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## Body Part Metaphor in Igbo: The Case of “The Ear”

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the metaphorical uses of ‘ntị’ (ear) in the Igbo language. The analysis, guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory aims at exploring how the ear extends beyond its literal sense to conceptualize knowledge, obedience, secrecy, and social interaction. The data were gotten from "Omenukọ" by Pita Nwanna and Oba (collections) of Igbo proverbs" by Patrik Ik. Umezi. Findings reveal that ‘ntị’ functions as a cultural and cognitive tool, shapes communication and reflects Igbo worldview. This study underscores the significance of body-part metaphors in meaning construction and enriches scholarship in cognitive and African linguistics.*

**Keywords:** Igbo language, ear metaphor, body-part metaphor, conceptual metaphor

### **1. Introduction**

Metaphor is not merely a decorative flourish in language; it is a fundamental cognitive process that shapes how we think and understand the world (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). It involves conceptualizing one domain of experience (the target domain), often abstract, in terms of another, more concrete, or familiar domain (the source domain). This process allows us to grasp abstract concepts, emotions, and complex ideas by grounding them

in tangible, often sensory, experiences. A common example is the ubiquitous expression "time is money," where the abstract concept of "time" (target domain) is understood through the lens of "money" (source domain), a tangible resource that can be spent, saved, or wasted. This metaphor reveals how we conceptualize time as a valuable commodity, influencing our behaviors and priorities. It is through metaphor that our language and thoughts are permeated while revealing the intricate workings of our minds. Conceptual Metaphor Theory according to Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argues that these metaphorical mappings are not arbitrary but are rooted in our embodied experiences and form the basis of our conceptual system.

The human body has been understood as our primary instrument for interacting with the world, which serves as a rich source of metaphorical expressions across languages. It is our bodily experiences and our interactions with the environment we find ourselves in that provide avenues for us to comprehend abstract concepts. Body parts, in particular, are frequently employed as source domains due to their inherent salience and the diverse range of functions and associations they carry. For instance, the "head," physically located at the top of the body, is often used metaphorically to represent intellect, leadership, or control, as in phrases like "head of the class" or "head of state." Similarly, the "heart," associated with emotions and feelings, often serves as a source domain for metaphors related to love, passion, or sadness, as in "broken-hearted" or "heartfelt gratitude." (cf. Sweetser 1990). This supports previous position that the widespread use of body part metaphors underscores the intimate connection between our physical selves and our conceptual understanding of the world.

These metaphorical patterns are common, and their specific manifestations and cultural connotations vary significantly across different languages and societies, reflecting diverse worldviews and cultural values (Evans & Green 2006 :145-150).

This study focuses on the Igbo language, a major language of southeastern Nigeria belonging to the Niger-Congo language family. With millions of speakers, Igbo plays a vital role in the cultural and social life of the Igbo people. Igbo boasts a rich oral tradition, encompassing a wide range of verbal art forms such as proverbs, folktales, songs, and ritualistic chants. Figurative language, including metaphor, is deeply embedded within this oral tradition, enriching communication and reflecting the cultural values and beliefs of the Igbo people. The use of metaphor in Igbo is not merely a stylistic device but a powerful tool for conveying complex ideas, expressing emotions, and shaping social interactions. The language is known for its expressiveness and its nuanced use of figurative language, making it a particularly fertile ground for the study of metaphor.

This research delves into the metaphorical landscape of the Igbo language, specifically focusing on the body part ‘ntị’ (ear). The ear, as an organ of hearing, plays a crucial role in our perception of the world and our ability to communicate. Beyond its physiological function, the ear often carries symbolic weight, representing concepts such as obedience, attention, understanding, and receptivity. In Igbo culture, the ear holds particular cultural significance, reflected in its diverse metaphorical uses. For example, the Igbo expression “Ada nwerentịke” (Ada has strong ears) does not refer to literal physical strength but rather metaphorically suggests that Ada is unattentive, disobedient, and unreceptive. The 'strength' of the ear is transferred to the act of

listening, highlighting the importance of attentiveness and perhaps obedience within the Igbo cultural context. Exploring the various metaphorical meanings associated with 'ntị' in Igbo promises to shed light on the cultural values, beliefs, and cognitive processes of the Igbo people.

This study aims to uncover the rich tapestry of metaphorical expressions related to the ear in Igbo, examining their cultural context and their contribution to our understanding of Igbo language and thought. This exploration will provide valuable insights into how the Igbo people conceptualize the world through the lens of their embodied experiences, specifically focusing on the symbolic and metaphorical significance of the ear. This understanding will contribute to the broader field of metaphor studies and enhance our appreciation of the richness and diversity of human language and culture.

This study focuses specifically on the metaphorical uses of the "ear" (ntị) in the Igbo language. It explores the various ways the concept of the ear, its functions (hearing, listening), and its cultural associations are employed to create metaphorical expressions. The analysis will primarily examine proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and other forms of spoken Igbo where the "ear" metaphor is prominent. The study will delve into the semantic domains covered by these metaphors, exploring the range of meanings they convey, such as obedience, understanding, receptiveness, and attentiveness. The analysis will be conducted using [e.g., Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Cognitive Linguistics]

## **2. Literature Review**

This section provides a brief description of the relevant concepts in the paper as well provide relevant and related already existing works.

### **2.1 Conceptual framework**

#### **Cognitive Linguistics**

Cognitive linguistics (CL) is the broad research program that treats language as an integral part of human cognition. Cognitive Linguistics shows how grammatical patterns grow out of general cognitive abilities (e.g., perception, categorization, attention), and CG supplies a detailed architecture for describing those patterns. Together they offer a usage-based, meaning-centered alternative to formal generative approaches. It is described by Hartmann & Winters (2021) as a framework in which “linguistic cognition is viewed as indistinguishable from general cognition.” This explains language through broad cognitive operations like metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual blending. Cognitive linguistics simply positions grammar and lexicon not as separate modules, but as points along a unified continuum emerging from usage patterns. This shift emphasizes language as an ecological, integrative phenomenon shaped by everyday cognitive processes.

Dabrowska & Divjak (2015) while reviewing the handbook of cognitive linguistics, outlined three foundational principles of this approach: (1) language is non-modular, embedded within perception, memory, and attention; (2) grammar is fundamentally about conceptualizing our mental constructions of experience; and (3) linguistic knowledge emerges from use, not from innate universal syntax. This usage-based perspective sees linguistic competence as shaped by frequency, context, and social interaction, rather than fixed rules. In his 2017 chapter in The

Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics, Langacker describes CG as a “comprehensive and unified theory of linguistic structure,” where linguistic units morphemes, words, constructions are all symbolic pairings embedded within schematic networks.

### **Metaphor**

Fauconnier and Turner’s Conceptual Blending Theory (2002), presents metaphor as a dynamic integration of multiple mental spaces. In this framework, metaphor results when elements from different domains, each structured within their own mental space are selectively projected into a new, blended space. This emergent structure often yields new meaning that exceeds the sum of its inputs. Blending theory thus captures metaphor’s generative capacity: it not only maps between domains but also creates novel conceptual combinations.

From a cognitive architecture and neuroscience perspective, recent works characterize metaphor as a fundamental mental operation with distinct neural substrates. Evans & Green (2024), describe conceptual blending as a general and basic cognitive operation which is central to the way we think. According to this view, metaphorical thinking engages embodied schemas and neural mapping processes, potentially supported by brain networks responsible for integration and mental simulation.

Sweetser (1990) provides foundational insight into how sensory perception, especially hearing, informs metaphorical reasoning. She illustrates how physical hearing maps onto domains of understanding, belief, and obedience. Hearing becomes more than a biological act, it is reinterpreted as a metaphor for epistemic and social responsiveness. This dynamic appears not only in English metaphors such as “turn a deaf ear,” but also in Igbo expressions

like *i kpochinti* (“to block one’s ear”), signifying deliberate ignorance or moral defiance.

## **2.2 Empirical Studies**

The metaphorical use of body parts in Igbo, particularly the ear ‘nti’, has attracted significant scholarly attention, with researchers exploring its role in expressing social, moral, and cognitive concepts. These studies, though varying in methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks, all emphasize the symbolic power of body parts in Igbo culture. This section reviews key empirical studies on body-part metaphors in Igbo, with a particular focus on ‘nti’, highlighting the goals, methodologies, aims, findings, and contributions of each.

Okoye and Mmadike (2016) offers a foundational cognitive-linguistic analysis of Igbo body-part idioms including those referencing ‘nti’ (ear). Deploying a collection of idioms from textbooks and idiom compendiums, they investigate how figurative meanings emerge via conventional knowledge, metaphor, and metonymy. Their analysis reveals that many idioms are interpretable through familiar cultural schemas even when not transparently metaphorical, while others derive clear conceptual mappings between bodily and abstract domains. Though comprehensive in approach, their study does not isolate ‘nti’ idioms for special focus, nor does it provide quantitative data or typology specific to ear-based metaphor.

Ejinwa & Nweya (2024), examine how the eye (*anya*) body part in Igbo is variously conceptualized and used metaphorically to express abstract concepts. Existing works on body-part metaphors in Igbo were based on traditionalist perspectives, treating metaphor

as rhetorical or figurative, with little attention to conceptual metaphor as a structured cognitive tool for understanding abstract ideas through concrete domains. Drawing on data from oral interviews and observations with 20 native Igbo speakers, they employed semantic analysis and found that *anya* functions as a source domain for mapping abstract notions such as intelligence, love, hope, time/distance, greed, and others. The findings also underscore that metaphor is a potent cognitive mechanism for conveying the Igbo worldview including cultural values, belief systems, and moral principles. They conclude that Igbo is rich in everyday metaphors, which facilitate comprehension and expression of the native speakers' worldview.

Okeogu's (2024) work presents a broader typology of body-part metaphor in Igbo, categorizing various parts symbolically across domains of duty, cognition, and moral character, and referencing the ear among other body parts. The study contextualizes metaphorical use within cultural values, offering insight into how *ntị* functions metaphorically in general semantics. However, Okeogu does not deploy cognitive-linguistic frameworks like Conceptual Metaphor Theory, nor does she conduct focused analysis or offer usage frequency of '*ntị*' idioms, limiting insight into how ear metaphors operate cognitively across different discourse genres.

### **2.3 Theoretical Framework**

The principal theoretical framework for this study is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). CMT posits that metaphor is not just a linguistic expression but a fundamental aspect of human thought. In this theory, people understand abstract concepts (the target domain) by

mapping them onto more concrete, familiar experiences (the source domain). The theory suggests that these mappings are shaped by embodied experiences, where our physical interactions with the world influence how we think and conceptualize abstract ideas.

Treating ear metaphors in Igbo with conceptual metaphor theory reveals a complex system: concrete bodily experience (hearing) maps to abstract domains (attention, wisdom), shaped by image schemas and supported by metonymic-mapping layering. These metaphors are systematically tied to Igbo cultural ideals, but they also reflect a broader human cognitive architecture where embodied experience scaffolds abstract thought. This demonstrates how CMT serves as a robust theoretical framework explaining not just the existence of such metaphors but the coherence, function, and cultural resonance behind them.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research method. The research is descriptive in nature, aiming to identify, classify, and interpret metaphorical expressions involving ‘ntị’ using Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The data for this study were drawn from published Igbo novel such as "Omenuko" by Pita Nwanna, (1st ed) (1963) and “ọba” (collections) of Igbo proverbs" by Patrik Ik. Umezi.

The analysis followed the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

#### **4. Data Presentation and Analysis**

This section presents the qualitative data collected primarily from idioms, proverbs, and metaphorical expressions involving *ntị* ("ear") in Igbo and analyzes their usage in terms of their metaphorical functions.

##### **4.1 Collected Ear-Related Metaphors:**

1. *Ńtì í nọn'àlà*

Ear PRO stay PREP'ground

Ear staying on the ground

'To keep one's ears on the ground'

In this expression, the ear is metaphorically placed on the ground to symbolize vigilance and attentiveness. The physical domain of the ear touching the ground is mapped onto the abstract domain of alertness and receptivity. The image schema of CONTACT is evoked, where physical closeness to the ground equals heightened sensitivity to vibrations or sounds. Culturally, this reflects the Igbo view that wisdom requires careful listening to the environment.

2. *Tọọ n̄tì n'àlà, n̄rụ ịzù*

Spread ear PREP'ground, hear discussion

'Lay Your ear on the ground, and hear the discussion'

Here, the act of laying the ear on the ground metaphorically represents deliberate attentiveness to communal discourse, that is, to pay attention. The source domain is physical positioning of the ear close to the ground, while the target domain is mental alertness and access to hidden information. The schema of PROXIMITY operates here, where closeness to the ground enables perception. Metonymically, "ear" stands for the whole person's ability to comprehend.

**3. Ntì bù ndù**

Ear is life

Ear is life

This metaphor directly equates the ear with life, grounding human survival in the ability to hear. The conceptual metaphor is HEARING IS LIVING. Without ears (and thus without attentiveness or responsiveness), existence is diminished. The ONTOLOGICAL metaphor treats “ear” as a vital organ whose absence equals death. This reflects the Igbo cultural belief that listening is central to wisdom, relationships, and survival.

**4. Ókwú na-ènyé àmàmíhé mà ntì na-ènyé àkólúchè**

Speech PREP'give knowledge COMP ear PREP' give wisdom

Speech gives knowledge while the ear gives wisdom

This expression distinguishes between knowledge (which comes from external words) and wisdom (which comes from attentive listening). The ear here is metaphorically elevated as a source of deeper understanding beyond mere knowledge. The mapping is: EAR → WISDOM, WORD → KNOWLEDGE. The CONTAINER schema is invoked: the ear receives and processes, but transforms input into wisdom. Metonymically, the ear stands for the attentive, wise listener.

**5. Ntì ná-anāghī ànú ihē, mgbè ágà-egbúrú ísí è gbúrú ntì**

Ear that NEG hear thing, when PRO will cut head PRO cut ear

Ear that doesn't hear, when the head is cut off the ear will be cut off too

The proverb means that a person who refuses to listen to advice will face the consequences of their stubbornness. The ear

symbolizes listening, while the head represents life. It warns that ignoring wise counsel leads to destruction.

#### **6. *Ńtì ná-anú íhē àhaghì kà òkpú átā***

Ear will hear thing NEG like cap elephant grass  
'The ear that listens is not as big as farming hat'

In this expression, there is a shift from the physical size of the ear to the vast capacity of hearing. Although the ear is physically small compared to a farmer's hat, its ability to capture knowledge, wisdom, and information is boundless. The metaphor maps SMALL PHYSICAL OBJECT → GREAT CAPACITY FOR PERCEPTION. The image schema here is CONTAINER, where the ear functions as a vessel that can hold immeasurable words, warnings, and wisdom. Metonymically, the ear stands for hearing, and by extension, for learning. Culturally, the Igbo worldview emphasizes that wisdom is not measured by outward appearance or size, but by inner receptivity to words and instructions.

#### **7. *Sí kèlé ónyé ñtì chiri, éñū ánūghī, àlà ànú***

Let us greet person ear deaf, up hear NEG, ground hear  
'Greet a deaf person, if heaven won't hear, the earth will hear'

This expression metaphorically contrasts the deaf ear with cosmic witnesses — heaven and earth. The act of greeting someone who cannot hear does not vanish but is acknowledged by the universe. The mapping is HEARING → RECOGNITION/ACKNOWLEDGMENT. The deaf ear symbolizes human limitations, while earth represents wider societal consciousness. The image schema is BALANCE/UP-DOWN, where heaven and earth serve as higher and lower planes of judgment. Metonymy occurs where the "ear" stands for responsiveness. Culturally, this illustrates the Igbo belief that no

action is lost — even when ignored by humans, it is preserved in communal or cosmic memory.

**8. Ọ búrú nà ụ̀nụ̀ nwéré̀ n̄tì inū̀ íhẹ̀, n̄̀r̄́n̄̀n̄̀ ókwú́ á**  
PRO if that PRO have ear to-hear thing, hear people word this  
‘If you have ear to hear, hear these words’

This statement metaphorically links the physical ear with the capacity for comprehension and obedience. To “have ears” here means more than possessing the organ; it implies willingness and readiness to internalize meaning. The mapping is PHYSICAL HEARING → UNDERSTANDING/OBEDIENCE. The image schema is ENABLEMENT, since the ear enables reception of wisdom. Metonymy is present in using the ear to represent the whole process of attentive listening. Culturally, the expression underscores the Igbo value of openness to moral instruction, where hearing is equated with transformation and acceptance of truth.

**9. Ọ̀kúkò n̄tì íkḕ nà-anú́ íhẹ̀ n'ìtè́ ófē**

Fowl ear strong aux-hears thing PREP pot soup  
‘A deaf/stubborn fowl hears inside a pot of soup’

This proverb uses metaphor to highlight delayed responsiveness. The fowl that seemed deaf eventually “hears” when it ends up inside the soup pot — but by then, it is too late. The mapping here is PHYSICAL DEAFNESS → MORAL STUBBORNNESS, and PUNISHMENT → FORCED LISTENING. The image schema is SOURCE–PATH–GOAL, since the fowl’s stubborn journey ends in the soup pot. Metonymy occurs where the ear stands for heedfulness. Culturally, the Igbo use this to warn against ignoring advice: a person who refuses to listen early will face dire consequences later.

**10. Ùkpánà ùkpókō gbùlù, ñtì chiri yá**

Grasshopper vehicle kill(PST), ear deaf PRO

‘The grasshopper killed by vehicle has a deaf ear’

Here, the metaphor establishes a causal link between deafness and destruction. The grasshopper that could not “hear” (or heed warning) ends up being struck dead. The mapping is NOT LISTENING → DEATH/DOWNFALL. The image schema at work is FORCE, where the consequence of resistance is annihilation. Metonymically, the deaf ear represents stubbornness or heedlessness. Culturally, this proverb reinforces the Igbo moral value that failure to listen to counsel results in misfortune, just as the grasshopper pays the price for its figurative deafness.

**11. Ónyé nwéré ñtì, yá nù!**

Person have ear, PRO hear!

‘Whosoever has ears, let him hear’

Here, the physical ear is metaphorically mapped onto the ability to understand and respond. The proverb assumes that having ears goes beyond biology; it connotes moral responsibility to listen and act. The mapping is HAVING AN EAR → CAPACITY FOR MORAL RECEPTION. The image schema is POTENTIALITY, since the ear represents the possibility of grasping meaning. Metonymically, “ear” stands for attentiveness and wisdom. Culturally, the Igbo use this as a general call to heed moral truth, implying that hearing without obedience is as good as being deaf.

**12. Ánwúntà na-èbé na ñtì, nà-agwá ñtì nà árá ábūghī ọnwú**

Mosquito AUX-cry PREP ear, AUX-tell ear that  
madness isNEG death

‘Mosquito that cries close to the ear, is telling the ear that madness is not death’

This expression metaphorically uses the mosquito’s buzzing as a persistent disturbance that forces recognition. The mapping is IRRITATION → WARNING/LESSON. The image schema is FORCE–CONTACT, where the mosquito’s nearness to the ear compels acknowledgement. The ear here functions metonymically as the seat of consciousness. Culturally, the Igbo use this to show that even when situations appear uncomfortable (madness), they are not the ultimate calamity (death). The ear thus becomes the receiver of a paradoxical truth: that one must endure lesser disturbances because worse fates exist.

**13. Á sị nà izùzù tóó ogólógó, ónyé ntị chiri àmára ihē á na-ekwu**

PRO say(pst) COMP discussion grows long, person ear deaf know thing PRO that saying

‘If discussion takes longer, the deaf will know what the discussion is all about’

This expression relies on the metaphor PERSISTENCE OF SPEECH → EVENTUAL UNDERSTANDING. Even someone with a “deaf ear” (stubborn, unresponsive, or slow to understand) eventually grasps meaning if talk continues. The image schema here is PROCESS, since extended communication over time breaks barriers. Metonymically, “deaf ear” represents slowness of comprehension. Culturally, this proverb reflects the Igbo communal practice of dialogue: repetition and elaboration ensure that even the most reluctant or resistant eventually catch the message.

**14. Èjìghì íhé èjì àgbá ná ntì àgbá ná anyá**

Pro use-NEG thing prohold put PREP ear put PREP eyes

What is used to clean the ear is not used to clean the eyes

This expression metaphorically compares the ear and the eye as distinct sensory domains, emphasizing that each has its own method of care. The mapping is DIFFERENT BODY ORGANS → DIFFERENT MEANS OF KNOWLEDGE/APPROACH. The image schema is PART-WHOLE, since the ear and eye are parts of the human whole but demand different treatments. Metonymically, the ear stands for auditory knowledge while the eye stands for visual knowledge. Culturally, this reflects the Igbo philosophy that wisdom requires knowing the limits of each situation; what works in one context may not apply to another.

**15. Àdìghì àgwá ónyé ntì chiri na ághá èsúlá**

PRO NEG tell person ear deafCOMPwar start(pst)

‘You do not need to tell a deaf person that war has begun’

This proverb metaphorically equates war with something too obvious to ignore, even for the deaf. The mapping is WAR NOISE → UNIVERSAL PERCEPTION. The image schema is SCALE/INTENSITY, since the magnitude of war transcends sensory limitations. The “deaf ear” functions metonymically as those who normally ignore or miss information. Culturally, the Igbo use this proverb to stress that certain realities are so evident that even the most oblivious person cannot miss them. It is a warning against feigned ignorance in the face of communal crises.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study examines the metaphorical and semantic functions of body part expressions in the Igbo language, with special focus on the ear ‘ntì’. The data were gathered from two literary texts in

which the ear is used figuratively. The proverbs were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, and interpretations were provided based on their contextual and cultural meanings.

The findings reveal that the ear in Igbo proverbs goes beyond its biological function of hearing. It symbolically represents concepts such as wisdom, obedience, negligence, awareness, ignorance, stubbornness, discipline, and consequences. For example, expressions like *onye anaghị ege ntị ga-ata ahụhụ* (“he who does not listen suffers”) highlight obedience and consequences, while others like *ebe a tūrụ ilu kōwaa, ochi ntị nọ na ya* (“where a proverb is said and explained, a deaf person is there”) emphasize ignorance and neglect.

Above all, the study establishes that the ear is an important conceptual metaphor in Igbo cultural communication. Through proverbs, it serves both corrective and didactic purposes, guiding social behavior, stressing communal values, and highlighting the importance of wisdom and attentiveness in human interaction.

The study concludes that the ear ‘ntị’ in Igbo proverbs is a rich source of metaphorical expressions that reflect both linguistic creativity and cultural wisdom. Beyond its physiological function, the ear embodies values such as obedience, attentiveness, and respect for advice, while also serving as a warning against stubbornness and neglect. Thus, Igbo body part metaphors, especially those involving the ear, are not merely linguistic ornaments but are deeply rooted in cultural practices, social order, and moral instruction. They are best understood using cognitive principles like metaphor as their meanings are not readily understood literally. They provide insight into how the Igbo conceptualize human behavior, relationships, and communal living.

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