

## A Critical Analysis of Ngwa Proverbs

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the use of a linguistic theory of meaning for the analysis of some Ngwa proverbs (Ngwa dialect is spoken by Ngwa people of Abia State in Nigeria) with the aim of differentiating the contextual meaning from the literal meaning of the selected proverbs. Language is a vehicle through which ideas, thoughts, opinions, messages and information generally are exchanged between groups of people to ensure effective communication. It is specific to humans and identifies people's value system. One of the major value systems highly respected and used in embellishing speeches is proverbs. Proverbs are words of wisdom, usually didactic, memorizable and therefore passed down easily from one generation to another. Proverbs are culture specific and context dependent. Proverbs cannot exist outside of the context. Pragmatics, the study of contextual meaning is adopted as the tool of the study. To understand the context of the selected proverbs, the socio-cultural background and orientation of a group of language users (Ngwa people) are considered. This implies that culture occupies a vintage position in the study of proverbs in order to explore their contextual meaning and didactic significance. However, cultural diversity of language users (particularly proverb users) has not been given adequate consideration in researches on proverbs. Thirty proverbs from oral interview (native speakers) are analyzed using pragmatic theory of meaning propounded by Wittgenstein. The findings reveal a remarkable difference in the contextual and the literal meanings of the proverbs. There are also differences in the way some proverbs are said in the Ngwa dialect and the way they are said in standard Igbo though the meanings are the same. In conclusion, the study reveals the need to be culturally versed to be able to distinguish the contextual and literal meaning of proverbs especially in the dialects.*

**Key words:** *Proverbs, Dialect, Critical analysis, Metaphor, Pragmatics*

### 1. Background to the study

The focus of this study is to examine the literal and non-literal meaning of some Ngwa proverbs. The literal meaning of an expression means the denotative meaning, what the word means, but a non-literal meaning means something different from what our word means that is connotative meaning.

Proverbs are concise, traditional and memorable expressions that convey piece of wisdom or general truth. Proverbs serve as condensed packages of traditional wisdom, distilled from cultural experiences and passed down through generations. The richness of proverbs lies in their ability to

encapsulate universal truths and offer timeless wisdom that resonates with people from different backgrounds. Proverbs are deeply rooted in the culture and history of a community or region. According to Igboanusi in Ayodabo & Kofa (2010), "Culture refers to "the totality of the people's way of life which defines a certain outlook on life, a certain morality, a certain disposition, a certain spirit of the people". We learn our culture from our fore-bearers and contemporaries, and then pass it to future generations. Proverb is one of the means that displays the cultural background of a group of people. They reflect the values, beliefs, customs, and experiences of the people who use them. Proverbs derive their meaning from the specific cultural and social context in which they are used. Understanding the cultural and historical context behind a proverb can provide insight into its intended meaning and significance. Therefore, understanding the meaning of proverbs implies that one is at home with the culture of his people.

Nwadike (1989:31) opines that "*proverb is a form of speech which is pregnant with meaning* Their meaning may not always align with modern sensibilities, therefore, it is crucial to approach them with cultural sensitivity and critical thinking. It is important to balance the wisdom of proverbs with evidence-based reasoning and critical analysis. Critical analysis refers to the process of examining, evaluating and interpreting information in a thorough and objective manner to form a well-reasoned judgment or conclusion. It involves analyzing various aspects of a subject beyond the surface level and delve into the underlying meaning to gain a deeper understanding. Critical analysis often involves considering the broader context in which the subject or work exists, including historical, cultural, or social factors that may influence its interpretation or impact. It promotes a deeper understanding, encourages intellectual rigor, and helps individuals develop informed opinions or make well-reasoned decisions based on evidence and logical thinking. There are different types of critical analysis that can be applied to different contexts: Literary Analysis, Textual Analysis, Cultural Analysis, Data Analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The Literary Analysis focuses on analyzing and interpreting literary works. The Textual Analysis involves analyzing language use. It examines written or spoken texts to understand their meanings. Cultural analysis involves examining cultural artifacts, practices, or phenomena to understand their significance, origins, and effects. It explores the social, historical, political, and economic factors that shape cultures and their meanings. Data analysis is a critical examination of numerical or quantitative data. It involves statistical techniques, data visualization, and interpretation to derive meaningful insights and conclusions. While the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on studying language use within its social and cultural contexts. CDA recognizes that language is not neutral but is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. By examining how language is used and manipulated within specific social and cultural contexts, it explores how language use reflects societal values and integrates theories and methods to provide a comprehensive analysis and a deeper understanding of language. It examines how language is used to construct meanings. Its aim is to uncover hidden meanings, focuses on analyzing specific discursive practices, such as the use of metaphors and examines how these practices shape meanings and influence perception. Many proverbs employ metaphors or symbolic language to convey their meaning and it's valuable to consider the specific cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts in which proverbs are used to derive its meaning, thus CDA method is the best method of analyzing proverbs in a specific language. Proverbs are product of human experiences and it is transmitted through language.

Language is a means of communication and the ultimate goal of communication is to convey meaning. Understanding an intended meaning is a crucial part of the communication process. The literal meaning of a proverb is straightforward and can be understood at face value, but many

proverbs use metaphorical language to convey deeper meanings. These figurative expressions draw parallels between everyday situations and abstract concepts. For instance, “Action speaks louder than words” suggests that people’s actions reveal their true intentions more accurately than their spoken promises. Every language has proverbs associated with it. Understanding the meaning of proverbs requires an in depth knowledge and mastery of a language or dialect. Dialect refers to a variety of a language spoken by a particular group of people or in a specific geographical area. It is a subset of a larger language. They reflect the unique linguistic characteristics and regional identities of the communities that use them.

Proverbs in their natural states (dialects) are being overlooked and that is why most of our proverbs are disappearing. For instance, the Ngwa proverbs are endangered as parts of the Central Igbo are being substituted into Ngwa dialect by the younger generation. The Ngwa dialect is spoken primarily by the Ngwa people of Abia State in South Eastern Nigeria. The Ngwa people are farmers and have high regard for land, thus proverbs related to farming and nature are prevalent in Ngwa community. In Ngwa land, the ability to use and understand the meaning of a proverb, no doubt, proves that one is indeed “Nwaafo”. With increased globalization and multicultural interactions, younger generations of Ngwa people are exposed to a wide range of culture and languages (dialect). This exposure leads to a blending of different linguistic styles and a departure from traditional proverbs specific to Ngwa dialect. This informed our collection and a critical analysis of thirty Ngwa proverbs to provide insight into its meaning or help clarify

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Studies**

There are various theories and perspectives on the nature of meaning, each offering different insights and explanations. Here, a few notable theories on meaning are reviewed the most suitable will be adopted in this study.

Kempson (1977:47) propounded the Behaviourist theory of meaning which states that the meaning of a linguistic form must be analysed in terms of the important element of the situation in which the speaker alters it. This is a mechanistic approach to analysing meaning leaving no room for initiative, and native speakers’ intuition.

The proponents of the Mentalist theory of meaning assume that the meaning of a word or an expression is the mental image or idea of the word or expression that is formed in the mind of the speaker or hearer as soon as the word or expression is altered. This theory is difficult because we can only form mental images of things that have physical images and some words such as “is, a, an” are not able to conjure mental images and is not subject to empirical verification. The meanings of proverbs are not determined on the basis of an idea because not all words (e.g. a, I, be, is, it) conjure mental images.

Referential theory of meaning propounded by Ogden and Richards (1923) states that the meaning of an expression is the object or entity which the expression stands for, which implies that the meaning of an expression lies in what it points out in the world. Linguistic expressions have the meanings they do because they stand for things, what they mean is what they stand for.. Although, proverbs are cultural artifacts but their meanings are not derived solely on the meaning of the words used in the expression.

Wittgenstein (<https://journals.openedition.org>) propounded Pragmatic theory of meaning and his view is that the meaning of any linguistic expression is determined by the particular context in which the expression is used. Pragmatics refers to the study of language in context and how language is used to convey meaning beyond the literal words or sentences. This means that the meaning of words/expression is left to be determined by use and context. Pragmatics meaning depends on context and the communicative intentions of the speaker. It is the study of language in use in particular contexts, or situations. Pragmatics is the study of “invisible” meaning. It deals with how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said or written. According to Wale (1989:3655), pragmatics is the study of language use which is concerned with the meaning of an utterance rather than a grammatical sentence. For Yule (1996:1), pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or writer, and interpreted by a listener (reader). Thus the study of what speakers mean or speaker meaning is pragmatics.

However, it is important to note that proverbs can have multiple layers of meaning, and their interpretation may vary across cultures and individuals. The richness of proverbs lies in their ability to encapsulate universal truths and offer timeless wisdom that resonates with people from different backgrounds. While the meaning of proverbs can vary depending on the context and culture, here are some theories and perspectives on their meanings:

**Literal Interpretation:** Some proverbs have a straightforward, literal meaning that can be easily understood. These proverbs often describe a specific situation or action and offer practical advice. For example, "A stitch in time saves nine" advises taking prompt action to prevent a problem from becoming worse.

**Metaphorical Interpretation:** Many proverbs employ metaphors or symbolic language to convey their meaning. These proverbs often use imagery from nature, daily life, or cultural references to illustrate a broader truth or lesson. For instance, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" advises against assuming success or making plans based on uncertain outcomes.

**Cultural and Historical Interpretation:** Proverbs are deeply rooted in the culture and history of a community or region. They reflect the values, beliefs, customs, and experiences of the people who use them. Understanding the cultural and historical context behind a proverb can provide insight into its intended meaning and significance.

**Contextual Interpretation:** The meaning of proverbs can change depending on the context in which they are used. The same proverb may have different interpretations in different situations or cultures. For example, the proverb "Every cloud has a silver lining" suggests that even in difficult circumstances, there is always a positive aspect to be found. However, in certain contexts, it may be seen as dismissive or insensitive.

**Intergenerational Transmission:** Proverbs are passed down through generations, which can result in variations in their meaning and interpretation. Each generation may add their own insights or adapt the proverbs to reflect their changing circumstances. This process of intergenerational transmission ensures the continued relevance and evolution of proverbs.

**Pragmatic Interpretation:** This focuses on understanding the intended meaning of a communication by considering various factors such as the speaker’s intentions, the context of the conversation, the relationship between the speakers, and the social norms and conventions governing the communication. Pragmatic interpretations go beyond the surface-level meaning of words and

consider the implied or intended meaning of the speaker. Proverbs are often intended to offer practical advice or wisdom for daily life. They can provide guidance on a wide range of topics, such as relationships, decision-making, perseverance, and personal character. Therefore, Pragmatic interpretation of proverbs is best since it focuses on the speaker's intentions, the effect of the communication on the listener, and the role of context in understanding meaning. Interpreting proverbs pragmatically involves considering their relevance and application to specific situations and individual experiences.

## **2.2 Empirical Studies**

Nwadike (2009) examines 85 Igbo proverbs and classified their functions into sub-headings which include: Admonition/Caution

### **Obummiriagbaoso.**

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.*

#### **1) Fear**

### **Nkume ria elu, ujoatuwaitemmiri.**

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

#### **2) Contempt**

### **Onyeyanwaokukona-akpaaghaghiisiakpalaakpala.**

*It means a person who is friendly with a chicken does not avoid the odor of chicken faeces.*

*It also means Familiarity breeds contempt.*

Nwadike (2009) investigates the meaning of Igbo proverbs while this present study delved into proverbs of dialect of Igbo(Ngwa) since meaning can vary across dialects.

Shelton(1971) analyzed Igbo proverbs by mere stitching of words as he found them in Igbo English Dictionary, for instance, an Igbo proverb: “**Ewe (sic) sina o fodurunwantinti ma ikuaruoyamma.**”He gave the meaning as “*Monkey says that he could have remained a little child but his eyebrows produced his beauty.*”But a typical Igbo person who understands the context of the proverb will give its meaning as “*The monkey thinks that his eyelashes nearly cost him his beauty.*”

Shelton (1971) work is faulty because meaning is not determined by individual words and the meaning of a word resides in the speakers of a common language. This flaw is inherent in the referential theory of meaning but in this present study the meaning of expression (proverb) is derived from the context of its use as propounded by Wittgeinstein(1953).

Ndiribe (2015) analyzed few standard Igbo proverbs using the framework of Lakoff (1987) image schema of metaphorical analysis. The study shows that image schema like Path, Force, Containment and casual schemas play important roles in highlighting the context of proverbs. However, \*Ndiribe examined proverbs based on contextual meaning but since proverbs are deeply rooted in specific cultures, the present work took cognisance of contextual, literal meaning and cultural specificity of Ngwa proverbs.

## 2.3 Theoretical frame work

This study adopts pragmatic theory in examining proverbs in Ngwa dialect of Igbo language. The pragmatic theory emphasizes the role of context and the intentions of the speaker or communicator in the construction of meaning. The framework aims at not only recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance, but goes beyond the linguistic or grammatical meaning of an utterance to include meanings that are not visible or directly discernible from or contained by the words of an utterance.

## 2.4 Summary of literature review

It is evident from the preceding review that the works in Igbo proverbs examined are all standard Igbo proverbs. Dialects, the bedrock of all standard languages are yet to receive proper attention, as such it becomes necessary to expound the research compass by carrying out a comprehensive analysis of Ngwa discourse dialect) proverbs of Igbo language.

## 3. A critical analysis of Ngwa proverbs

It adopts the critical discourse approach (CDA) and using the pragmatic theory to analyse the few Ngwa proverbs collected. In the study, the Ngwa proverbs were also rendered in standard Igbo to enable all benefit from them.

According to Ofomata (2016), "Obodoobulanwereilu. O bukwana'susu ha kailujuputara". Ofomata confirms that every village/community has their proverbs. Their proverbs are embedded in their language. The proverbs collected and analysed so far of Igbo language. Proverbs are rich depository of our various dialects. This research collected and analyzed Ngwa proverbs as seen below.

- 1) Okukoabafughiulo la afonjuruya.- Okukoalabaghijuranaafojuruya.  
**Literal meaning:** Chicken does not go to bed because the stomach is filled.  
Throwing in the towel/giving up (resigning to fate) does not depict contentment.
- 2) Anya mpiakueleweiheanyande le. - Anya piaikueleweiheanyana-ele.  
**Literal meaning:** When the eye goes blind the lashes will be seeing what the eye sees.  
**Substitution:** If an elderly person is indisposed, a young person will have to do what that elderly person was doing.
- 3) Mkpunnunundeeti le eluabughiihe ode eti ma ejideya. Mkpunnununa-etin'eluabughiihe o na-eti ma e jideya.  
**Literal meaning:** The sound the bird makes when it is up is different from the one it makes when it is caught.  
**Braggart.** Somebody may be bragging of what he will do and latter the same problem befalls him and he was not able to do anything.
- 4) Agwauchichiabughinwaanyisim kpeuwaoma. Akwaabaliabughinwaanyisiekpeuwaoma.  
**Literal meaning:** The cry of a widow in the night is not good world.  
All is not well. One is constantly reminded of the loss of a dear one.
- 5) Onye la mkpakaraudemgboto. I dighieleyaanyan'ihu.  
**Literal meaning:** Who is staying with his torn mat?  
Unperturbed. Not paying heed to gossip or frivolities.
- 6) Egbubeghiegebe a si la nwaanyierighiya. Egbubeghiegebe a sinanwaanyiaagaghieriya.  
**Literal meaning:** Kite has not been killed and they are saying women will not eat it.

Putting the cart before the horse. Pride goes before a fall. Bragging of a feat not yet achieved

- 7) Ọkukọhūruegbe da agbaosọ ọ juola ma egbe ọ diivuruya. Ọkukọhūruegbena-agbaosọ, ọ juola ma egbeochorivuruya.

**Literal meaning:** The chicken that saw kite and was running has it asked if the kite wants to carry it.

Assumption: One assuming that something is going to happen as predicted.

- 8) Mgbe e gbujiriabughimgbe le ojiakponwụ. Ọ bughimgbe e gbujirika ọ na-akponwụ.

**Literal meaning:** A tree does not dry up immediately it is cut down.

Mgbeirurummaduaruruala (meeyaiheojoo) ọ naghiegosiozugbo.

Effect of an action manifest later.

- 9) A gbambuyatul'ogwe, agbakwaabuyatukwal'ogwe, mpetampiti, ọpitaragweaku. A gbambuyaatuon'ogwe, a gbaabuyaatuon'ogwe, ọ busogweka a pparaaku.

Literal meaning: The first one is shot and it hit the dried wood, the second one is shot it hit the dried wood, is the spear made for dried wood?

Not taking caution. Always making same mistake (is it a curse?)

- 10) Ọchunwaokukonweada, nwaokukonwennwenweosọ. Ọchunwaokukonweosọ, nwaokukonanwenweosoya.

Literal meaning: He who pursues the chicken will fall while the chicken keeps running gently. Clear conscience

God defends an innocent person.

- 11) Isi namaejighieful'iteofe. Isi namaanaghiefun'iteofe.

Literal meaning: The head of the cow does not disappear in the pot.

You cannot deny something that is outstanding or obvious.

- 12) Nkukummiriejighiaghoyiaza. Ọ dighiheura mere anya/ mmaduịtibiokọ.

Literal meaning: A small water cannot be river.

An insignificant person cannot pose a threat to an influential person.

- 13) Ncheakucheemaonweya, yaghoiwiagwo. Ihe e meziriemezi a na-akpoyanwamma.

**Literal meaning:** If a tiny snake preserves itself, it will be a big snake.

Caution. If you take precaution, you will succeed.

- 14) Ọbughiefechaamkpa, mmuobakwammadu. Nshiko (crab) gwuruiyi (mmiri) ukwu, gwuoiyinta, biazuoiken'iteofenwaanyi

**Literal meaning:** Not when you pass the evil forest that you will be caught by the spirit.

After surviving a bigger problem, you will be caught up with a small one.

- 15) Ọ bughigbumma, ọ bu la onye e gburumma ọ nanaa. Ọ bughigbumma, ọ buotuonye e gburumadi.

**Literal meaning:** The problem is not cutting one with cutlass the problem is how the person that was cut is.

It is not taking an action that matters, what matters is the consequence/outcome of the action.

- 16) Ikere ukwunhuruonyeomatunguzo. Mmamyahuruonyoma, yaagbaafufo.

Literal meaning: The heel (leg) saw a familiar person and stopped.

Like begets like. It takes two to tangle. You cannot pass a loved one, despite being in a hurry.

- 17) Nkukummiridaaolulu, ukwuejieya - Iheniilenwereogen'okpuruanyanwu.

When a body of water gets to a pot hole, it stops.

Abrupt stopping. There is limit to everything.

- 18) kpimkpimkpimbuonyeukwul'ahu - Beta suya beta suyabun'ahunama.

Literal meaning: Heavy sound is on the big person's body.

So many jobs can weaken someone. Biting more than one can chew.

- 19) Adijisita he nnawerendi be nwufutarayaokukono la mkpuka. – Agaghi m ejinanna m looro m uwaneyebuoyananri.

Literal meaning: We cannot because of the noisy cry of the wolf release the chicken in the cage.

You cannot give out a chicken in the cage to a wolf because of its cry.

Do not give in to a challenge because of pressure.

- 20) Aka nharaaadijivakpurukaya - O metereyavuru.

The hand that harvest bee will carry the sting.

The hand that harvests honey will bear the stings of the bees.

One that commits crime will bear the consequences of the crime.

#### **4. Summary of findings**

This study looked at the literal and contextual meaning of some selected proverbs. The study reveals that meaning plays an important role especially in the use and analysis of proverbs. It also shows that proverbs can have metaphorical and literal meaning. Speakers of a language or dialect can understand the meaning inherent in the linguistic expression (proverbs) and what enables them in their innate knowledge of their language. The study also shows that proverbs reflect the values, customs and experiences of a particular culture. While proverbs can be insightful and provide valuable wisdom and guidance, they also warrant critical analysis due to their cultural and contextual specificity. The use of pragmatic theory of meaning in analyzing proverbs of a specific language (dialect) will enhance the use and understanding of the meaning of a proverb of a particular dialect.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Proverbs are used to suit various occasions in Igbo land: advice, caution, pedagogical, satirical, warning, commendation, request etc. The functions of proverbs in Igbo land are infinite. It is obvious that various communities have various proverbs that suit various occasions. The proverbs are expressed in the various dialects of the people concerned. It is also obvious from this work that a non native speaker of a dialect can be lost when proverbs in a dialect other than his, is used. There is therefore the need to carry out aggressive research in Igbo proverbs in our various dialects.

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