

*Original Article*

# An Analysis of Igala Proverbs in Awo Speech Community of Ankpa, Kogi State

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**ABSTRACT:** *The use of language is open to every human who is privileged to acquire the ability to produce meaningful sounds. However, linguists (pragmatists) are saddled with the responsibility of carrying out analysis of human utterances with the aim of discovering the acts performed in the utterances. "An analysis of Igala proverbs in Awo speech community" is a well-researched paper aimed at achieving pragmatic analysis of some selected Igala proverbs collected from the Awo speech community, guided by the following objectives: to identify contextual uses of Igala proverbs and to analyze the contextual meaning of the Igala proverbs. The paper adopted a non-participant instrument to generate its data, complemented with both primary and secondary sources of data collection, through which twenty-five data points were generated and analysed using a descriptive qualitative approach. It anchors on Austin's Illocutionary Act and Searle's Conversational Implicature theories coded as "pragma IACI". The findings of the research include the following, among others: the interpretation/meaning of Igala proverbs changes depending on the context in which the proverb is applied. More than one proverb can be used to explain an idea, and an Igala proverb can be used for warning/advice, educating/informing, and recommending that. Further research on pragmatics should be carried out with more concentration on language users' socio-cultural reality, among other recommendations.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pragmatics, Proverbs, Illocutionary, Conversational.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are a vital part of African cultural heritage, conveying wisdom, values, and beliefs in a condensed and memorable form [14]. They are commonly used in most Nigerian indigenous languages [18]. Proverbs are an integral part of language, like figurative and idiomatic expressions, which help to beautify communication [6]. In the Igala language, proverbs play a significant role in everyday communication, serving as a means of teaching, advising, and socializing [13]. However, the pragmatic functions of proverbs in the language remain understudied, with limited research exploring how they are used to achieve communicative goals and convey meaning in context [16]. This study aims to investigate the pragmatic analysis of proverbs in the Igala language, examining how they are used to negotiate meaning, establish social relationships, and reinforce cultural values [12]. By exploring the pragmatic strategies employed in proverbs, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of language use, cultural communication, and the role of proverbs in shaping social interactions in African contexts [25].

Across languages and cultures, proverbs constitute a very important aspect of language use [14]. Hence, they have been the subject of varying attention from linguists, anthropologists, and language users in general [18]. They have also been described and labelled in various ways in different languages and cultures. For example, the Yorubas refer to proverbs as a kind of horse, which comes in handy in recovering a speech that has derailed [11]. Among the Igbos, it is "the palm oil with which words are eaten" [1]. Even the scriptures are not silent on proverbs. Proverbs 1:1-7 (The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), 1984) explains that proverbs help the wise increase wisdom while enabling the discerning to get guidance [14]. Proverbs in different languages and cultures form part of the codes of behaviour and exemplify their use for the transmission of tribal wisdom and rules of conduct [14]. In Africa, and perhaps other places, proverbs are prerogatives of the elders [17]. Elders who are knowledgeable in the use of proverbs show the depth of wisdom through their use [17]. The Igala people have this to say: "Alu Ogijo ma gbulu omi eka," translated as "wisdom is perceived from the mouth of elders" [13]. Elders are assumed to epitomize and exemplify positive deeds [13].

On the other hand, the Igala language is a socio-cultural marker among the settlers within the confluence of two Nigerian rivers, the Niger and Benue [13]. The name Igala represents the language, the people, and the region itself, and this is the only form that is being used by the people themselves [13]. As a language, Igala belongs to the Kwa sub-group of the Niger-Congo family [6]. There are four major language families in Africa: (i) Niger-Congo, depicting the languages around the Rivers Niger and Congo, with sub-groups 'Kwa' and 'Bantu,' (ii) Nilo-Saharan, covering mainly the northern part of Africa down to part of West and Sudan, (iii) Afro-Asiatic, suggesting the languages around the Horn of Africa and the Cush, and (iv) Khoisan, referring to languages in the southern part of Africa, now greatly influenced by the Bantu sub-group of the Niger-Congo family [6].

Awo is a community politically recognized as Ojoku Ward IV in Ankpa Local Government Area of Kogi State [13]. It is located at the border of Kogi and Benue States, sharing boundaries with Idoma-speaking communities such as Auke in Apa Local Government, Okakle in Ohimini Local Government, and Ojide in Otukpo Local Government, all in Benue State [13]. Most members of the Awo community are bilingual, speaking Igala and Idoma languages, while the literate ones are multilingual, exploring Igala, Idoma, English, and other languages [13]. It is interesting to note that proverbs have been fairly studied from both linguistics and literature perspectives, although the concern of this study is linguistically oriented [16]. Proverbs indeed are essential ingredients for harmonizing the life rhythm of any community [14].

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are quite a number of works on proverbs [14]. However, very few of these works are based on contextual meaning (pragmatics) [16]. Studies on proverbs from the semantic, stylistic, and discourse analysis points of view are easier to come by than those from the pragmatic perspective [6]. In the same vein, studies on pragmatics generally, and proverbs in particular, often do not consider the cultural diversity of language users as a basis for meaning explication [12]. Most of these studies either failed to address the relevance of context to meaning explication or adopted a Universal Pragmatics (UP) principle, which erroneously posits that the same socio-cultural reality underlies language use across the globe [16]. It is in agreement with this submission that the use of proverbs in the Igala language deserves more attention than it may have received, in order not only to preserve the moral values of the proverbs but also to encourage their unique way of conveying weighty (traditional) messages with some degree of societal backing or approval [13, 14].

## 3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to use pragmatic principles to analyze the data that will be collected for this study. However, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- i. To identify contextual uses of Igala proverbs.
- ii. To analyze the contextual meaning of the Igala proverbs

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study intends to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the contextual uses of Igala proverbs?
- ii. Are there contextual meanings in Igala proverbs?

## 5. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 5.1. PRAGMATICS: A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

Etymologically, the term “pragmatics” is from the Greek word “pragma” meaning deed or action [25]. Oisanwo traces the term “pragmatics” to Charles Morris [33], who describes it as one of the three (with syntax and semantics) component fields of semiotics, which is the study of signs and sign systems. Morris regarded syntax as the study of the relationship between signs, while semantics is the study of the relationship between signs and the things for which they stand. Pragmatics, therefore, is the study of the relationship between signs and their users [33]. Akmajian [3] identifies the coverage of pragmatics as the study of language use, and in particular the study of linguistic communication in relation to the structure and context of utterance. Thus, pragmatics must identify central uses of language, specify the conditions for linguistic expressions (words, phrases, sentences, discourse) to be used in those ways, and uncover general principles of language use. Most of these works were originally done by philosophers of language such as Wittgenstein [5], Austin [6], Searle [26, 27], and Grice [11] in the years following World War II. The meaning of pragmatics changes depending on the context in which language is employed, a view also supported in contemporary pragmatic studies (cf. Huang [13]; Mey [20]; Culpeper & Haugh [9]). The definitions often cited as the most influential interpretations of the field are presented here so that readers can gain knowledge from them. Leech [17] sees pragmatics as the study of meaning in relation to speech situations, allowing the speaker to use language to attain a desired effect on the mind of the listener. Nwala [25] describes pragmatics as the study of meaning emphasizing context and situation, noting that with pragmatics, the intended meaning of words and sentences can be inferred. Pragmatics is significant because it allows one to study language use on the basis of what is implied, i.e., deriving the intended meaning of language use and the reason it is communicated [25], a position reaffirmed in recent pragmatic research (see Yule [41]; Taguchi [37]).

The word “proverb” is derived from the Latin word “proverbium,” a two-syllabic word: “pro” meaning public and “verbium” meaning word or expression, together meaning “an expression said in public” [33]. The term “proverb,” as a translation of the biblical Hebrew word “Mashal,” denotes certain specific literary forms, particularly of wisdom literature. Ummu [38] argues that proverbs are a noble genre of African oral tradition, serving as custodians of people’s wisdom and philosophy of life. Zainab and Halima [28] note that proverbs express simple and concrete truths based on common sense and experience. Usman [39] views proverbs as relating to the day-to-day lives of the people who produce them, encompassing their aspirations, morality, religion, history, and expectations. Onyemelukwe, as cited by Oledi [28], states that proverbs succinctly convey truth and wisdom to teach, commend, advise, warn, or correct. Surakat [35], cited by Oledi [28], postulates that proverbs reflect a people’s philosophy of life and address all aspects of human experience. Mieder [22] defines proverbs as

short, memorable sayings that express general truths or advice, applicable to various contexts. Mbesike [21] considers proverbs as “generally terse figurative expressions,” rich in imagery and pithiness. Salzmann [34] maintains that proverbs contain generally accepted truths and represent the collective wisdom of prior generations. These views are consistent with recent proverb scholarship that emphasizes their cultural, pragmatic, and discourse functions (cf. Mieder [22]; Honeck & Welge [74]).

Considering functions, Ihedigbo [14] notes that proverbs illuminate, correct, and reference social norms, values, and prestige. African proverbs constitute a sub-language, capturing the society in which they are used. Referencing Nwachukwu [26], Ihedigbo examines context and performance in the communication of proverbs, discussing their social, communicative, educative, rhetorical, and aesthetic functions. Monye [23] emphasizes proverbs as instruments of embellishment and argumentation in conversation. Krasuska [15] states that proverbs spice up conversation; without them, dialogue becomes unpalatable. Oledi [28] highlights their moralizing, didactic, and sanctioning roles, applied through strategies like persuasion, valorization, stigmatization, and satire. Oyibo [32], citing Usman, identifies three Igala proverb functions: clarifying issues, thickening discourse, and asserting Igala identity. Among Africans, proverbs serve as mediators in disputes, negotiations, and important gatherings, a role also observed in recent African discourse studies (see Finnegan [75]; Adegbija [76]).

Empirical studies include Olatunde and Ahmad [29], who examined forms and functions of proverbs across Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, using interviews to explore literary and linguistic forms and pragmatic functions. The study found that proverbs caution, encourage, and advise, employing assertive and declarative speech acts. However, their sample of three proverbs per language is considered inadequate to represent Nigerian cultures fully. Zakariya [42] conducted a pragmatic analysis of proverbs in selected works of Ola Rotimi, emphasizing cultural diversity and illocutionary acts. Findings revealed primary and secondary levels of meaning, as well as direct and indirect illocutionary acts, but the study was not anchored on a theoretical framework, which is a limitation. Similar pragmatic approaches to African proverbs have been documented in recent studies (cf. Alabi [38]; Odeunmi & Alo [27]).

Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji [10] approached selected Yoruba proverbs from a pragmatic perspective, using Lawal’s pragmatic model. The research aimed to investigate the pragmatic functions and implications of Yoruba proverbs, with objectives including identifying the pragmatic strategies employed and examining their cultural significance. The study found that Yoruba proverbs employ strategies such as implicature, indirectness, and metaphor, among others. It recommended incorporating Yoruba proverbs into language education to promote cultural awareness. However, the study lacked a methodological framework and was not anchored on any theory [16]. More recent works similarly advocate the pedagogical and pragmatic value of indigenous proverbs (see Adegboju [5]; Bamgbose [7]).

Oluwole [30] conducted a pragmatic analysis of selected social justice songs by Bob Marley and the Wailers. The study examined the influence of Marley’s songs on listeners, specifically analyzing human rights songs such as “Babylon System,” “Zimbabwe,” “Redemption Song,” and “Get Up, Stand Up.” Structured interviews were administered to selected admirers who listened to the songs multiple times. Anchored on pragmatics, the study found that Marley’s songs have therapeutic effects, empowering the weak, consoling the depressed, and liberating the oppressed. It concluded that his songs inspired resistance against dehumanization globally [30]. Related contemporary discourse-pragmatic studies of protest music and popular culture confirm similar findings (cf. Machin & Mayr [18]; Taiwo [36]).

Adedimeji [2], from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives, analyzed Nigerian proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, drawing fifteen proverbs from each text. The study aimed to investigate the pragmatic functions of Nigerian proverbs, exploring their roles in conveying cultural values and literary themes. Objectives included identifying and analyzing proverbs in both texts and examining how they convey cultural values, themes, and authorial intentions. Findings revealed that proverbs in both texts serve as vehicles for cultural transmission, conveying values such as respect. The study recommended using proverbs as tools for teaching pragmatic analysis and literary criticism [2]. Recent literary-pragmatic research continues to affirm the relevance of proverbs in African texts (see Norrick [24]; Odeunmi & Alo [27]).

## **6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework for this research is coded as Pragma IACI, derived from J. L. Austin’s [45] concept of Illocutionary Act (IA) and Grice’s [46] theory of Conversational Implicature (CI). The term “speech acts” originates from Austin’s development of performative utterances and his theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Crystal [47] defines a speech act as “a theory which analyzes the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of speakers and listeners in interpersonal communication.” Griffiths [48] views acts as basic units of linguistic interaction, noting that any utterance used to state a fact or opinion, confirm, make an offer or request, or ask a question qualifies as a speech act. Yule [49] further explains that a speech act is an utterance that not only presents information but also performs an action.

Building on this, Austin [45] identifies speech acts at three different levels:

- i. A locutionary act: the actual utterance and its clear meaning, comprising its verbal, social, and rhetorical meanings.
- ii. An illocutionary act: the purpose of the utterance, such as asking a question, giving a command, or stating facts.

iii. A perlocutionary act: the effect of the utterance on the listener, such as persuading, convincing, frightening, or providing information [45].

Searle [50] further expands the study of speech acts by classifying illocutionary acts into five categories:

- i. Assertive: involves speakers expressing their beliefs about what is true or false by conveying information, drawing conclusions, or making statements.
- ii. Declarative: involves making announcements or pronouncements by a speaker in an institutional or instrumental position.
- iii. Expressive: involves utterances that show emotion, attitude, or mental state.
- iv. Directive: involves asking someone to do something, such as commands, requests, or advice.
- v. Commissive: involves committing oneself to a future action, such as promising, threatening, assuring, or betting.

While speech act theory accounts for what speakers do with utterances, Conversational Implicature (CI) explains how additional meanings are communicated beyond what is explicitly stated. CI refers to indirect or implicit meaning derived from context rather than from the literal form of the utterance. In other words, implicature concerns what is communicated even though it is not overtly expressed. It explains how hearers work out the complete message when speakers mean more than they say. Thus, implicature constitutes a component of speaker meaning that is not necessarily part of what is said but forms part of what is meant.

The definitions above clearly show that speakers may intend more than the literal content of their utterances. Implicature, therefore, represents additional information conveyed by the speaker that is not explicitly stated. It is the process through which meaning extends beyond the surface structure of an utterance. For example, in Igala: *erę anya lei okwu ọma ajuwę la tẹ* (*enwu kpa?*), interpreted as “a chick is found dead very close to where a bicycle’s tyre has just passed,” the unstated meaning is “what killed the chick?” By implication, the bicycle’s tyre caused the chick’s death. The literature reviewed above is relevant to the present study because it focuses on pragmatics and proverbs, particularly through speech act theory and conversational implicature. However, these studies did not adequately address context in meaning construction. This gap provides the basis for the present research, which integrates illocutionary acts and implicature within specific socio-cultural contexts of Igala proverb usage.

## 7. METHODOLOGY

This study employed both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected through one-on-one interactions with elders renowned for their use of Igala proverbs, facilitated by research assistants. Secondary data included a review of relevant scholarly works, such as academic journals and textbooks. Non-participant observation was also used, as outlined by Omede and Odiba [51], where the researcher, via assistants, attended gatherings of elders and recorded the proverbs used during discussions. The study followed a descriptive qualitative research design. The target population comprised 250 elderly individuals (male and female) from the Awo speech community. A sample of 25 participants was selected to represent the proverbs used in the community.

### 7.1. DATA PRESENTATION ANALYSIS

The data were categorized into five contexts: cultural, family, marriage, school, and social, as presented below.

### 7.2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Having subjected the data presented above to analysis, the findings of the paper are as follows:

- i. The interpretation/meaning of Igala proverbs changes depending on the context in which the proverb is applied.
- ii. More than one proverb can be used to explain an idea.
- iii. Igala proverb can be used for warning/advice, educates/informs and encourages
- iv. The dominant illocutionary act is assertive.

## 8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

[15] is of the opinion that proverbs are highly context-dependent. This claim holds true for Igala proverbs, whose interpretations depend on the environment in which they are used. In other words, the meaning of an Igala proverb varies according to context. For instance, the proverb “*enyi chegahi ejo*” (translated as “teeth are the pride of a snake”) has different interpretations across settings. In a marriage context, it means “husband is the pride of the wife,” whereas in a cultural or kingship context, it refers to “the people surrounding a king as his strength.” This demonstrates that a single proverb may convey different meanings depending on the situation.

Similarly, a proverb may express multiple ideas, just as different proverbs may communicate the same idea. In Igala, the use of several proverbs within the same context often reflects the speaker’s expertise, though care must be taken to avoid inappropriate usage that could result in misinterpretation. For example, “*Qrọ cha gbọgba t’ondu oko le n*” (the okro can never

be taller than the farm owner) and “Ína cha gbogba t’ojile n” (lice cannot be taller than the head) both emphasize that a child cannot outgrow parental control.

Igala proverbs function as tools for warning, advice, education, and information, depending on the context. They are often used to caution against bad behavior in order to prevent its consequences. For example, “Ad’egwu dufu cha ch’egwu anyi n” (those who bring the masquerade out do not make it laugh) warns against disrespecting the king. “Etękpęnwu ęnę dęnę dọdi n” (to bow down to someone does not make one a dwarf) advises individuals to admit their faults, while “Atę ma b’uja uji” (the hawk is best prevented while still in the air) educates on timely crisis management. The study also finds that some proverbs serve to encourage positive action, such as “Iro imọtọ malu n ogijo ki ny’qwoję nyunwu” (if a child’s fart does not smell enough, an elder should add to it).

Furthermore, the proverbs analyzed in this study exhibit assertive, directive, declarative, and expressive speech acts. They express beliefs, make statements, convey information, draw conclusions (assertive), reveal emotions or attitudes (expressive), issue pronouncements (declarative), and influence actions (directive). However, assertive acts dominate the proverbs collected for this study.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Pragmatics, as the study of the contextual meaning, is no doubt a reliable means of determining meaning. Clearly, there is a wide gap of differences between what a person says and what he means. It is on this basis that Mey (2001) describes pragmatics as the study of how to say what one means and how to mean what one says. An expression such as, “Was the door open when you entered the room”? This question may not require either a yes or no answer. Rather, it may be directive to a person to either open or close the door. In view of this, to understand an expression (either literary or otherwise), there is no need for the contextual exploitation of the expression, and to understand context, the cultural background of the language users should be considered relevant. The above submission is particularly true of proverbs because they (proverbs) are context-based and culturally specific. The culturally specific nature of proverbs does not mean that the same proverb cannot be found in other cultures (see Ojoade, 2004). However, the relevance of context in determining the intended meaning is non-negotiable. This is because the same proverb can have a different interpretation depending on the situation of use. In conclusion, the study of meaning (pragmatics) is a useful tool for explicating the meaning of both literary and non-literary works. Context determination is not the same in both natural speech communities and literary texts, because the writer might be influenced by several factors that may differentiate his works from the realities of natural society.

## 10. RECOMMENDATION

Below are some recommendations based on the research findings.

- i. Further research on pragmatics should be carried out with more concentration on language users’ socio-cultural reality.
- ii. Proverbs (Igala) should be highly rated to be included in the curriculum of secondary schools, relevant undergraduate and post-graduate courses of the tertiary institutions in Igala land, to strengthen their efficacy and to preserve the cultural heritage of the people.
- iii. Older members of the society who are knowledgeable in the appropriate application of proverbs should encourage the use of proverbs in gathering of both social and traditional contexts.
- iv. Mass media (radio/television) workers of Igala origin especially media houses in Igala land should create forum for discussing Igala proverbs so as to promote the people’s language and their culture.

### 10.1. CONTRIBUTION TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

This research contributes to the body of knowledge in both pragmatics and proverbs. Below are some contributions of this study to the body of knowledge:

*i. Understanding of language in context.*

This study helps researchers to uncover how language is used in context to convey meaning.

*ii. Promoting language teaching and learning.*

The analyses of the data made available for this study promote teaching and learning by highlighting the importance of context, inference and cultural knowledge in understanding language.

*iii. Promoting pragmatic theory*

This research contributes to the development of pragmatic theory, shedding light on issues like speech acts and implicature.

*iv. Preserves cultural heritage.*

This study helps in preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge.

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