

# ON THE ROLE OF IGBO PROVERBS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION

Martha Chidimma Egenti

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Adaobi Ngozi Okoye

Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

## Abstract

Proverbs are rhetorical strategies employed by various communities in expressing their experiences in a condensed manner. Achebe (1958) describes the Igbo proverb as the palm oil with which words are eaten. As forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversation, proverbs are found to possess evidence of peace and reconciliation and serves as a linguistic tool for conflict management. This study, therefore, examines some Igbo proverbs so as to determine the extent to which the proverbs are used as tools in reconciliation and crisis management. Data were collected in both planned and spontaneous settings. The study adopts the speech act theory in the analysis of some selected proverbs bringing out the various functions and impact of proverbs in enhancing conflict resolution and promotion of peaceful co-existence in human interpersonal relationships.

## Introduction

Proverbs are among the most cherished rhetorical expressions in human societies. In the context of the Igbos, proverbs remain the ready tools for thinking and communicating, not only because of their aesthetic exquisiteness, but also because of their being a way of life in Igbo culture (Egudu, 1972).

The proverb in the Igbo matrix remains a documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time and like other oral forms, it

records the history, experiences, trauma and tension of the society at every stage of its origin (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990).

Proverbs are indispensable in conflict resolution and crisis management. As an oratory and linguistic tool, when proverbs are applied to conflict situation, they can function as ice breakers in relieving tension, as therapeutic tools in facilitating trauma healing, in promoting introspection which brings about change, in promotion of interpersonal communication etc. (Ajiboye, 2012). They can also be used in judging, counseling, warning and encouraging a person. It is a known fact that if peace is to reign, there must be management of crisis and reconciliation which would not be of value to one party in a dispute, but to all parties involved.

The Igbo occupies the states of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo and parts of Rivers and Delta States. The Igbo as a group is part of the human family and as such are subject to be influenced by the natural causes of conflict among humans which may include such things as; differences in needs, values, opinion and other components of human interaction. These differences often lead to conflict. Conflict, according to Ajayi and Buhari (2014) can be described as a condition in which an identifiable group of human beings whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise is in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human group because these groups are pursuing what appears to be incompatible goals. They also assert that more importantly, conflict arises from the interaction of individuals who have partly incompatible ends, in which the ability of one actor to gain his ends depends on an important degree on the choice or decisions that other parties will take. Conflict could be violent, uncontrollable, dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable under various sets or circumstances (Omotoso)

In the pre-colonial days, there were many principles guiding conflict resolution in the traditional African societies. Those who want their conflicts resolved are to have confidence in the tribunal

that would resolve the dispute. These include elders, chiefs, priests, priestesses, secret cult etc. The disputants must have confidence in them. They (disputants) must be ready to submit themselves to the constituted authorities.

These conflicts could be interpersonal conflicts and inter communal conflicts and may range from person to person, community to community and nation to nation (Poku, 1998). The Igbo traditional institutions for conflict resolution include: the family, Amala (council of elders), Okpara system (eldest male), Umunna (clan), Umuada (female born in a town but married out), age grades (assembly of the people), Ohanaeze (assembly of the people and the king). These are not different from the one found in other traditional African societies. Reconciliation according to Ajayi and Buhari (2014) is the most significant aspect of conflict resolution. It is the end product of adjudication. After the disputants have been persuaded to end the dispute, peace is restored. This restoration of peace and harmony according to them was always anchored on the principle of give a little and get a little. This idea buttresses the idea of the disputing parties to give concessions. A feast was usually organized to confirm the readiness of the conflicting parties towards reaching points of compromise. Citing Williams (2000), they further posit that conflict resolution method is the use of arbitration. The reconciliation function is practiced by an authority figure that mediates between conflicting parties but is empowered to make binding judgments. The purpose is not to render a judgment in law, but to reconcile the conflicting parties and its norms. The relationship between the authority and the community is cushioned by community representatives who advise authority

Igbo proverbs are context dependent. A proverb can perform different acts with different meaning depending on the context it occurs. Ik-Iloanusi (2014) observes that the meaning of proverbs is contextual which makes it violate compositionality and thereby contributes to their various interpretations. This is in line with what Mey (2001:94) says with regard to speech act. She asserts that “the language we use and in particular the speech acts we utter are

entirely dependent on the context of the situation in which such acts are produced". Following from the above, this study adopts the speech act theory of Austin (1962) and classification of Searle (1969) in order to determine the acts proverbs perform in their use in communication especially in crisis management and reconciliation. Ten proverbs were randomly selected from primary and secondary sources. Some of these proverbs have equivalence when translated in English while some were transliterated. Some pragmatic comments about the acts and the different categories to which they belong were also given. The paper attempts to highlight the necessary role of proverbs in crisis management and reconciliation. It is also a way of documenting and preserving them since they stand the chance of going into extinction due to lack of use by the younger generation.

### **Pragmatics and Igbo Proverbs: An overview**

Pragmatics is concerned with understanding language in context. It studies the aspects of meaning and language use that are dependent on the speaker, the addressee and other features of the context of utterance. In pragmatics, we study how factors such as time, place and social relationship between speaker and hearer affect the ways in which language is used to perform different functions. The pragmatic analysis of proverbs is seen as the investigation into the meaning of aspect that is not derived from the formal properties of works but rather derived from the way in which utterances are used.

Igbo proverbs are context dependent and are often used to describe in very few words, what could have otherwise required thousand words. It is also a euphemistic means of making certain expressions in the Igbo society, thus the Igbos have come to typically rely on this as means for certain expressions. In everyday discourse, Igbo proverbs are not only used to embellish speech, but they perform varied functions. This explains why Achebe (1958) asserts that proverbs is the palm oil with which words are eaten 'ilu bu mmanu ndi Igbo ji eri okwu'

Ik-Iloanusi (2014) points out the fact that the contribution of

pragmatics to the study of language in context is primordial especially to the study of proverbs which linguistic theories do not emphasize. Similarly, Gonsum & Rwang (2010) demonstrate the varied uses of proverbs in Ngas and Beran as useful tools of advice, encouragement, corrections, passing comments on issues among people in the society and especially serving to preserve cultural values and beliefs of the people as well as to provide aesthetic appeal to speech. Obiechina (1975) also correlates this when he defines proverbs as kernels which contain the wisdom of the philosophical moral expositions shrunk to a few words that form a nonionic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day to day life has to be committed to memory.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The speech Act theory developed from Austin's (1962) work: 'how to do things with words' and was further developed and codified by one of his students, Searle (1969) who became one of the major proponents of the theory.

According to Levinson (1983:326) and Saeed (2003:227), Austin proposes that communicating speech acts involves three elements; the speaker says something, the speaker signals an associated speech act, and the speech act causes an effect on her listeners. These three kinds of acts as distinguished by Austin are outlined as follows;

**\*Locutionary Act** – This is simply the activity we engage in when we say something (Mey 2001). It is an utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference, ie the act of saying and producing meaningful sounds and words with certain reference (Osisanuo 2003:58).

**\*Illocutionary Act** – is the making of a statement, offer, promise etc in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase). The term speech acts is often used with this meaning of illocutionary acts, i.e performing an act by uttering a sentence.

**\*Perlocutionary Act** is concerned with what follows an utterance: the effect or 'take up' of an illocutionary act. In other words, it is the

bringing about the effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance.

Austin uses the example, 'shoot her' to explain the differences in the appropriate circumstance this can have. It shows the illocutionary force of ordering, urging or advising the addressee to shoot her and on the other hand, the perlocutionary force of persuading, forcing, frightening the addressee into shooting her. However, with regard to the kind of performative acts and its function according to Levinson (1983:240) & Mey (2001:120-123), Searle (1976:10-16) proposes five basic kinds of actions that one can perform in speaking, by means of the following five types of utterance or speech act categories viz;

\* **Representative (assertives)** – It commits the speaker to the truth of the exercised proposition. The paradigm cases include: asserting, concluding etc). These speech acts are assertions about the state of affairs in the world as Leech (1983:128) calls it assertive. They carry the value true or false.

\* **Directives** – are attempt by the speaker to get the addressee/hearer to do something.  
The paradigm cases include: requesting, questioning, to 'direct him or her towards some goal which is mostly of the speakers'.

\* **Commissives** – commits the speaker to some future course of action. The paradigm cases include; promising, threatening, offering) i.e commissive operate and change in the world by means of creating an obligation; the obligation hinges on the speaker, not the hearer.

\* **Expressives** – express or psychological state, i.e an inner state of the speaker; the expression is usually subjective and tells us nothing about the world. Paradigm cases involves; thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating).

\* **Declarative** – that which affects immediate change in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra linguistic institution. The paradigm cases involves; excommunicating, declaring war, christening, and firing from employment).

It should also be noted that Austin outlines a set of felicity condition in relation to these act. According to him, a performative that works is 'felicitous' and one that does not is infelicitous – That is the truth and falsity of sentences. These set of 'felicity condition'; the condition which makes a speech act an appropriate utterance and as such satisfies the success of an utterance is what he called performatives. Therefore, in every utterance/sentence, a speaker/writer performs an act such as stating a fact, stating an opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or request, asking a question, issuing an order, giving a permission, giving a piece of advice, making somebody or condoling a bereaved person.

For instance, with regard to making a promise Grundy (2008:75) exemplifies that an utterances do not need to contain an explicit performative verb to be performative.

The example (1) & (2) shows this:

1. I promise to pick you at eight.
2. I'll pick you at eight.

e.g. (1) explicitly uses the verb 'promise' to show the performative act, whereas e.g (2) do not contain the verb, but the utterance does mean promising.

This is to say that e.g (1) would be felicitous if the speaker keeps an agreement in a previous occasion, while e.g (2) shows reassurance and commitment; although, it does not have the performative verb 'promise'.

Furthermore, with regard to types of sentence and their forms used in speech act, a speech act can be direct or indirect. The sentence types include; interrogative declarative and imperative sentences and their sets of functions include; assertion, order, request, question etc. When form and function match, the effect is called direct speech act, i.e the conventionally expected function of an utterance; while the act function is called the indirect speech act. This is exemplified by (Saeed 2003: 230-231)

<b>E.g of utterance</b>	<b>Direct act</b>	<b>Indirect act</b>
3. Why don't you finish your drink and leave?	question	request
4. I must ask you to leave my house	statement	order/request

However, Searle (1969) gives some clue with regard to how to understand indirect speech act which involves combining our knowledge of three elements to support a chain of inference. The three elements are:

- The felicity condition of direct speech acts
- The context of the utterance
- The principles of conversational cooperation

The indirect speech act suggests that inference and conversation principles play a role in hearer's recognition of a speech act. This is because most times, we make request or give orders indirectly by means of interrogatives.

The foregoing simply shows that for the success of a speech act, the felicity condition must be met. That is to say, there must be felicity in the context in which they occur and also the speech act must fit into the context, otherwise there is no speech act no matter what is said or written. The following section will discuss the Igbo proverbs with regard to its illocutionary force and the categories in which they fall following Searle's five classifications.



### **Class of Igbo Proverbs for Reconciliation**

In this section, some of the selected proverbs are presented and analyzed using the contexts in which they were used. Some of the selected proverbs include:

1. Okwu di nrò n'eme ka ?n?ma j?r?  
'A soft answer turns away wrath'
2. ?b? ire ?ma kà ejùla jì àga n'ogw?  
'It is with sweet tongue that the snail walks over thorns'
3. Nwaologbō siri nà mmet?ta aru bù ?`t?  
Familiarity is friendship
4. Eleta àghàrà kà di nà nwunyē jì èbi.  
'Forgiveness is a tunic for friendship'
5. Ofo ka ide ji àwa àlà  
'Ultimate triumph comes by justice'
  
6. Egbue n'iwe è nìe mà isì  
If you destroy due to anger, you bury because of the smell.
  
7. Onye ch?ba onye n'ēmē kà ya s?` ya èbiri  
'Tolerance is a necessity for communal living'
8. O bù etinye nzuzù nà àmàmiheò wèrè zùò òkè  
'Foolishness complements wisdom'
9. Hapu ihe niile tara n'abali ka o buru anwu  
'Let us bury the hatchet'
10. Iwe nwanne anaghi eru n'okpukpu  
'A brother's provocation does not cut deep into the heart'

The proverbs are used in the contexts below to show their functions in conflict resolutions and crisis management.

#### **Context 1**

**Nature of Communication:** A meeting for deliberation on the funeral of a 'Nwaada'

**Discourse participants:** The bereaved in-law and eldest

**Audience:** brother of the deceased wife.  
Members of the large polygamous family and few visitors

**Setting:** Nkpor

The bereaved in-law accompanied by members of his family visited the maiden home of his late wife for a meeting in preparation for a ceremony. The bereaved man and other guests were welcomed and in the process of discussion, some members of the deceased wife's family opted out of all that has to do with the burial of their late sister on the note that the deceased had earlier during her lifetime insulted them. The nature of insult is such that she would have asked for forgiveness, but she did not before she died. In the midst of that rowdy gathering, a member of the bereaved man's family intervenes with the proverb (in 10)

*Iwe nwanne anaghi eru n'okpukpu.*

'A brother's provocation does not cut deep into the heart'

This proverb is used here as a sort of advice to the discourse participants to forget whatever that had happened in the interest of peace. Based on Searle's classification, this proverb fits into the directive speech act aimed at getting the addressee to do something and it is also representative.

## **Context 2**

**Nature of communication:** Accusation of infidelity

**Discourse participant:** Husband and wife

**Setting:** Abagana

**Audience:** Extended family members

The husband accused the wife of flirting with different men in the guise of petty trading. The wife denied the allegation leveled against her and in a bid to explain and exonerate herself recalled bitter events that have occurred in the cause of their married life. Various expressions of dissatisfaction emanated from both parties and along the line, the eldest member of the family intervened with the proverb

(in 4)

*Eleta àghàra kà di nà nwunyē jì èbi*

'Forgiveness is a tunic for friendship'

This Igbo proverb is used here as a sort of settlement tunic aimed at calling the attention of the discourse participants to the reality of marriage which is basically centered on forbearance and tolerance. However, murmuring continued from both parties and the wife suddenly told the audience that the man has consistently failed in his duties as a husband and a father. This utterance provoked the husband and he moved to hit the wife but was restrained by his eldest brother using the proverb (in 6) *Nwoke m welu nwayọọ maka na*

*Egbue n'íwe è nìe mà isì*

'If you destroy due to anger, you bury because of the smell' He also cautioned the woman with the following proverb (in 2)

*?b? ire ?ma kà ejùla jì àga n'ogw?*

'It is with sweet tongue that the snail walks over thorns'

The chaotic situation is brought under relative control and the members of the extended families stated the obvious which was, that there are no marriages devoid of quarrel. They further admonished the couple to try as much as it lay within their power to live peaceably because no human being is perfect. They support their point with the Igbo proverb (in 7) which posit that:

*Onye ch?ba onye n'ēmē kà ya s?`ya èbiri*

'Tolerance is a necessity for communal living'

Both discourse participants are encouraged 'to bury the hatchet' which is equivalent to the Igbo proverb (9): *Hapu ihe niile tara n'abali ka o buru anwu*

The proverbs used in this second context are not only representatives but also directives speech acts. It is also observed that some of these proverbs perform the same function of restoring peace in different contexts.

### **Context 3**

**Nature of Communication:** Verbal insult in a conflict situation.  
**Discourse participants:** A mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law  
**Setting:** Ifite, Awka  
**Audience:** Family members

The quarrel started from the daughter in law who claimed that her mother in law was prowling into her matrimonial home. There was effusion of angry words from the two women and profuse name callings from the daughter-in-law.

The audience intervened, admonishing the younger of the two women stressing that she should not have replied the way she did because 'a soft answer turns away wrath' as in the proverb (in 1)

*Okwu di nrò n'eme ka ?n?maj?r?*

The advice embodied in this proverb affected the daughter- in-law in a way that made her to change her tone while addressing the mother-in law thus lowering the tempo of the quarrel. Some members of the audience appealed to the two women using the proverb (in 9):

*Hapunu ihe niile tara n'abali ka o buru anwu*

'Let us bury the hatchet'

This proverb is used in the context above to resolve the quarrel between the discourse participants in order to soothe the anger of the two women involved in the quarrel by advising that they forgive and forget whatever that had happened in the past.

### **Conclusion**

Some Igbo proverbs have been considered in this paper. It is established that Igbo proverbs are tools for reconciliation and conflict management. In the light of the above, the Igbo proverbs

used in this study shows that they have the potential in conflict resolution, but it should also be noted that it is not all Igbo proverbs that can fit into the context of resolving conflicts. However, the Igbo proverbs used in this study basically perform illocutionary acts which fall into Searle's categories of representative (assertive), expressive and directive and; as such they have perlocutionary outcome on the addressees. It should also be noted that the proverbs for peace and reconciliation help to get the parties involved see the truth in the discourse by way of requesting and questioning them thereby getting the parties to be active in achieving peace which is the major goal of the speaker. The speaker having achieved this goal of reconciling the warring parties uses proverbs that fall into expressive speech acts as a way of showing how s/he feels achieving his goal by rendering apologies and note of thanks to the parties for their co-operation in achieving peace. On the other hand, commissives and declaratives are not identified in the proverbs used.

Further studies on Igbo proverbs used in conflict management are also recommended not only to discover more proverbs that are relevant in this regard, but also to serve as a way of documenting and preserving the Igbo cultural heritage.

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