *òkù* is lost in the world view of younger Igbo generation. The traditional mode of oath-taking is no longer common. Contemporary religious beliefs have largely displaced it. *Òkù*, in its own case, is no longer a common smoking pipe. In fact, it is difficult to find anyone in the contemporary Igbo society smoking with the earthen smoking pipe. In other words, younger Igbo generation would hardly compute appropriately this proverb.

Lastly, (14) has a reference of two key words, *ngwèrè* ‘lizard’ and *oba* ‘barn’ in relation to hunting. Lizards are known to live around homes so hunting for them is done around homes. We are certain that this type of activity is no more common. When it was common, it was not acceptable to do it in or around another person’s barn. This projects the computation of limits or boundaries. It is true that people could do what they wish to but there is allowed limits or boundaries. Absence of the concrete image of the activity referred to in (14) in the consciousness of the younger generation would mar their computation of the proverb.

The foregoing prove a connection between the concrete and the abstract in the computation of proverbs and when the linguistic representative of the concrete is no more common or has ceased to exist, the mapping from the concrete to the abstract is hindered. This is evidently why we believe that the younger generation of Igbo speakers have a great deal of difficulty with computing such proverbs that hinge on words with reference of

objects, things, conditions and activities that lack currency in their world view.

Conclusion

The thrust of this work is that proverbs count on metaphors. In other words, the meaning of the proverbs is derived by a relation of a concrete idea to a corresponding abstract idea which certifies the meaning of the proverbs. Upon this, we have posited that many members of the younger generation of Igbo speakers would have difficulty computing some proverbs especially those framed with key words with reference of objects, things, activities, etc which lack currency in their world view. That is, the metaphors enriching the proverbs are lost in their world view. We have selected 14 proverbs to illustrate this.

One truth that emerges from the situation evident here is that some Igbo proverbs are seriously endangered. Only adult speakers of the Igbo language can use them in the dimensions in which they apply. This calls for action. The action we recommend is documentation, which would involve levels of annotation that would include specification of metaphorical relations in the mode expressed in this analysis done here. At best, a multimedia documentation could be sponsored where pictures of objects, things, animals, events etc are included and used in practical annotation. The output of this, in addition to serving to preserve the proverbs, could serve to stimulate the younger generation to use them thereby revitalization results. Of course, this would mean recovery of the ‘lost metaphors’.

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