

Pragmatic Functions of Igbo Proverbs: A Study of Ihioma Dialect and Cultural Communication

Patricia Nneka Ogbuehi¹, Chisom Cherish Olushola Olashinde²

¹Department of English and Literary Studies, Admiralty University of Nigeria, Ibusa, Delta State, Nigeria.

²Department of Law, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the pragmatic underpinning of Igbo proverbs with particular emphasis on their functional use in communication within the dialect of Ihioma community of Imo State. Among the Ihioma people, proverbs have played a crucial role in resolving conflicts, promoting unity, and preserving their cultural heritage. However, these proverbs have received limited scholarly attention from a pragmatic perspective. Through the examination of the linguistic structures and cultural relevance of Ihioma proverbs, the study highlights how Ihioma proverbs pragmatically foster ethical values and social norms. The study is grounded in Relevance theory as advanced by Sperber and Wilson. Using quantitative and qualitative research design, the study investigates how these proverbs communicate layers of meaning via inferential interpretations. With the use of unstructured interview technique, twenty proverbs commonly used within the Ihioma community were purposefully selected as data for this study. The findings reveal that, based on three foundational principles that underlie pragmatic interpretation including explicit, implicit and inferential meanings, Ihioma proverbs function as instruments for promotion of values such as respect, prudence, patience, courage, discretion, resilience, communal harmony, and social cohesion within the Ihioma community. In conclusion, this study emphasizes that Ihioma proverbs contribute to broader discourse on human and societal development by playing a vital role in preserving cultural identity, transmitting ethical values, and fostering societal harmony by incorporating life lessons in everyday discourse and addressing universal themes of justice, equity, and responsibility.

Keywords: Cultural communication, dialect, Igbo proverbs, Ihioma proverbs, oratory, pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are significant part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Ihioma people of Southeastern Nigeria. They are metaphorical and figurative forms of language that serve as instruments for the expression of wisdom, social norms, and moral values. As carriers of cultural identity, Ihioma proverbs serve as tools for teaching, persuasion, and conflict resolution. These proverbs play a vital role in the preservation of socio-cultural heritage of the Ihioma people as embodiments of wisdom, ethical values, and social norms. They are a form of oral tradition passed on from generation to generation. The Igbo man refers to proverbs as '*the palm oil with which words are eaten*'. Proverbs are used creatively to enrich communication by conveying wisdom, enhancing expression, simplify complex ideas, and making speech more engaging and meaningful. They also serve as a tool for preserving and transmitting cultural values and traditions. They can be used to teach, soften words and situations, deepen the meaning of what is said, add aesthetics to discourse, interpret what is said, drive home one's points, admonish, draw inspiration and make an impact (Oboko, 2020).

Igbo proverbs are regarded as embodiments of the Igbo man's culture, philosophy, technology, and general outlook. They serve as institutional representations of Igbo man's archival stores of philosophy for the retrieval of wealth of moral, social, metaphysical, epistemological, religious and economic worldview. In line with this, Okorie, (2013) affirms that a proverb is to Igbo man what Bible is to a religious man. He further

emphasizes that the reality of the Igbo man's world is embedded in proverbs; whatever is not contained in a proverb is non-existent in the real world. Despite the rich cultural significance of Igbo proverbs in fostering ethical values, social norms, and effective communication, there is a lack of focused scholarly attention on their pragmatic functions within specific Igbo dialects, including those of the Ihioma community. This gap undermines their appreciation and limits the exploration of their social roles. This study therefore is set to fill this gap by exploring the pragmatic functions of the Ihioma dialect proverbs through the pragmatics lens.

Ihioma, located in Orlu Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, is a community with a rich cultural and historical background. The community originally comprised of three main kindred including Ebenese, Okwuabala, and Umuezennachi all of whom share a common ancestral lineage. Overtime, these kindred evolved into five distinct autonomous communities including Isiokwu and Nnenato (Ihioma International Association, 2021). Culturally, Ihioma is richly blessed with a diverse cultural heritage that are preserved over time through oral traditions, among which is its proverbial system. In the Ihioma community, as in other Igbo communities, proverbs are the hallmark of oral tradition. They serve as a medium for conveying wisdom, moral, and ethical values, reflecting historical cohesion and promoting conflict resolution and solidarity. (Onyima, 2016). The Ihioma people have a rich cultural heritage that is deeply embedded in their proverbial system. Ihioma proverbs serve as a means of preserving and transmitting wisdom, cultural values, and traditional practices across generations. Some of these cultural and traditional practices include respect for elders and ancestral wisdom, communal living and cooperation, hard work and industry, marriage and family values, wisdom and prudence, justice and retribution (Agbasiere, 2015;). For instance, the proverb "Gidi gidi bu ugwu eze" interpreted in English to mean (Unity is the prestige of a king) reinforces Igbo traditional values of communal living, democratic leadership, and respect for authority. This proverb emphasizes the importance of unity, cooperation, social stability, and collective strength in leadership and governance. It suggests that a king (or leader) derives honor, power, and authority not just from his title but from the unity and cooperation of his people. Without the support of his subjects, his rule would be weak and ineffective (Nwosu, 2022).

The natural landmarks in Ihioma, such as the Iyiokwu spring and Iyi Ngodo lake, further enrich its cultural narrative. These sites are steeped in myths and stories that have been passed down through generations. Elders employ proverbs to narrate the significance of these locations, connecting the people to their environment while instilling a sense of communal responsibility. For instance, the Igbo saying 'Oke soro nkwere ma mmiri, okocha nkere oma kocha oke' literally interpreted as (The rat that followed the lizard into the rain, and when the lizard's body dried quickly, the rat's body will not dry as fast). The imagery of 'rain' is significant, as it reflects a common communal experience in which children are warned against exposing themselves to rainfall to protect their health, a practice common in the Igbo community, including Ihioma. Implicitly, the proverb suggests that not everyone is equally suited to handle the same circumstances. Just because someone else thrives in a situation does not mean another will. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's limitations and individuality when making decisions. These types of proverbs, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Igbo people and the Ihioma community, serve as potent vehicles for education; teaching younger generations about the importance of self-awareness and caution (Onyema, 2016). It is tailored towards the preservation of wisdom through the allegorical significance of the body of water that makes the lesson, not only impactful but also memorable, thus ensuring its transmission across generations. Philosophically, this proverb reflects cultural values of prudence that emphasizes the importance of understanding individual uniqueness while fulfilling vital societal roles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is hinged on the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986) that provides a robust framework for exploring how meaning is derived in communication. Relevance theory is a cognitive approach to pragmatic theory of meaning that is anchored on the idea that every human communicative utterance conveys enough information to justify its intention. The theory posits that humans communicate by providing stimuli that guide the hearer toward the most relevant interpretation which is determined by balancing cognitive effects, new information, and the contextual implications. Relevance theory provides a cognitive framework for understanding how individuals interpret language, including proverbs. Relevance theory relates to cognitive effects on the communicative processing of information with the belief that encoded sentence

meanings provide clues to the speaker's intentions, emphasizing the role of context in comprehension.

Proverbs, as figurative expressions, require hearers to infer their meaning based on contextual cues and background knowledge. According to this theory, communication is guided by the principle of relevance, meaning that speakers convey information in a way that maximizes cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). When interpreting proverbs, listeners engage in a process of inferencing, aiming to derive the most relevant interpretation by balancing cognitive effort and contextual effects. For instance, the proverb "*A stitch in time saves nine*" does not explicitly state its intended lesson but prompts the hearer to infer that taking early action prevents greater problems. Relevance Theory explains how hearers select the most contextually appropriate meaning by considering available assumptions and optimizing communication efficiency (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). This aligns with the theory's concept of *optimal relevance*, where the speaker provides just enough information for the listener to infer meaning without unnecessary effort.

Recent studies have continued to explore the application of Relevance Theory to the interpretation of proverbs, showing its effectiveness in understanding figurative language across various cultures. For instance, Tanzeem et al. (2022) in their study of pragmatic analysis of metaphors in Punjabi proverbs, reveal that listeners decode non-literal meanings through contextual interpretation which align with Relevance Theory's principles. Similarly, Uyanne and Ejiaso (2024), in their examination of Igbo proverbs, reveal that these expressions encode ancient wisdom and cultural values, which are interpreted by listeners through minimal cognitive effort, as posited by Relevance Theory. Relevance theory anchors human communication on cognitive and communicative principles, indicating that relevance is central to all human cognition and communication.

According to Sperber and Wilson's Cognitive Principle of Relevance states that human cognition is naturally geared toward maximizing relevance, meaning that individuals automatically seek interpretations that yield the most meaningful cognitive effects with minimal effort (Wilson & Sperber, 2022). When encountering a proverb, a listener does not simply process its literal meaning but instead applies cognitive effort to infer an intended, contextually appropriate interpretation. Bokora (2019), in his study on the ethical aspects of Oromo proverbs, affirms that authentic knowledge cannot be gained through mere observation alone. Instead, true understanding requires keen attention and deep reflection (*xiinxaluu*) on our experiences. This idea is illustrated by the proverb *Hadurreen keessi bineensa* ("Deep down, a cat is a wild animal"), which suggests that to fully comprehend something, we must go beyond surface appearances and engage in thoughtful analysis. Judgments should not be based solely on external traits but should consider deeper, underlying realities. For instance, upon hearing "Isi kote ebu, okpaya" which is translated to "If the head carries a wasp's nest, it gets stung" a listener's brain effortlessly connects the metaphorical elements (the head, the wasp's nest, and the sting) to real-life situations, such as personal responsibility, the dangers of provoking trouble, or the inevitability of facing the outcomes of one's choices. By applying relevance theory, the listener interprets the proverb in a way that maximizes contextual effects without unnecessary cognitive strain, prioritizing the most relevant interpretation based on prior knowledge and situational cues.

In this framework, the pragmatic mapping process involves the interplay between explicit and implicit communication, recognizing that communication is inherently inferential. Listeners enrich linguistic input with contextual assumptions, guided by a relevance-driven comprehension heuristic (Wilson & Sperber, 2022). Explicit communication refers to the encoded linguistic meaning of an utterance, while implicit communication encompasses inferences derived from contextual cues (Clark, 2013). The speaker provides evidence of their intention to communicate, and the listener infers this intention based on utterance relevance as depicted by the context of communication, which requires minimal cognitive effort for maximal cognitive effect (Heintz & Scott-Phillips, 2022). In line with this, Ogbuehi, (2021) avers that determining the illocutionary act requires considering the speaker's intention based on general believe or presumption, the semantic interpretation of utterances, the context of usage, and its implications. For instance, the Ihioma proverb "Onye bute chi ya ụzọ, ọ gbagburu onwe ya n'ọsọ" literally interprets to describe "a person trying to be faster than their shadows", exemplifies the pragmatic mapping process by requiring inferential reasoning to grasp its deeper meaning. Explicitly, the proverb mentions a person (onye) runs faster (bute), their "chi" (personal god or destiny) is ahead of them, resulting in them outpacing their destiny. Taken literally, it seems to describe a physical act of running, but its full meaning is not contained within these words

alone. The true meaning is inferred through cultural and situational context. In Igbo cosmology, “chi” represents an individual's fate or spiritual path. The proverb warns against rushing destiny, implying that attempting to force things prematurely may lead to unintended or disastrous consequences. The implicit message discourages impatience and over-ambition which aligns with traditional Igbo wisdom that destiny unfolds at its own pace. Following Wilson & Sperber’s (2022) relevance-driven comprehension heuristic, a listener processes the proverb in a way that yields the most relevant interpretation with minimal cognitive effort. If this proverb is said to a young entrepreneur eager to cut corners for success, the proverb would be understood as a warning against hasty actions that may lead to downfall. In another context, such as relationships or career progression, it might advise patience and trust in divine timing. In line with illocutionary force as observed by Ogbuehi (2021), the interpretation depends on the speaker’s intention and the listener’s contextual understanding. If an elder says this proverb to someone making reckless life choices, the listener must infer that they are being advised to proceed cautiously rather than literally slow down their movement.

Similarly, pragmatics deals with the interpretation of meaning in language use based on the context of language processing. It studies how interlocutors combine linguistic and extra linguistic factors in decoding the intended meaning of an utterance, which Yule (1996) refers to as “invisible meaning”. Pragmatics examines how listeners combine linguistic meaning with other knowledge to understand a speaker's intended meaning. Additionally, Mey (2001) defines it from the perspective of the 'user' as the way humans use language in social contexts to align with societal norms and their effects. Birner (2013) defines pragmatics as the study of the contextual use of language. According to him, pragmatics examines patterns of interpretation that clarify the implicit knowledge that guides in choosing the appropriate meaning interpretation. Mey (2001) sees pragmatics as the science of language in relation to its users to achieve their goals, taking into account their constraints and available resources. Similarly, Leech (2014) defines pragmatics as the exploration of meaning in relation to specific speech situations. In relation to proverb interpretation, proverbs are known to encode meanings that extend beyond their literal composition, which will require interpreters to consider the situational context and cultural nuances in which they are deployed. Recognizing proverbs as pragmatic devices highlights how their meanings are actively shaped through communication, resonating differently across diverse social and cultural contexts.

Optimal Relevance in Proverb Interpretation: A Relevance-Theoretic Approach

Proverbs are metaphorical expressions that convey culturally embedded wisdom and truths. Their interpretation often involves going beyond the literal meaning to decode the speaker’s intended meaning. In this regard, Relevance Theory developed by Sperber & Wilson, (1986/1995) offers a compelling framework for understanding how individuals derive meaning from proverbs. Central to this theory is the idea of optimal relevance, which strikes a balance between cognitive effort and communicative effect.

According to Relevance Theory, every act of communication carries a presumption of optimal relevance: the speaker aims to provide input that is worth the hearer's processing effort by yielding significant cognitive effects. In proverb interpretation, this means that the listener searches for a meaning that justifies the mental effort involved in resolving metaphorical or elliptical expressions. For example, interpreting the proverb “Eme ngwangwa, emeghara odachi” (A stich in time saves nine). This proverb does not refer to “sowing” as represented literally, but requires inferring that addressing problems early prevents bigger issues later. This inference is guided by contextual assumptions and the pursuit of relevance, rather than decoding the surface structure of the sentence.

By contrast, Grice’s Cooperative Principle (1975), which is based on four conversational maxims- quantity, quality, relation, and manner offers a more rule based guided communication. When interpreting proverbs, Gricean Maxims tend to be violated as some proverbs may seem unrelated to the topic or obscure and therefore flouting maxim of relation or manner. From a Gricean perspective, this might suggest a failure in communication. But Relevance Theory does not assume that speakers follow fixed rules. Instead, it proposes that human cognition is geared toward maximizing relevance. It does not see obscurity or ambiguity in expression as breakdown in communication but as an intentional feature that serves as an invitation for the listener to search for deeper contextual implications (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Relevance Theory tends to

offer a more flexible interpretation of proverbs by giving explanations of why interlocutors tolerate and even expect non-literal language in culturally familiar expressions like proverbs. The interpretation process is seen as inferential which relies on contextual enrichment to derive implicatures that make the utterance optimally relevant (Carston, 2002).

The above exposition indicates that Relevance Theory provides a more robust and cognitively grounded account of proverb interpretation. By focusing on the hearer's inferential processes and the pursuit of relevance, it aligns well with how people naturally interpret figurative language in everyday communication. While Grice's framework laid important foundations for understanding implicature, Relevance Theory's dynamic model better captures the nuanced and context-sensitive nature of proverbial meaning.

In line with the above exposition, relevance theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between linguistic meaning, context, and cognitive processes in communication, particularly in decoding the implicit meanings embedded in proverbs. By emphasizing the role of context and the inferential nature of communication based on pragmatics mappings, relevance theory fosters dynamic interaction between speakers and listeners to achieve meaningful and efficient exchanges.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a research technique that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative descriptive research design. With quantitative research design, the researcher identifies and categorizes selected proverbs from the Ihioma dialect according to their pragmatic functions in tabular form to determine the frequency of their occurrence. While with qualitative analysis, the researcher provides a detailed description of how the meaning of these proverbs are interpreted that align with the pragmatics mappings as advanced by Sperber and Wilson such as explicit, implicit, inferential, as well as literal interpretation. This aims at giving an in-depth insight into how the proverbs serve as embodiments of wisdom, ethical values, and social norms. The data for this study consist of 25 proverbs gathered through unstructured interviews. The researcher interviewed two elderly individuals from the Ihioma community who contributed a total of 20 proverbs. In addition, the researcher, who is also an indigene of Ihioma, contributed five proverbs, bringing the total to 25 proverbs collected from three individuals. Although all 25 proverbs were used for statistical analysis, only 12 were purposefully selected for textual analysis due to the limited scope of this paper.

Data Analysis

The data for this study is analyzed using the pragmatic mapping framework of Sperber and Wilson (1986). This study employs a mixed-method approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Quantitatively, the researcher identifies selected proverbs from the Ihioma dialect of Igbo and classifies them in tabular form according to their functions. Their distribution is quantified and analyzed using simple percentage statistics. Qualitatively, the study provides a textual analysis that gives a detailed explanation of how these proverbs are pragmatically interpreted. This includes their explicit, implicit, and inferential meanings, as well as their literal interpretations which align with the pragmatic mapping framework.

Data Presentation

Table Igbo Proverbs and their Functions

Proverbs	Functions	Types	Frequency	Percentage
Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ọgọdọ ayo chieye anya	Educational	Educational	8	32
Okoro etoghi eto wara ọgọdọ ikuku buru ye,	Warning	Warning	3	12

oburu ogodo ya				
Ngwere hapu ukwu osisi, aka apkaraya	Advice, dyadic, warning, and philosophic al reflection	Advice	2	8
Agaghi m akwu aka tiere okuko aki	Caution, social wisdom, and educational	Philosophic al reflection	2	8
Mberede ka eji amara dike	Motivationa l statement, and social wisdom	Motivationa l	1	4
Egbe bere ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya	Educational, social wisdom, and philosophic al reflection	Social	5	20
Wepu aka enwe n'ofe ka o ghara iwu aka mmadu	Educational	Caution	2	8
Isi kote ebu, okpaya	Warning, and social wisdom	Wisdom	2	8
Total			25	100

The above table reveals that most of the proverbs perform multiple functions with a total of 25 pragmatic functions identified. The most common function is “educational”, which appears 8 times (32%). The second highest in no is “social” with a total of 5(20%), while “warning” appears 3 (12%). Both “philosophical reflection”, “wisdom”, “advice”, and “cautionary” functions are noted twice each (8%). The least among them is “motivational” functions which is reflected once each (4%) of the total number. This indicates that the most frequent pragmatic function of the proverbs is “educational” (32%), while “motivational” (4%) function is the least common.

Textual Analysis

Ihioma-Igbo Proverbs; Interpretations and Functions

Proverb: “Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ogodo ayọ chieye anya.”

Literal Meaning: When a child lifts his or her father up high, the father's loincloth covers his or her eyesight.

Function: This proverb serves as a teaching tool in Igbo culture to instill values such as respect, humility, and awareness of the consequences of actions. It emphasizes the importance of considering the broader implications of one's behavior, particularly in relation to elders or authority figures.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: When a child or a younger person elevates their father or someone of higher status to a position of prominence or attention, it exposes them to scrutiny or embarrassment, much like physically lifting someone could cause their clothing to shift inappropriately.

Implicit Meaning: The proverb implies that actions meant to elevate or highlight someone can unintentionally reveal their flaws, vulnerabilities, or shortcomings. It warns against thoughtlessly or publicly praising someone in a way that might lead to unintended consequences, such as bringing undue attention to their imperfections.

Inferential Meaning: This proverb is a cautionary tale about balancing respect, discretion, and the broader consequences of well-intentioned actions. It emphasizes that relationships, especially those between generations or social hierarchies, should be handled with care and discretion. While honoring or supporting others is commendable, it should be done with tact and foresight to avoid exposing them, and oneself to ridicule or criticism. It also hints at the interconnectedness of people's reputations; the actions of a subordinate can reflect either positively or negatively on their superior, depending on the manner and context of the act.

Proverb: “Okoro etoghi eto wara oḡoḡo ikuku buru ye, oburu oḡoḡo ya”

Literal Meaning: If a young man who is not yet mature wears a loincloth, when the wind blows, it will carry him and the loincloth.

Function: This proverb serves as a warning and lesson about the dangers of premature actions, lack of preparation, and immaturity. It advises caution in undertaking responsibilities or roles for which one is not ready. It is a tool for moral and social instruction, particularly for younger individuals.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: A young and inexperienced man puts on a loincloth which symbolizes maturity, responsibility, or readiness, but because he is not yet strong or mature, a strong wind, symbolizing challenges, will sweep both him and the loincloth away. This shows that he cannot withstand the test of the wind due to his lack of preparedness, inexperience or strength.

Implicit Meaning: The proverb implies that a person who lacks the necessary experience, wisdom, or strength will struggle to maintain dignity, responsibility, or societal roles. More so, acting before one is prepared can lead to exposure, embarrassment, or being overwhelmed by circumstances. Life's challenges (symbolized by the wind) will reveal one's level of readiness or inadequacy.

Inferential Meaning: From this proverb, the following can be inferred:

One should take time to grow, learn, and mature before taking on significant roles or responsibilities. Life's difficulties have a way of exposing weaknesses, especially when people take on tasks beyond their capabilities. Maturity and wisdom are prerequisites for maintaining dignity and respect in society. It cautions against rushing into adulthood, leadership, or responsibilities without adequate preparation or the strength to endure challenges. It encourages patience, self-development, and right preparation for any task one intends to embark on to avoid personal or public embarrassment.

Proverb: “Ngwere hapu ukwu osisi, aka apkaraya.” (If Lizard leaves the trunk of a tree, he will risk being captured)

Literal Meaning: The lizard (ngwere) is safer when it remains on the trunk of a tree (ukwu osisi). If it decides

to leave its safe position, it exposes itself to danger, such as being caught (akà apkara ya — hands will catch it).

Function: Advisory Function: It offers a warning advice for individuals to always endeavor to remain in their “safe zones” or stick to wise decisions to avoid unnecessary exposure to risks.

Educational Function: It teaches prudence, self-awareness, and caution.

Philosophical Function: It reflects the general truth that abandoning security may lead to vulnerability or consequences.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: This proverb explicitly warns that moving away from safety (like a lizard leaving a tree) will lead to exposure to danger or harm.

Implicit Meaning: Implicitly, the proverb reiterates the lesson on the consequences of leaving a position of safety, stability, or comfort. The tree trunk symbolizes protection, wisdom, or a stronghold. Leaving it represents unwise decisions or recklessness, which could lead to failure or disaster.

Inferential Meaning: From this proverb, we can infer: People should not abandon their strong positions or safe environments without careful consideration. There is safety in staying grounded, prepared, and aware of your environment. Leaving a secure place without a plan may lead to negative consequences. In life, one should be cautious in taking uncalculated decisions that can lead to exposure to harm or failure.

Proverb: ‘Aga m akwụ aka tiere ọkụkọ aki’ (I will not wash my hand to break nut for a fowl,)

Literal Meaning: “I will not wash my hand to break nut for a fowl.”

This means that one would not deliberately make a fruitless effort of trying to endure difficulty just for the sake of someone or something that will undervalue it.

Function

A cautionary statement: It warns against wasting effort or resources on those who will not appreciate or benefit meaningfully from it.

A moral lesson: It teaches individuals to be discerning with their time, resources, and efforts.

Social wisdom: It reflects the communal value of prudence, effort, and reciprocation within the Igbo culture.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: Explicitly, the proverb states that one will not wash their hands (put in effort) to break a nut for a fowl (a chicken), since the fowl lacks the ability to truly value or even use the nut in a way that justifies the effort.

Implicit Meaning: This proverb implicitly suggests avoidance of spending time, effort, or resources on ungrateful or incapable individuals. We should place value on what will be appreciated or rewarded. People should act with discernment in prioritizing situations or relationships that bring meaningful returns.

Inferential Meaning: From this proverb, one can infer that efforts should align with outcomes that benefit oneself or others meaningfully. Decisions should be based on practical benefit, and wise deployment of resources, and to discourage wastefulness, and unnecessary toil. It could also be a subtle social critique of people who misuse others’ generosity or fail to recognize its value.

Proverb: “Mberede ka eji amara dike.”

Literal Meaning: “It is in times of emergency that a hero is recognized.”

This means that a person’s bravery, strength, or ability is revealed during moments of crisis or unexpected challenges.

Function: This proverb serves as a motivational statement that encourages people to rise to the occasion during difficult times. It is a wise saying used to remind people that strength, courage, and leadership are proven under pressure. It teaches moral lesson of resilience and the value of preparedness in moments of crisis and adversity. Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: The proverb conveys that a person’s true strength or heroism is tested during critical or unexpected situations.

Implicit Meaning: Implicitly, the proverb suggests that people’s abilities or values are truly revealed in times of difficulty. Readiness for emergencies are proven to be true test of capability and dependability. Heroism is not about boasting or appearance but about stepping up when it matters most.

Inferential Meaning: From this proverb, the following can be inferred: Leaders or heroes emerge when they respond effectively in trying times. The Igbo culture appreciates and celebrates individuals who demonstrate courage and strength during adversity. One must be prepared for the unexpected as it is in such moments that their worth or ability is evaluated. The proverb implies that recognition and respect are earned through actions in difficult moments, not through mere titles or status.

Proverb: “Egbe bere ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya”

Literal Meaning: Let the kite (hawk) perch, let the eagle perch; the one that says the other should not perch, let its wings break.

Function: This proverb is used to promote the values of coexistence, mutual respect, fairness, and the rejection of envy or destructive competition. It is a call for peaceful coexistence and balance in relationships, communities, or societies.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: The proverb explicitly highlights the need for allowing room for everyone to thrive or coexist peacefully. It warns that anyone who seeks to prevent others from existing or prospering will face consequences.

Implicit Meaning: It implies that life has enough space and resources for everyone to succeed without hindering one another. The proverb discourages envy, selfishness, or malicious intent towards others. It encourages humility, accommodation, and fairness, fostering harmony in relationships.

Inferential Meaning: The proverb conveys that in any community, fairness and equal opportunity should be upheld to ensure peace. Those who act unjustly or selfishly, denying others their rightful place, may face repercussions or karma. It is a moral lesson on the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of living harmoniously.

Proverb: “Wepu aka enwe n'ofe ka o ghara iwu aka mmadu”

Literal Meaning: Remove the monkey's hand from the soup pot before it turns into a human hand.

Function: This proverb is used to encourage early intervention to minor conflicts to avert major crisis. It highlights communal responsibility of maintaining order and to discourage unethical behavior.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: This proverb directly suggests taking action to remove the "monkey's hand" (a symbolic foreign or inappropriate element) from a soup to avoid confusion with a human hand. It points to an act of distinguishing between what belongs and what does not.

Implicit meaning: The proverb advises addressing inappropriate actions or behaviors before they escalate or are normalized. The "monkey's hand" symbolizes improper or undesirable influences, which, if left unchecked, could cause disorder or corruption within a system.

Inferential Meaning: From this proverb, the following can be inferred:

The proverb emphasizes the need for vigilance in personal, social, or communal matters. It warns of the dangers of negligence, as failing to act promptly can lead to larger problems that are harder to rectify. It also implies that ignoring small wrongs or anomalies can blur the line between right and wrong, leading to moral or ethical decay.

Proverb: “Efopu nwankita akorọ, egosị ya”.

Literal Meaning: When a parasite is removed from a puppy, it is shown to the puppy. The act of showing the removed parasite to the puppy implies teaching or illustrating something important.

Function: This proverb serves as a moral teaching tool for accountability, consequences of actions, and the importance of recognizing help or intervention. It reinforces the importance of correcting mistakes to ensure that people stay focused on their goals or responsibilities.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: The explicit meaning is that when an undesirable or harmful element (like a parasite) is removed from someone or something, it should be pointed out and acknowledged. This draws attention to the harm it caused and reinforces the importance of addressing such issues.

Implicit meaning: The proverb implicitly suggests that people should acknowledge harmful influences or situations and understand the effort it takes to address them. It also highlights the importance of being aware of what causes pain or difficulty, so it can be avoided in the future.

Inferential Meaning: this proverb talks about need to recognize and acknowledge assistance and interventions. People, like the puppy, need to be shown the "parasite" (harm or wrongdoing) to learn and grow from the experience. It serves as a metaphor for educating individuals about the dangers they've been saved from or the actions taken to correct a situation.

Proverb: “Nkita nwere ndidi n’eri okpukpu buru ibu”.

Literal Meaning: A patient dog eats the fattest bone.

Function: This proverb encourages individuals to remain calm and composed while waiting for benefits, rewards or outcomes. It reinforces the importance of waiting for the right time to reap benefits rather than rushing into action. It gives a moral lesson of instilling patience to younger generations.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: The statement suggests that patience leads to better outcomes. The “dog” symbolizes anyone waiting diligently, while the “fattest bone” represents the reward for enduring or persevering.

Implicit Meaning: Patience is a virtue that often brings greater benefits than impatience or haste. The proverb implies that those who act impulsively may miss out on the best opportunities or outcomes. It highlights the

significance of timing and self-control in achieving success.

Inferential Meaning: The proverb teaches the principle of waiting patiently for the right moment to get greater rewards. It demonstrates that perseverance, discipline, and the ability to wait for the right opportunities can lead to more substantial and lasting success.

Proverb: “Ana amara uma adara ochi na owa ochi na debut mmadu.”

Literal Meaning: It is by recognizing the beauty of laughter that one deliberately falls for laughter and not that it is the laughter that pushes someone down or leads someone astray.

Function: The proverb serves as a cautionary reminder to assess situations critically before acting. It advises against being misled by surface-level appearances or emotions and emphasizes discernment in interpreting people's actions and intentions.

Pragmatic interpretation

Explicit Meaning: It is only when one understands the purpose of a smile that they realize it is not laughter alone that can lead a person astray. This means smiles or laughter might not always indicate good intentions; they can conceal deception or mischief.

Implicit Meaning: The proverb implies that not everything that seems pleasant, cheerful, or inviting is genuine or trustworthy. One should look beyond outward expressions to decode the underlying motives or truths regarding an action or idea.

Inferential Meaning: The proverb suggests the essence of wisdom, careful judgment, discernment and caution in relationships and interactions. People must evaluate actions and words carefully to avoid falling victim to deceit or manipulation masked by kindness or joy. It also suggests that trust should be earned through understanding, not assumed based on surface impression.

Proverb: “Ukpala okpoko buru, ntị chirie.”

Literal Meaning: The cricket that a bird eats has its ears closed.

Function: This proverb acts as a metaphor that highlights the consequences of being oblivious to danger or ignoring danger, or disregarding warnings. It teaches the importance of staying alert and being vigilant, self-awareness, and the need to pay attention to advice or signals that could help avert harm or danger.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: The cricket that is consumed by a bird is described as having "closed ears," this is to say that it was either unaware of its impending danger or ignored signs of the bird's approach.

Implicit Meaning: Neglect to warnings or failure to decode warning from the environment can lead to disastrous consequences or make one vulnerable to harm. Lack of awareness or carelessness to protect oneself either through advice, awareness or preparedness can be destructive.

Inferential meaning: This proverb advises people to remain vigilant and listen to advice or signs that could help them avert looming danger. It reflects on the importance of awareness and preparation in avoiding threats or misfortunes. It is a warning that ignoring risks, dismissing warnings, or failing to plan ahead can lead to negative outcomes, much like the cricket's oblivion leads to its demise.

Proverb: “Isi kote ebu, okpaya”

Literal Meaning: If the head disturbs the wasp, it suffers the sting.

Function: This proverb serves as a cautionary statement to warn people to take steps to avoid actions that might provoke unnecessary trouble. It uses local imagery of the “wasp” and its “sting” relatable to the Igbo community to highlight the consequences of people’s action. The proverb delivers wisdom concisely and succinctly while giving moral and ethical lesson indicating that every action has repercussions.

Pragmatic Interpretation

Explicit Meaning: This proverb explicitly means that when a person causes trouble or provokes danger, the person should be ready to take responsibility of bearing the consequences of his/her actions. The focus is on a cause-and-effect relationship: provoking the wasp (*kote ebu*) leads to suffering its sting (*okpaya*).

Implicit Meaning: People should think carefully before taking actions that could lead to harm to avoid provoking a volatile situation might result in self-inflicted suffering. Taking precautionary measures in one’s action is very vital in every social relationship. It equally emphasizes that the consequences of unintentional actions is still the responsibility of the actor.

Inferential Meaning: This proverb infers that life is governed by the principle of accountability indicating that actions have repercussions. It serves as a warning to those knowingly or unknowingly stirs up conflict within families or communities may find themselves disproportionately affected by the fallout. It reflects a worldview where wisdom, self-restraint, and foresight are valued virtues in navigating life’s complexities.

DISCUSSION

The tabulated findings of this analysis show that Ihioma proverbs serve various functions, including moral, education, advice, caution, philosophical reflection, social, wisdom, motivation, and warnings. However, the study reveals that the educational function is the most predominant, accounting for 8 instances (32%). This finding highlights that proverbs are predominantly used as educational or teaching tools by elders to educate and instill wisdom and morals in the younger generation. In this manner, cultural norms and values of the Ihioma community are preserved and transmitted from generation to generation.

Additionally, the textual analysis of selected Ihioma dialect of Igbo proverbs reveals their profound cultural and linguistic roles. They emphasize that proverbs serve as embodiments of wisdom, cultural, and moral values, societal expectations, and worldviews such as virtues of patience, respect, humility, self-control, exercise of caution in taking decisions, staying alert and being vigilant, self-awareness, cautionary statement, accountability, communal responsibility, promotion of mutual respect, fairness, rejection of envy, jealousy, and unethical behavior, awareness of the consequences of one’s action and motivational statements that encourages people to rise to the occasion during difficult times, which are reflected in the transmission of oral tradition of the Ihioma people’s heritage.

Each proverb encapsulates a principle essential for navigating life’s complexities, such as the importance of discretion, maturity, prudence, and resilience. They serve as vital instruments of moral guidance, teaching the necessity for acting thoughtfully, preparing for challenges, and valuing meaningful relationships and efforts. They foster principles of ethics, patience, accountability, and vigilance. This research findings resonate with Okorie, (2013) when he affirms that Igbo proverbs are embedded in its ethics or aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, logic and culture. According to him while some are metaphysical in nature, some are ethical or moral, epistemological or even social in nature. For instance, the proverb “Nwata bulie nna ya elu, ogo do ayo chieye anya” teaches the importance of tact when elevating others to avoid exposing vulnerabilities, while “Okoro etoghi eto wara ogo do, ekuku buru ye, oburu ogo do ya” emphasizes the need for adequate preparation and maturity before assuming responsibilities. The proverb, “Wepu aka enwe n’ofe ka o ghara iwu aka

mmadu” stresses the significance of addressing minor issues before they escalate. It highlights communal responsibility in maintaining order and discouraging unethical behavior. Another example, “Efopu nwankita akoro, egosi ya”, highlights the need for recognizing interventions and learning from challenges, reflecting accountability and personal growth.

Additionally, the proverb “Nkita nwere ndidi n’eri okpukpu buru ibu” teaches the virtue of patience. It illustrates how endurance and composure often lead to greater rewards than impulsive actions. Similarly, proverbs like “Ngwere hapu ukwu osisi, aka apkaraya.” highlights the importance of prudence, caution, and self-awareness. It emphasizes the consequences of abandoning secure position, while “Agaghi m akwu aka tiere okuko aki” warns against investing effort in unworthy endeavors. The proverb “Mberede ka eji amara dike” highlights the value of preparedness and courage in times of crisis, showing that true strength is revealed under pressure. Likewise, the proverb “Ana amara uma adara ochi na owa ochi na ebutu mmadu” advises critical evaluation of situations and relationships. It warns against superficial judgments, and emphasizes the application of wisdom in navigate human interactions.

The proverb “Ukpala okpoko buru, nti chirie” highlights the dangers of neglecting warnings or being unaware of one’s surroundings. It encourages the need for alertness and preparedness to avoid harm. Finally, the proverb “Isi kote ebu, okpaye” reinforces the principle of accountability. It serves as a caution against actions that provoke trouble and indicates that individuals must face the repercussions of their choices.

These teachings not only reflect the cultural emphasis on moral character but also the interconnectedness of individual actions and societal expectations. They illustrate a culture deep rooted in wisdom, where life lessons are conveyed through metaphorical expressions that encourage ethical behavior, communal harmony, and personal responsibility.

This study illuminates the moral and philosophical underpinnings of the Igbo worldview that showcase the universal relevance of these values in maintaining a harmonious and conscientious society. The pragmatic use of these proverbs fosters deeper communication and contextual understanding that is reflective of their relevance for cultural preservation and philosophical reflections. These findings resonate with recent studies that emphasize their relevance in addressing moral, social, and political issues, thus maintaining their significance in both traditional and contemporary contexts (Ugwuanyi, 2021; Asuoha, 2023).

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it can be inferred that Ihioma dialect of Igbo proverbs remain vital in preserving and transmitting cultural identity, ethical education and values. The following functions identified in this study such as teaching of morals, cautions, social wisdom, philosophical reflections and motivational measures are all geared towards the transmission of critical life lessons across generations. They reflect the community's ethos and offer guidance for ethical living and societal harmony (Yankah, 2012). By embedding these teachings in everyday discourse, the Ihioma dialect of Igbo community proverbs help to promote values that foster individual growth, communal harmony, and resilience. These proverbs transcend mere linguistic expressions by addressing universal themes of justice, equity, and responsibility, and thereby contributing to broader discourse on human and societal development. They go beyond their literal meanings to serve as enduring guides for behavior, relationships, and decision-making. As invaluable reservoirs of cultural wisdom and philosophy, these proverbs significantly contribute to understanding and sustenance of the rich cultural heritage of the Ihioma dialect of Igbo community. Integrating their study into modern linguistic and cultural frameworks ensures their sustainability as a rich resource for education and ethical instruction (Ezindu-Odoemelem, 2023; Ugwuanyi, 2021).

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 25. Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence) Authors hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.