

The metaphorical implications of Igbo proverbs of advice

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Abstract

Proverbs have long been recognized as repositories of cultural wisdom and vehicles for transmitting societal values across generations. In Igbo culture, proverbs play a particularly significant role, forming an integral part of the Igbo culture. These proverbs often use metaphors to pass across wisdom. This study examines the metaphorical implications embedded within Igbo proverbs of advice, drawing on data collected from Ezeobata (2019)'s compilation "Nchikọta Ilu Ndị Igbo" (Collection of Igbo Proverbs). The research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the figurative language used in these proverbs and explores how metaphors convey cultural wisdom, social norms, and ethical guidance in Igbo society. The study identifies recurring themes and imagery in the proverbs, discussing how they reflect Igbo worldviews and values. The findings reveal that Igbo proverbs of advice frequently use natural phenomena, animal behavior, and everyday objects as vehicles for conveying complex social and moral concepts. The research highlights the significance of proverbs in preserving cultural knowledge and facilitating intergenerational communication of societal expectations. This research contributes to the fields of cognitive linguistics, cultural

anthropology, and African studies by providing insights into the interconnection between language, thought, and culture in Igbo society. It also emphasizes the continued relevance of traditional wisdom in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *Metaphor, culture, proverbs, communication, language.*

Introduction

The Igbo people, being one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, possess a rich cultural heritage characterized by a vibrant oral tradition. Central to this tradition are proverbs, known as "ilu," which serve as powerful tools for communication, moral instruction, and cultural preservation. Proverbs encapsulate the collective wisdom of the Igbo, reflecting their values, beliefs, and societal norms. As noted by Amadi (1982) and Emecheta (1994), historically, Igbo proverbs have played a crucial role in community life. Proverbs are a universal aspect of human culture, serving as a repository of wisdom, values, and beliefs. They are windows into the soul of a culture, offering insights into the deepest values and concerns of a community. The Igbo people's reliance on proverbs as a means of communication and moral instruction underscores the significance of oral tradition in their culture.

The metaphorical richness of Igbo proverbs is particularly noteworthy, as observed in several literatures. Metaphors enable speakers to convey complex ideas in concise, relatable ways, allowing for deeper engagement with the messages. These figurative expressions often draw on nature, daily life, and communal experiences, making them accessible and relevant to the people. The use of metaphors in Igbo proverbs facilitates a nuanced

understanding of complex issues, making them a valuable resource for navigating contemporary challenges. In recent years, scholars have emphasized the continued relevance of Igbo proverbs in modern society. According to Umeasiegbu (2017), Igbo proverbs offer valuable perspectives on issues such as social justice, community cohesion, and personal responsibility. Similarly, Nwosu (2020) argues that Igbo proverbs provide a framework for understanding the complexities of human experience, offering insights into the human condition that are both timeless and timely. This study seeks to explore these proverb-based insights, examining their metaphorical implications and their significance in modern society. Despite the rich repository of wisdom embedded in Igbo proverbs, there exists a notable gap in scholarly exploration regarding their metaphorical implications and contemporary relevance. Many existing studies focus primarily on the linguistic aspects or historical origins of these proverbs, often overlooking the metaphors that underline these proverbs and their role in addressing modern societal issues. This lack of comprehensive analysis limits the understanding of the metaphorical complements of these proverbs of advice. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating and shedding more light on the metaphorical implications of Igbo proverbs of advice. This research adopts a qualitative research method because it involves the analysis of textual data, extracted from Ezeobata's (2019) comprehensive collection of Igbo proverbs, titled "Nchikōta Ilu Ndị Igbo". The proverbs of advice were carefully selected and described pointing out their metaphorical implications. By analyzing Igbo proverbs, this research aims to highlight their role not just as cultural artifacts but as living expressions of wisdom that can inform and guide individuals and communities today.

Overview of proverbs

Proverbs are concise, traditional and memorable expressions that convey piece of wisdom or general truth. (Ezindu-Odoemelem et al 2023: 13). They are deeply rooted in culture and history of a community or region. Proverbs in their natural states (dialects) are being overlooked and that is why most of our proverbs are disappearing.

Morrison (2020) defines proverbs as poetic devices that use metaphor, alliteration, and rhythm to make profound insights memorable and shareable. Proverbs employ literary techniques like figurative language and musicality to transform complex ideas into compact, catchy phrases that are easy to recall and pass on. Proverbs are compact vehicles for exploring the human condition - they reflect our hopes, fears, values, and experiences in pithy, quotable form. Proverbs condense universal human experiences and emotions into bite-sized statements that capture essential truths about the human experience.

Ogbalu (1999) notes with nostalgia that in no language do proverbs play a more important role than in Igbo; According to him, this is because among the Igbo people, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and the people see proverbs as “abuba eji eri okwu” that is (the condiments to speech). Achebe (1984) has the English rendition as “the palm oil and salt with which words are eaten”. Ugonna (1994) after a comprehensive description of the concept of “ilu” (proverbs) sums it up as “a kind of mirror which reflects human experience”.

Chidozie (2021) makes an observation that at the moment, such settings hardly exist because most Igbo families are now interested in the display of affluence through installation of satellite dishes and other sophisticated communication gadgets

which hardly promote Igbo culture and language. He also points out that village setups are now gradually changing from the traditional Igbo houses to modern ones and he claims that as a result of that, children and the youths on their own part are not interested in learning their native language (NL) where they would encounter the use of proverbs. They are glued to some of their favourite television programmes or on the computer/phones browsing foreign films and programmes while some educated parents consciously suppress their wards native languages in favour of English language. In the Igbo milieu, what may constitute the language of a discourse from the beginning to the end may be proverbs. Listeners only nod their heads in affirmation to the points raised. He also says that Igbo proverbs have important social, cultural and linguistic functions. As a communicative tool, proverbs depict the values, norms, aspirations likes and dislikes of the society, they validate and reject certain practices, advocate the maintenance of certain forms of social order, and they are educational/instructional tools and purveyors of the culture, ideology and cosmology of the Igbo people.

Metaphor

Wang (2024:1) defines metaphor as a ‘conceptual and linguistic device that highlights or establishes cross-domain nexus’. He describes it as conveying words and expressions beyond their literal meanings and helps the understanding of complex and abstract concepts. Wang further sees metaphors as mappings from one conceptual domain to another. He stresses the idea that metaphors involve a transfer of meaning between different domains or fields of experience. Lakoff (2008) understands human cognition as being metaphorical in nature. Kovecses (2015:15)

defines metaphors as conceptual mappings that allow us to understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones. In a similar vein, metaphors are viewed as not being mere stylistic or rhetorical figures, but a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of conceptualizing the world' (cf Lakoff 1993:204). He emphasizes that one domain of our experience is understood in terms of another domain. Metaphorical mappings are not arbitrary (Macha 2016:99). This is in line with Lakoff and Johnson (1980)'s view that metaphors are not arbitrary and accidental, but are conventional and differ from each other through cultures. Metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience. For instance, we have organized knowledge about journeys that we rely (Kövecses 2010:4), the same way that we understand one conceptual domain in terms of another. According to Lakoff (2008), metaphors are essential for creating new meanings and understanding complex concepts. Also, Kövecses (2005:23) discusses the relationship between metaphor and language, highlighting how metaphors create new meanings and expand our linguistic repertoire. He emphasizes the role of metaphors in shaping our understanding of abstract concepts, such as emotions and ideas. Kövecses argues that metaphors are a key aspect of language, allowing us to communicate complex ideas in a more relatable way.

Types of metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), there are three major types of conceptual metaphors, they include:

Structural Metaphors are the metaphors that map one complex and abstract concept is understood in terms of another concept (more concrete) E.g., "Time is money" maps the domain of time onto the domain of money, creating a new understanding of time as a valuable resource.

Oriental Metaphors are metaphors that organize concepts in terms of spatial orientation, such as up-down, in-out, or front-back, creating a spatial mapping of abstract concepts, making them more tangible and relatable. E.g., "Happy is up" maps the concept of happiness onto the spatial orientation of up, creating a positive association.

Ontological Metaphors: the metaphors that map abstract concepts onto concrete objects, making them more tangible and comprehensible, creating a new understanding of abstract concepts by relating them to concrete objects or substances. E.g., "Life is a journey" maps the abstract concept of life onto the concrete concept of a journey, creating a new understanding of life as a path with destinations.

Empirical studies

Bamgbose (2018) analyzed the metaphorical meanings and cultural significance of Yoruba proverbs. The research employed qualitative analysis of proverbs through interviews with native speakers and a review of existing literature. The study revealed that Yoruba proverbs were rich in metaphorical language, serving as a vehicle for conveying deep societal values and norms. For instance, proverbs often used natural imagery (like rivers and trees) to symbolize human virtues such as resilience and integrity. These metaphors not only enhanced the aesthetic quality of the language but also facilitated complex ideas about morality, community

relationships, and the interconnectedness of life. Additionally, the findings highlighted how proverbs were integral in everyday communication, often employed to impart wisdom in familial and social interactions.

Sadiq (2018) examined the metaphorical language in Hausa proverbs. She utilized field research involving interviews with Hausa speakers and analysis of written collections of proverbs, the research highlighted that Hausa proverbs were steeped in metaphorical language that reflected the values and beliefs of the Hausa community. Metaphors drawn from everyday life—such as trading, family, and agriculture—were frequently used to convey lessons on ethics, social behavior, and respect for tradition. The study found that these proverbs served as educational tools, teaching younger generations about the importance of community, hard work, and integrity. Moreover, the metaphors employed in proverbs played a crucial role in conflict resolution, providing culturally acceptable ways to address disputes and misunderstandings within the community.

Adetola (2019) discussed the metaphorical roles across various Nigerian languages and their cultural insights. The research conducted a comparative analysis of proverbs from multiple Nigerian languages, using literature review and interviews. The findings revealed that metaphorical themes in proverbs across various Nigerian languages often intersected, reflecting universal human experiences while also highlighting unique cultural perspectives. Common metaphors, such as those related to nature, familial relationships, and social hierarchy, were identified as pivotal in conveying communal wisdom. The study emphasized that these proverbs not only served as cultural artifacts but also functioned as dynamic tools for social commentary and

critique. Additionally, the findings underscored the importance of preserving these metaphorical expressions, as they encapsulated valuable insights into the cultural psyche and social structures of Nigerian societies.

Okafor (2019) analyzed how metaphors in Nigerian proverbs reflected and shaped gender roles and relations in her study. She collected and analyzed proverbs related to gender from various Nigerian languages, along with focus group discussions. The findings revealed that metaphors in proverbs often reinforced traditional gender roles, using imagery that depicted men as warriors and providers, while women were associated with nurturing and domesticity. However, the study also found instances where proverbs challenged these norms, advocating for gender equality and empowerment. The findings emphasized that proverbs served as a cultural mirror, reflecting societal attitudes toward gender while also providing a platform for dialogue and change. This dual role highlighted the dynamic nature of proverbs in shaping and reshaping cultural narratives around gender in Nigerian societies.

Odetola (2020) compared the metaphorical constructs in proverbs from different Nigerian languages and explored their cultural implications. The study employed qualitative analysis of proverbs from Yoruba, Efik and Hausa languages through interviews and literature review. The research revealed that while there were common metaphorical themes across Yoruba, Efik, and Hausa proverbs—such as nature, community, and personal character—each language employed unique metaphors that reflected distinct cultural values. For example, Yoruba proverbs often utilized metaphors related to water to symbolize life and nourishment, while Hausa proverbs emphasized metaphors tied to

farming and harvest. The study highlighted how these metaphors functioned as a means of cultural continuity and identity, enabling speakers to articulate shared experiences and societal norms.

Eze (2020) examined the role of metaphor in proverbs as a storytelling device within Nigerian folklore. The research involved analysis of recorded oral traditions and proverbs collected from various Nigerian communities, along with interviews with folklore practitioners. She found out that metaphors in proverbs were potent tools for storytelling, enriching narratives with deeper meanings and moral lessons. Metaphors often linked to animals and natural phenomena served to engage listeners and convey complex ideas about human nature and social justice. The research emphasized that these metaphorical proverbs not only entertained but also educated, providing moral guidance and reinforcing community values. Additionally, the findings underscored the importance of preserving these oral traditions as vital components of Nigerian cultural heritage.

Nwankwo (2022) investigated how metaphors in Nigerian proverbs influenced cognitive processes and cultural understanding. The study analyzed proverbs from various Nigerian languages, supplemented by surveys and interviews with speakers. The findings indicated that metaphors in Nigerian proverbs significantly influenced cognitive processes, shaping how speakers thought about and interpreted their experiences. The research identified specific metaphorical frameworks, such as viewing life as a journey or a battle, which informed cultural attitudes toward challenges and progress. This cognitive approach illustrated how proverbs provided mental shortcuts for complex concepts, enabling speakers to communicate nuanced ideas efficiently. Additionally, the use of metaphor in proverbs fostered a shared

understanding within communities, reinforcing social cohesion and collective identity.

Upon conducting a thorough review of existing empirical studies, it is evident that the majority of research has predominantly focused on the general applications and functions of metaphors in language, with minimal attention devoted to the metaphorical significance and implications of Igbo proverbs of advice. This oversight creates a notable knowledge gap, as Igbo proverbs of advice play a vital role in conveying cultural values, moral guidance, and wisdom. My research aims to bridge this gap by undertaking an in-depth exploration of the metaphorical implications of Igbo proverbs of advice, providing a contextualized understanding of their role in Igbo communication, cultural transmission, and social interaction.

Methodology

Method of data collection

This study extracted data from Ezeobata's (2019) comprehensive collection of Igbo proverbs, titled "Nchịkọta Ilu Ndị Igbo". The proverbs of advice were carefully selected and translated from this source for analysis.

Method of data analysis

This study will employ a descriptive method of data analysis to examine and analyze the metaphorical implications of Igbo proverbs of advice. This approach will involve a detailed and systematic analysis of the proverbs, identifying and categorizing the metaphors that make them up. The descriptive method will allow for a thorough exploration of the proverbs' metaphorical

implications, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of their significance and function in Igbo culture.

Data presentation and analysis

This section presents proverbs in Igbo language that are used in giving advice, while pointing out the metaphors that are used in these proverbs and the meaning and implications of the metaphors. The following are proverbs of advice in Igbo language and their metaphorical implications:

1. "Onye ajuju anaghi efu uzo."

Person question pro-comp to-loose road

Translation: "He who asks questions does not lose his way."

Metaphor: The way or path represents life's journey or decision-making process.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the concept of navigation to emphasize the importance of seeking information and guidance. It suggests that by asking questions and seeking advice, one can avoid mistakes and make better choices in life. The metaphor of a journey illustrates how knowledge acquisition helps in navigating life's complexities.

2. "O na-abu a kpaa nkụ n'okochi, anya ya n'udummiri."

Pro aux-is pro gather firewood prep-dry season use pro prep-rainy season

Translation: "Firewood gathered in the dry season is used in the rainy season."

Metaphor: The dry season represents times of plenty or opportunity; the rainy season symbolizes times of scarcity or difficulty. Firewood represents resources or preparation.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the periodic nature of seasons to emphasize the importance of foresight and preparation. It suggests that one should use times of abundance to prepare for future challenges or scarcity. The metaphor of gathering firewood illustrates how proactive actions during good times can sustain one through difficult periods.

3. "Onye nwere ntị, ya nūrụ."

Person have-rv-pst ear pro hear-ru

Translation: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Metaphor: Ears represent the capacity for understanding and wisdom. Hearing symbolizes not just listening, but comprehending and applying knowledge.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the act of hearing to emphasize the importance of being receptive to wisdom and advice. It suggests that true understanding goes beyond mere listening to include comprehension and application. The metaphor of having ears highlights the difference between those who are truly open to learning and those who are not.

4. "Nkụ dī na mba na-eghere mba nri."

firewood is prep community aux-done community food
Translation: "The firewood in a community sufficiently cooks food for the community."

Metaphor: Firewood represents local resources, talents, or capabilities within a community.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the common household task of cooking to illustrate the principle of community self-reliance. It suggests that a community often has the resources it needs to solve its own problems or meet its own needs. The metaphor of firewood cooking food emphasizes how local

resources, when properly utilized, can sustain and nourish the entire community.

5. "Agu anaghị eji ọsọ achu nta."

Tiger pro-comp-neg hold run pro-run hunt.

Translation: "A leopard doesn't hunt by running."

Metaphor: The leopard represents a skilled or wise individual. Its hunting style symbolizes strategic approach to challenges.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the hunting behavior of a leopard to illustrate the importance of strategy and patience in achieving goals. It suggests that rushing or using brute force is often less effective than a well-thought-out approach. The leopard's hunting style metaphor emphasizes how intelligence and strategy can outperform mere speed or strength.

6. "Ọ na-abụ a kụọ mkpuru osisi taa, a-ghota nnukwu osisi echi."

Pro aux-is pro plant seed tree today pro-harvest big tree tomorrow

Translation: "A seed planted today becomes a big tree tomorrow."

Metaphorical implication: The seed represents small actions or beginnings. The big tree symbolizes significant outcomes or achievements.

Meaning: This proverb uses the growth process of a tree to illustrate the principle of long-term thinking and patience. It suggests that small actions in the present can lead to significant results in the future. The metaphor of a seed growing into a tree vividly portrays how seemingly insignificant efforts can yield substantial outcomes over time.

7. "Ọkụkọ a-naghị echefu onye foro ya ọdụ mgbe mmiri na-ama ya."

Hen pro-do-neg forget person remove pro tail when water aux-beat pro

Translation: "A chicken doesn't forget who plucked its feathers in the rainy season."

Metaphor: The chicken represents a person in need. Plucking feathers in the rain symbolizes helping someone during difficult times.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the vivid image of a vulnerable chicken in the rain to emphasize the lasting impact of kindness during hardship. It suggests that people remember those who help them during their most difficult times. The metaphor of plucking feathers in rain illustrates how meaningful assistance during adversity can create lasting gratitude and bonds.

8. "Nwayọọ nwayọọ ka eji aracha ofe dị ọkụ"

Slowly slowly comp to hold lick soup is hot

Translation: "slowly slowly is how one licks hot soup"

Metaphor: The hot soup represents challenging situations or tasks, and the act of licking represents one's approach to these challenges.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the familiar act of eating hot soup to illustrate the importance of patience and caution when dealing with difficult situations. It suggests that a measured, careful approach is more effective and safer than rushing. The metaphor of consuming hot soup demonstrates how hastiness can lead to "burning" oneself, while patience allows one to safely navigate challenges.

9. "Agwa nti ma ọ-nughị e-gburu isi, nti esoro ya"

To tell ear comp pro-hear pro-cut-rv head ear follow pro

Translation: "if the ear is told and it does not listen, if the head is chopped of, the ear will follow it"

Metaphor: The ear represents listening or heeding advice, telling it symbolizes verbal warnings or advice, and the head represents one's overall well-being or fate.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb personifies body parts to convey the importance of listening to advice. It suggests that if one doesn't heed verbal warnings, they will learn through harsh experience (the ear following the head's fate). The metaphor effectively illustrates the potential consequences of ignoring wise counsel and the different ways one might learn life lessons.

10. "Ọkụkọ na-eche ụmụ ya nche a-maghị na ugo na-ele ya anya."

Hen aux-guard children pro guard pro-know-neg comp eagle comp-look pro eye

Translation: "The hen watching over its chicks doesn't know the eagle is watching it."

Metaphor: The hen represents a protective figure (e.g., a parent), the chicks symbolize those under protection, and the eagle represents unforeseen dangers.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the natural world to advise on vigilance and the multi-layered nature of threats. It suggests that while we may be focused on protecting those in our care, we might be unaware of larger dangers targeting us. The metaphor effectively illustrates the need for comprehensive awareness in safeguarding oneself and others.

11. "Onye ji ọkụ n'aka na-ahụ ụzọ karịa ndị ọzọ."

Person hold fire prep-hand aux-see road better people
others

Translation: "The person holding a torch sees the way better than others."

Metaphor: The torch symbolizes knowledge, insight, or preparation.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the imagery of light in darkness to represent the advantage of being informed or prepared. It suggests that those who equip themselves with knowledge or tools are better positioned to navigate challenges. The torch metaphor effectively illustrates how personal initiative in gaining knowledge can provide clarity and direction.

12. "Ọ bughị mgbe nwaanyị bụ ji dara ka a na-agwa ya maka ọdịda."

Pro is-neg when woman carry yam fall-rv-pst comp aux-tell
pro about fall

Translation: "It's not when a woman has fallen with yams that you tell her about falling."

Metaphor: The woman carrying yams represents anyone in the midst of a difficult task, and falling symbolizes failure or mistakes.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses a common domestic scene to advise on timing and sensitivity in giving advice. It suggests that pointing out errors or giving warnings is most effective before, not during, a crisis. The metaphor of falling with yams illustrates the idea that advice is most valuable when it can prevent, rather than merely comment on, mishaps.

13. "Ọ bụ onye mara ebe mmiri si malite mawa ya
nwere ike ịkọwa ebe ọ kwụsiri ịma ya."

pro is person know-rv-pst where water from begin beat pro
 have-pst power explain where pro stop-rv-pst to-beat pro
 Translation: "Only one who knows where the rain started beating
 them can say where they dried their body."

Metaphor: The rain represents life's challenges or the origin of a
 problem, and drying oneself symbolizes finding solutions or
 recovering.

Metaphorical Implication: This proverb uses the universal
 experience of getting caught in rain to discuss self-awareness and
 problem-solving. It suggests that understanding the root of one's
 issues is crucial to finding effective solutions. The rain metaphor
 effectively conveys the idea that personal insight is key to
 overcoming life's challenges.

14. "Ọkụkọ hapuru ìbọ ala ga-ata mkpuru aki."

Hen leave-pst scratch ground aux-eat seed palm kernal
 Translation: "A chicken that stops digging the ground will eat palm
 kernels."

Metaphor: Digging the ground represents consistent effort or work;
 palm kernels symbolize hardship or difficult circumstances.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the behavior of
 chickens to illustrate the consequences of laziness or giving up. It
 suggests that stopping one's efforts or becoming complacent can
 lead to facing tougher challenges. The contrast between easy-to-
 find food (through digging) and hard palm kernels vividly portrays
 the relationship between effort and life's difficulties.

15. "Agwo hapuru ala gbaa oso n'osisi, aghaghi
 ida."

Snake leave-rv-pst ground to-run prep-tree pro-fail-neg
 fall

Translation: "A snake that leaves the ground to climb a tree will surely fall."

Metaphor: The snake represents an individual, the ground symbolizes one's natural environment or strengths, and the tree represents unfamiliar or unsuitable situations.

Metaphorical implication: This proverb uses the imagery of a snake out of its element to caution against venturing too far from one's area of expertise or natural abilities. It suggests that abandoning one's strengths or tried-and-true methods for unfamiliar territory can lead to failure. The inevitable fall of the snake emphasizes the risks of overreaching or ignoring one's limitations.

Findings and Conclusion

This research undertook an in-depth examination of the metaphorical implications of Igbo proverbs of advice, delving into the ways in which metaphors convey complex ideas, values, and cultural beliefs.

This research demonstrates the profound significance of metaphorical language in Igbo proverbs of advice, highlighting their role in conveying complex cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs. The findings underscore the importance of considering metaphorical implications in understanding the richness and depth of Igbo proverbs. This paper contributes to a deeper appreciation of Igbo language and culture, providing insights for further research in linguistic anthropology, cultural studies, African languages, and literary analysis. By exploring the metaphorical dimensions of Igbo proverbs, this research sheds light on the creative and expressive power of language in conveying cultural wisdom and values. The study's findings have implications for

language education, cultural preservation, and the promotion of Igbo language and culture.

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