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Negative Positivism in Sixteen Selected Igbo Novels

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Abstract

Negative Positivism involves the use of a negative expression to express a strongly positive state, action or attribute. It is a class of idiom that is usually negative, but expresses a positive meaning. It is a phenomenon that has been established for the Igbo language by Romanus Egudu. The purpose of the study is to examine the realisation of this phenomenon in sixteen Igbo literary works using a descriptive approach. The extracts of negative positivism that were analysed reveal three additional categorizations that were not found in Egudu (1975) and Emenanjo (2015). The study also shows that the meaning of negative positivism is realized basically by means of figurative usages. On the basis of the examined data, therefore, the study confirms that this phenomenon seems to be a peculiar Pan-Igbo attribute which is used by the language speakers, and especially literary artists for aesthetic function.

Key Words: Negative positivism, stylistics, idiom, figurative usage

Introduction

Emenanjo (2015) confirms Egudu (1975) as the first to identify the phenomenon of negative-positivism as a literary feature of Igbo literary aesthetics. However, since this phenomenon was brought to limelight by Egudu and confirmed by Emenanjo (2015), there is no further study in this regard which is why this study is geared towards ascertaining whether there are other categorizations that are not identified in previous studies. In addition, worthy of mention

is the fact that Emenanjo (2015:614) notes that negative positivism is one of the phraseological units in Igbo, an interesting phenomenon, and one of the sundry issues in Igbo semantics that needs to be explored.

According to Egudu (1975), negative positivism involves the use of a negative expression to express a strongly positive state, action, or attribute. In fact, 'positive negativity' was designated by Egudu (1975, p. 174) as an:

aspect of Igbo idiomatic expressions that seem to possess (sic) some extra aesthetic potentiality which makes it more imaginatively appealing than what may be called straightforward idiomatic usages in Igbo.

However, Emenanjo (2015) rather uses the term 'Negative Positivism' to designate the use of an expression which is patently negative to express a strongly positive state, action, or attribute. This study, therefore, goes with Emenanjo's use of the term 'Negative Positivism' and his explanation because his term clearly represents what the concept stands for.

The above explanations simply show that negative positivism is a class of idiom that is usually negative, but express positive meaning. Sixteen selected Igbo novels used for the study are as follows:

- **Chidozie F. Ogbalu (1972, 2008, & 2008 2nd ed.):** *Dimkpa taa aku, Ebubedike*, and *Uwaezuoke*
- **J. U. T. Nzeako (2005, 1973, & 1980):** *Chi Ewere Ehihie Jie, Nkoli*, and *Emecheta*
- **C. E. Ofoimata (1997, 2000 & 2009):** *Achowa Isi Ochu*, *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị*, and *Ofunna*
- **Ray C. Anene (2012, 2007, & 1998):** *Oja Dufuo Dike*, *Ogbenye Nwee Ndidi*, and *Mkpuru Onye Kuru*
- **Tony Ubesie (1977, 1975, 1974 & 1973):** *Juọ Obinna*, *Ukpana Okpoko Buuru*, *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe*, and *Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa*

The Igbo novels were examined by identifying the use of negative positivism by each author. The extracts of negative positivism were glossed and tone marked using Igwe and Green's (1963) tone marking convention which leaves high tone unmarked, but marks low and down step tones. The rest of the sections are structured as follows: Section Two discusses the features of negative positivism and its categorization as an aspect of idiom, while Section Three forms the data presentation and analysis, the last section summarises and concludes.

Features of Negative Positivism

One of the features of negative positivism is that it operates on the basis of contrast/oppositional relationship with respect to the words that make them up and the literal meanings of those words. Egudu attempts a categorization of these negative expressions

which are also captured in Emenanjo (2015:619). Some of the instances from Egudu (1975:175-180), with their adopted translations are presented below:

I. What is apparently bad as naturally good:

- (1). a. Àda màrà ajō mmā
 Ada is badly beautiful (lit.)
 Ada is extremely beautiful (fig.)
- b. Òbi dèlù ajō akwùkwọ
 Obi wrote a bad paper (lit.)
 Obi passed the examination very brilliantly (fig.)

II. Excellent performance or achievement as destructive actions:

- (2). Àda dējiri mkpisi akwùkwọ
 Ada broke her pen writing (lit.)
 Ada wrote extremely well (fig.)

III. A virtue or an achievement seen in terms of physical or moral defect:

- (3). Àda bù oke ozū
 Ada is a mighty corpse (lit.)
 Ada is a very important/eminent person (fig.)

IV. A happy situation seen in terms of a sad incident:

- (4). Akwùkwọ riri Àda isī
 Book eat-rVpst Ada's head (lit.)
 Ada loves (reading) books very much. (fig.)

V. Excellence in terms of a wicked or evil spirit or animal:

- (5). Àda bù ajō nnùnù
 Ada is a bad bird (lit.)
 Ada is very experienced and wise (fig.)

Observe from examples (1), (2), (3) and (4) that a negative epithet is always introduced partly for the purpose of intensifying or emphasizing the quality or virtue being praised. The juxtaposition of the negative and positive words shows the contrast/oppositional relationship. Also, some of the negative-positive expressions can have different meanings depending on the contexts. For instance, in (4), in terms of academics, the meaning could be, 'Ada is exceedingly intelligent' or 'somebody that loves reading very much'.

Egudu (1975, pp. 182-184) also points out the various dimensions and features of Igbo Negative Positive expression such as:

- They are richer in terms of aesthetic functionality which marks them out as an aspect of idiom of a special class.
- It operates on the same basis as the figurative usage, especially in respect to metaphor, personification and oxymoron. The connection between figurative usage and negative-positivism is that they operate on the principle of indirection.
- Negative positivism has some elements of witticism which are naturally humorous and are handed down from generation to generation.
- It has the nature of irony especially where sarcasm or cursing is intended. Also, it differs in a way from irony especially where eulogy is involved or expressing satisfaction with a person or a situation. Hence, irony and negative positive expression, in intention or purpose, work in opposite directions, yet resemble in some levels of meaning which contradict each other.

Following the above explanations of negative positivism, one could see that it has a peculiar feature of using a negative quality, state or action to describe a positive one. This feature distinguishes it as an aspect idiom. In what follows, we will not attempt to give a full overview of studies of idioms in Igbo, but rather to bring out the aspect of idioms that expresses negative attribute with a positive one as used in the novels that constitute our data. It should also be noted that this aspect of idioms have not been adequately explored.

Negative Positivism as an Aspect of Idiom

Researchers have studied idioms from various perspectives. Some of these studies involve body-based idioms in different languages. For instance, Al-Amouudi (2013) studies Arabic hand idioms. In Igbo, works such as Nwoye (1992), Okodo (2012), Asonye & Emma-Asonye (2013) and Okoye & Mmadike (2016) have also looked at idioms from various angles in Igbo. Only recent studies are presented below.

Asonye & Emma-Asonye's (2013) study examined idioms in order to show how it expresses and projects the worldview of the speakers. Using a grammatical cum pragmatic approach, the authors study the Igbo idioms and their expression of thought. They argue that pragmatically, idioms are used euphemistically and by means of collocation whether the words are related or not. They posit that idioms are classifiable in form and functions. Three functions were identified by them viz: lexical and lexical phrases, sentential, and word repetition. According to them, it is lexical when the meaning of the entire expression is expressed by one lexical item in the sentence as illustrated with the example in (6):

- (6). Ebelebe ègbuola
 Ebelebe has killed
 'Wonders have happened' (culled from Asonye & Emma-Asonye, 2013:393)

They further explain that although the word 'ebelebe' does not feature in everyday speech, it is used idiomatically to express a wonder either negatively or positively.

On the other hand, lexical idioms, unlike in English, do not seem to indicate formal or informal situations; instead, they are used as attributive expressions. This is shown in e.g. (7a & b)

(7). a. ogbènyè ọ̀nụ ntū
poor mouth ash

‘a very poor person’

b. anyanwū ùtùtù
sun morning

‘a very beautiful person’

(Asonye & Emma-Asonye, 2013, pp. 394)

Example (7b) is a case of an idiom that metaphorically describes the beauty of a person. This is obviously different from the idioms that use what is apparently negative to describe something or somebody that is seen as naturally good. With regard to sentential Igbo idioms, they are the class of idioms that are usually expressed in a sentence as illustrated in Asonye & Emma-Asonye’s (2013:396). For instance:

(8). iwū mmirī na ñkume
‘to pour water on stone (lit.)

‘to be engaged in a wasted venture’ (fig.)

This idiom is used to express disappointment when a person’s instruction or advice is not taken. With regard to the use of idioms by means of euphemism and collocation, the authors use the following idioms to exemplify them:

(9) a. imē aka àbùọ/ aka ntùtù
to do hand two/to do hand picking
‘to have the attitude of stealing’

b. isā anya mmirī
To wash eye water
‘to be careful’

(Asonye & Emma-Asonye, 2013, pp. 397-8)

The authors explain that while (9a) is used euphemistically, (9b) shows the collocative relationship of *anya* ‘eye’ and *mmirī* ‘water’.

Following from Asonye & Emma-Asonye’s (2013) study, it can be observed that most of the idioms provided in the study do not express negative features in a positive way, as such, the study is also silent in noting this aspect of idioms. There are also few sentential examples that are used to express a positive quality in a negative way. Such as *igbā isi akwarà* ‘to be determined/stubborn’ and *nkuzi ñkè taà kpù ọkụ n’ọ̀nū* ‘today’s teaching was powerful’. However, the study shows the different productive ways of using idioms by making reference to different fields such as *ọ̀nwụ* ‘death’, *àhụ mmadụ* ‘body parts’, *ìmmụ̀ọ̀* ‘spirit’, *mmirī* ‘water’, *ọkụ* ‘fire’ e.t.c. and how they enable the speakers of the language to use the idioms in various ways to express their thoughts and worldview.

Okoye and Mmadike (2016) adopt the cognitive approach in their study of body parts idioms in Igbo. Their study reveals that there are some cognitive mechanisms that aid the interpretation of idioms in Igbo such as metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge. The study also notes that conventional knowledge is a vital mechanism in the meaning interpretation of the Igbo body parts idioms especially where both metaphor and metonymy cannot account for such meaning. The example below illustrates where part of the body is involved:

- (10). Isi inū ȳkū
 Head on fire
 'to be brilliant'

Okoye & Mmadike (2016, p. 28)

Following the few studies on idioms examined in the literature, it is observed that some idioms stand out with regard to their meaning interpretation. Such idioms are usually negative, but express positive meaning, whether parts of the body constitute it or not. This class of idiom is what has been referred to as negative positivism.

Observe that the idiom in (10) describes someone who is very intelligent but which literally has a negative meaning, since *ȳkū* 'fire' in Igbo idioms according to Asonye & Emma-Asonye's (2013:401) depicts *difficulty, trouble, suffering, and power* e.t.c. In spite of the copious examples provided by the authors, it is observed that this is the only idiom that falls within the special class of idioms that is referred to as negative positivism. This shows that this class of idioms is actually few in number. In the subsequent section, a presentation and analysis of the instances of negative positivism in the selected novels are discussed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the instances of negative positivism in the sixteen selected novels used for this study.

1. Instances of Negative Positivism

Extracts of this aspect of idiom that can be confirmed in some of the novels used are presented in this section. The negative positive expressions discussed below are based on the categorizations in Emenanjo (2015:619):

Describing as apparently bad what is naturally good:

- (11) a. ȳ dà-rà dimkpa dī egwù
 PRO fall-rV₂ strong be fearful
 He is a strong man that is very fearful (lit.)

'He is a very powerful and courageous man' (fig.)

(*Mmiri ȳkū eji egbu mbe*, p.6)

- b. Mma yā nà-ègbuȳmù òkorobà ègbu

beauty her AUX-kill young men BNC-kill

Her beauty is killing young men (lit.)

‘She is extremely beautiful’ (fig.) (Oja *dufu*o dike, p.73)

c. O mà-rà mma, mabì-rì ọ̀nū
 3Ps be-rV₁ beauty, cut/slide off-rV₁mouth

She has a beauty that cuts off the mouth (lit.)

‘She is extremely beautiful’ (fig.). (Ebubedike, p.54)

d. Mma yā nà-èyikwa ndị nkuzi nā-ākūzī
 Beauty her AUX-scare PL teachers AUX-teach
 n'ụlọ akwụkwọ ahụ egwù
 PREP-house book DEM fear

Her beauty scares teachers that teach in the school (lit.)

‘She is extremely beautiful’ (fig.)

(Onye chi ya akwatughị, p.12)

e. Kamgbè o jiri me ajō agadī,
 since PRO hold-rV₂ do bad old,
 ọ̀ dighị ẹnwe ikē apụta ēzī
 PRO be-NEG own strengthgo out outside

Since she is badly old, she does not have strength to come out (lit.)

‘She is extremely old’ (fig.)

(Ebubedike, p.36)

In (11d & e), *mma* ‘beauty’ and *egwù* ‘fear’ & *ajō* and *agadī* are in oppositional relationship whereas (11b) & (11c), describe as bad what is naturally good. Observe also in (11b, c, & d) where an ugly situation is portrayed in the different descriptions showing the natural beauty of a woman being extolled.

Describing excellent performance or achievement in terms of destructive actions:

(12) a. Kasie rụgidèrè ọ̀rụ yā, urù
 Kasie work-until-rV₂ work PRO benefit
 màlite dàgbuwe yā...

started fall-kill-INCHOPRO

Kasie worked until benefits started falling and killing him (lit.)

‘Kasie started reaping a bountiful harvest as a result of his hard work’ (fig.)

(*Oja dufuo dike*, p. 71)

b. O riri amōōsū n’orū ugboàlà
 PRO eat-rV₂ witchcraft PREP-repair vehicle-land He ate
 witchcraft in vehicle repairs (lit.)

‘He is an expert in vehicle repairs’ (fig.)

(*Oja dufuo dike*, p.71)

c. ...Onye ̄ būlà chòrò ihū nwa òkòròbīa
 who PRO be like-rV₂ INF-see child youngman a
 gbājīrī anyanwū
 INDEF-coloured-rV₂ sun

...Everyone wants to see the young man that darkened the sun (lit.)

...‘Everyone want to see the young man who has an excellent record in dancing’ (fig.)

(*Ebubedike*, p.52)

Observe that in (12a) Kasie’s hard work which paid him off bountifully is described as a negative action. Also, benefit and killing show some oppositional relationship which is a characteristic of this class of idiom.

Describing a virtue or an achievement seen in terms of physical or moral defect:

(13).a. Ọ mūōlā umù isii mà sòro
 PRO give birth-PERFchildren six CONJ follow-rV₂
 umùàgboghō riwara anya na-èti ùkù ebe umùòkorobìà nò
 young girls eat-break-rV₂ eye AUX-flap wing place youngmen stay

She has 6 children, but associates with women of loose virtue in the pursuit of men (lit)

‘She has a good body physique and can compete with young girls who have lost the sense of shame’ (fig.)

(*Oja dufuo dike*, p.42)

c. ùdì ndì mmadū nā-āchōtā nwanyì à
 sort Pl persons AUX-INDEF-find woman DEM
 bù ndì oke ozū, oke ozu

be PL big corpse big corpse

The sort and class of persons that visit this woman are mighty mighty corpses.

‘The type of men who come for this woman are the very prominent or rich men’

(*Onye chi ya akwatughi*, p.37, 124)

A happy situation seen in terms of a sad incident:

- (14) a. M̀gbè ọ nà-echè ihe à kà ụra
 when PRO AUX-think thing DEM COMPL sleep
 b̀àrà zuru yā n'ohī
 come-rV₂ steal-rV₂ PRO PREP-thief

When she was thinking about it, sleep came and stole her away (lit.)

‘She slept off while thinking about it’ (fig.)

(*Onye chi ya akwatughi*, p.17)

- b. Mma Uju mà-rà gbà-kà-rà yà isi
 Beauty Uju be-rV₁ scatter-surpass-rV₂ PRO head

Uju’s beauty tore/scatter his head (lit)

‘Uju’s beauty excited him’ (fig.)

(*Onye chi ya akwatughi*, p.18)

- c. Ụbòchì Ụwaezuoke zùrù ahịa ọ̀zọ, kà otùnwa
 day Ụwaezuoke appearance-rV₂ market title, COMPL one child
 āgbōghoō jī mma kpa amū gbàrà egwu
 young girl hold beauty take laugh dance-rV₂ dance
 mebi-rì Ụwaezuoke isi
 spoil-rV₂ Ụwaezuoke head

The day Ụwaezuoke made his public appearance, was the day one very beautiful and cheerful young girl danced and spoilt Ụwaezuoke’s head (lit.)

‘The day Ụwaezuoke made his public appearance at the market after his ọ̀zọ title taking was the day a very pretty girl danced in such a way that excited him’ (fig.)

(*Uwaezuoke*, p.99)

Following from the novel, the character, Obiamaka in (14a) is lamenting about her life, especially the death of her husband and who to run to for succor. While she was still thinking, she slept off. *Ura* ‘sleep’ and *ohī* ‘steal’ are in oppositional relationship in terms of good and bad. But it is metaphorically used here to mean ‘fall asleep’. Although, to sleep is a good thing, it is portrayed in this context as a negative situation. Of course, anyone who knows the state of mind of Obiamaka would be glad she rather sleeps than stay awake. In (14b), the character, Osita, fell in love with Uju when he met her and could not wait to propose to her, but this is described as a sad incident in which Osita went berserk just by seeing Uju. This is also similar to (14c). Thus, Uwaezuoke got attracted to a cheerful young lady because of her dancing skills which made him/turned him as a mad person. The negative expressions *isi igbākā* and *imēbiare* used to express positivity.

A good looking person seen in terms of ugly:

- (15). a. Ogē obulà I huru ya, ò na-àgba kà oku
 Time any PRO see-rV₁ PRO PRO AUX-shoot COMPL fire
 Whenever you see her, she is sparkling/shooting like fire (lit.)
 “She is very attractive” (fig.)

(*Onye chi ya akwatughị*, p.29)

- b. nwanyị ahụ jì akwà mmee m̄m̄ē wèrè tie
 woman DEM hold cloth red red take-rV₂ beat
 ònwe yā mmonwu.
 self PRO masquerade

(*iti mmanwu* - ‘dress up/launch a masquerade’)

Woman that use cloth red to beat herself masquerade (lit)

The woman is dressed up like a masquerade

“The woman looks very attractive in her red attire” (fig.)

(*Onye chi ya akwatughị*, p.45)

Describing or Showing admiration of a person in terms of a destructive or an ugly situation:

- (16). Anya Ebubedike pjà-rà ya, gòsiri
 eye Ebubedike flog-rV₂ PRO show-rV₂
 ihùnanya o nwèrè ebe Ngozi nọ

love PRO own-rV₁ place Ngozi stay
 Ebubedike flogged her with his eyes to show his love for Ngozi (lit)
 ‘The kind of eyes Ebubedike cast on Ngozi shows how he admires her’ (fig.)
 (Ebubedike, p.40)

A piece of advice/warning is seen in terms of destructive action:

(17). Nne yā òkwàrà ya odu n’ulò
 Mother PRO advise-rV₁ PRO advise PREP-house
 tupu ò pùba, tabie yā nti
 CONJ PRO go-enter bite off PRO ear
 The mother advised him at home before leaving, she bit off his ear (lit.)
 ‘The mother emphatically advised him before leaving the house’ (fig.)
 (Ebubedike, p.40 & Nkọli, p.4)

It can be observed from the above examples as found in the novels that, there is a preponderance of proverbs than idioms in the literary works. Thus, there are few or no negative positive expressions found in some of the novels. For instance, *Dimkpa* by Ogbalu (1972), *Emecheta* (1980), *Chi Ewere Ehihie Jie* by Nzeako (2005) and *Ogbenye Nwee Ndidi* (2012), have no instances of negative positivism. Uwaezuoke (2008) has only one instance. This simply shows that negative positivism is a special class of idioms that is usually less frequent, than the proverbs that characterise most of the Igbo novels used for this study. This study, therefore, reveals that e.g.s (15), (16) & (17) do not fall under any of the groups provided by Egudu (1975) and Emenanjo (2015). Also, following from the glossing, the above presentations demonstrate that the meaning of Negative Positivism is realized basically by means of figurative usages.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has focused on negative positivism in sixteen selected literary novels using a descriptive approach. The findings of the study reveal that negative positivism is a special class of idiom that expresses a negative expression in a positive way, but it is usually few in number.

In addition, the study identifies other categorizations of negative positivism that are not found in Egudu (1975) and Emenanjo (2015) such as describing a good person in terms of a ugly person, describing/ showing of a person in terms of a destructive or an ugly situation, and a piece of advice/warning is described in terms of a destructive action.

Finally, the study concludes that the phenomenon of negative positivism adds aesthetics to spoken and written language of Igbo native speakers and literary artists, and since they are

few in number, it implies that the second language learner will need to learn to identify them and be able to differentiate them from other idioms whose meanings are all understood in contexts.

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