Gesture and Their Grammatical Interpretations: Insights from Some Igbo Poetry Performances

Edith U. Nwobu
Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
eu.nwobu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines gestures and their grammatical interpretations. While spoken language has traditionally been prioritized in linguistic analysis, this paper argues that gesture is not merely decorative or emotive. It rather functions as part of a coordinated semiotic system through which meaning is produced, intensified, and interpreted. Using performance recordings, live observation sessions, and multimodal transcription of eight contemporary Igbo poetic performances and drawing on growth point analysis of select Igbo poems, the study shows that gestures can convey different meanings depending on form. Also, gestures help show the size, degree or intensity of meaning. The analyses equally demonstrated that spoken words alone are often not enough to fully express a speaker's intended meaning. Instead, gestures work alongside speech to provide grammatical information such as pronouns, nouns, adjectives, preposition and tense. Therefore, there is need to treat gesture as part of Igbo grammatical expression, particularly in performance contexts where language, body, and cultural aesthetics interact to produce meaning.

Key words: Gesture, meaning, speech, poetry

1. Introduction

Language is the not limited to spoken words. It includes various forms of communication that work together to convey meaning. Among these, is gesture. It plays an important role in human interaction, although it is often considered secondary or merely supportive in many linguistic and literary studies. In Igbo oral performance traditions, gesture is a key component in expressing and interpreting meaning. Within the Igbo cultural context, speech, body movement, rhythm, music, and visual display combine to create a single communicative experience. This study, therefore, explores gesture as a grammatical asset in the performance of Igbo poems.

Igbo poetry performance, whether traditional or contemporary, functions within a communicative setting where the poet's voice, and movements work together to create meaning. Through a combination of words, gestures, tone, facial expressions and body movements, performers interact with their audience in a lively and expressive way. These elements are not simply decorative. They influence how meaning is understood, how emphasis is shown, and how emotional, social, and spiritual messages are communicated. However, most academic discussions of Igbo poetry have focused mainly on its verbal structure, themes, and cultural symbols, while paying limited attention to its physical and embodied aspects, particularly gesture.

Previous studies in linguistics and multimodal communication have established that gesture operates in close coordination with speech and often performs linguistic functions such as reference, aspect marking, and discourse organization (McNeill, 2005; Kendon, 2014). Scholars working on African and Nigerian oral

traditions have similarly highlighted the significance of non-verbal resources in meaning-making and audience engagement (Nwoga, 1984; Finnegan, 2012; Nwosu, 2019). Within Igbo expressive culture, gestures such as pointing, chest-tapping, rhythmic arm swings, and head nodding are not merely decorative; they carry culturally specific meanings that enrich performance and interpretation. For instance, a pointing gesture may not only identify a referent but also convey accusation, warning, or moral emphasis. Similarly, rhythmic body movements may reflect the tempo of the poem and enhance its musical quality, while facial expressions can convey emotions such as irony, respect, or satire, adding layers of meaning that the spoken text alone may not fully express.

Drawing on the growth point theory of McNeill, recordings and live observations of select Igbo poetry performances, focusing on gestures that appear consistently in relation to specific linguistic or poetic functions, this study therefore seeks to determine that gesture is not a supplement to Igbo poetic language, but a part of its grammar. Eight select poems performed by native speakers of Igbo were recorded and annotated on using the ELAN software (2018), which allows to carry out annotation on different levels. Through the annotation, multimodal transcription and interpretive analysis, the research identifies patterns in how gesture collaborates with narrative structure to enhance deeper interpretation and understanding. The analysis demonstrates that gesture forms a semiotic system that audiences have learned to read as part of Igbo communicative competence. By foregrounding gesture as grammatical, the study challenges narrow text-based approaches to Igbo poetry and highlights the need for analytical frameworks that account for the full performance event.

2. Literature Review
Gesture

A gesture is an expressive action that enacts imagery and is generated as part of the process of speaking. McNeill (1992) describes gestures as holistic and imagistic on-the-spot creations by speakers and language as conventionalized and categorical forms that must be learned. He goes on to say that ".…gestures and speech are processed in the same areas of the human brain… and is inseparable from language." Morgenstern & Goldin-Meadow (2022) say that gesture studies were given new life and propelled forward by McNeill's 1992 monograph. They equally noted that he presented speech and gesture as an integrated system that expresses two different types of thought (imagistic vs. propositional). According to them, gesture was reappraised as a necessary and valuable object of study for psychologists and linguists. Taking seriously that language includes gesture as an integral component changes the look of everything. Gesture is therefore seen here as meaning accompanying body movements during speech processes.

Paralinguistic Features

Paralinguistic features are non-verbal cues that help to give urgency to one's voice. That is, it adds human touch to words. They are the non-phonemic aspects of human speech that convey information about the affective state of the speaker. They are of two forms: vocal paralinguistic features (tone, pitch, quality, volume, rate, pronunciation, pauses) and physical paralinguistic features (facial expressions, gestures, proximity, posture). Okorji, Eze &Nwike (2022) describe paralinguistics as "The component of communication that occurs outside of the words themselves." This means that paralinguistic features do not have lexical

representation, yet is a fundamental part of meaning of a lexical item or a string of lexical items. In this study, paralinguistic features are viewed to be any extra meaning suggested outside of the lexical items. In this work, paralinguistic feature is seen as any non-verbal way of enhancing communication.

Theoretical Framework

This work is developed within the framework of growth point. Growth point theory was developed in 2005 by McNeill. The theory challenges the traditional assumption that gesture is merely an optional, paralinguistic addition to spoken language. Instead, McNeill proposes that gestures are integral components of linguistic expression, revealing essential aspects of how speakers conceptualize and package information during communication. This theory positions gesture as a core component of linguistic expression. By framing gesture and speech as jointly produced from a single cognitive event, it offers a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how grammar, cognition, and multimodal behavior interact in real-time communication. It is the smallest unit of thought that combines speech and gesture into a single meaning-making process. In the words of McNeill (2025:3),

> Growth points create gesture-speech unity by synchronizing a bundle of linguistic features with a gesture that carries the same meaning. It makes speaking a growth process, hence the name, "growth point," implying that the growth begins in a minimal unit or "point." Unificationmeans specifically that the growth point unites gesture and linguistic form into one.

This means that growth points are identified by seeking speech and gestures which are co-expressive and synchronous. In other words, the core of Growth Point Theory is that meaning emerges from the

interaction of linguistic structure (speech) and imagistic structure (gesture).

3. Methodology

The research used descriptive research method. Data for the study are got from two sources. The primary data are from some anthologies of Igbo poems and the secondary are got from recording of real time performance of the poems. Eight Igbo poems were selected based on brevity. The selected poems are (1)"Abalị" by Ihechukwu Madụbụike, (2) "Ezi Ịhụnanya, by Nkechinyere Okediadi, (3) "Ihe Meghaị", (4) "Ihe Ukwu", by Asọnye Ụba Mgbemena, (5) "Ositadịmma", by J. U. Ezeuchegbu, (6) "OtiiOtiiOtii" by IfeanyịUgwunnadị, (7) "Ọnwa M" by J. C. Maduekwe, (8) "Ugonwa" by Nkechinyere Okediadi. For the recording of the poetry performances, twenty-five students from the Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies and the Department of Theatre and Film Studies and a freelance performer were selected for repeated performances. All the performers were under the age of 40. The factors considered in the selection are excellent performance skills, the Igbo language proficiency and accessibility. The selected poems were then performed, recorded and annotated. The gestures were annotated using ELAN 6.4 developed by Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. This was achieved by uploading the videos to ELAN 6.4 for annotation. The annotations were then looked at through the lens of McNeill's growth point theory.

4. Data analysis

In this sub section, the impacts of gestures on the interpretation and understanding of Igbo poems are examined. The examples below are taken from performances of Igbo written poems in which the

performers make statements about third parties, themselves or celestial bodies. The multimodal transcripts Figures 1-8) combine video stills, the acoustic waveform and tiered annotation of gestures, grammatical labels, and free translations. The focus of this analysis is the performers' first gesture–speech unit which co-occurs with the indicated clauses.

Fig. 1: **Imaging Sleep**
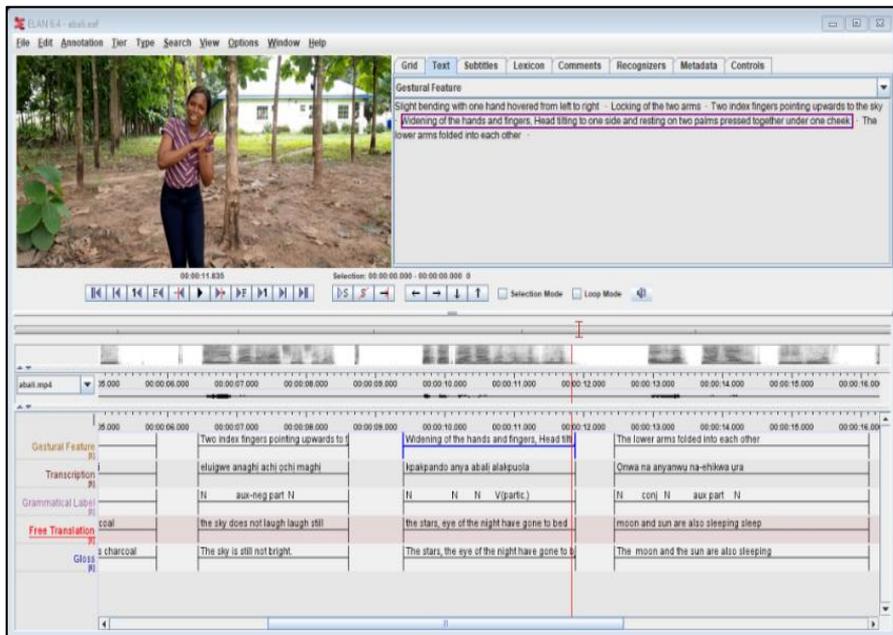
Imagistic Structure: Head tilts to one side and resting on two palms pressed together under one cheek to signify 'sleep or going to bed'. Linguistic Structure: Ọnwa na anyanwụ na-ehikwaụra (Moon and sun are also sleeping.)

Here, the metaphoric phrase used, ọnwa and anyanwụ (celestial bodies) do not literally sleep. The language creates a narrative of total quietness or inactivity. The gesture component comprising the folded palms, mirror the universal sleep gesture, functioning as iconic, global and synthetic. It resembles sleeping and expresses the whole concept of sleep. Thus, the gesture grounds the metaphor in embodied imagery, making an abstract idea physically perceptible.

The gesture complements the metaphor in many ways. For example:
The verbal metaphor alone might be ambiguous (poetic or figurative), but the gesture complements the metaphor thus:

  i.   It anchors the meaning in human bodily experience.
 ii.   It reinforces that 'sleep' is the central semantic focus.
iii.   It signals that the speaker is interpreting the celestial bodies through human action.
 iv.   It helps the listener grasp the intended imagery clearly.

This demonstrates vividly that the gesture and speech work together to form a single cognitive unit.

Fig. 2: **Imaging a third person**
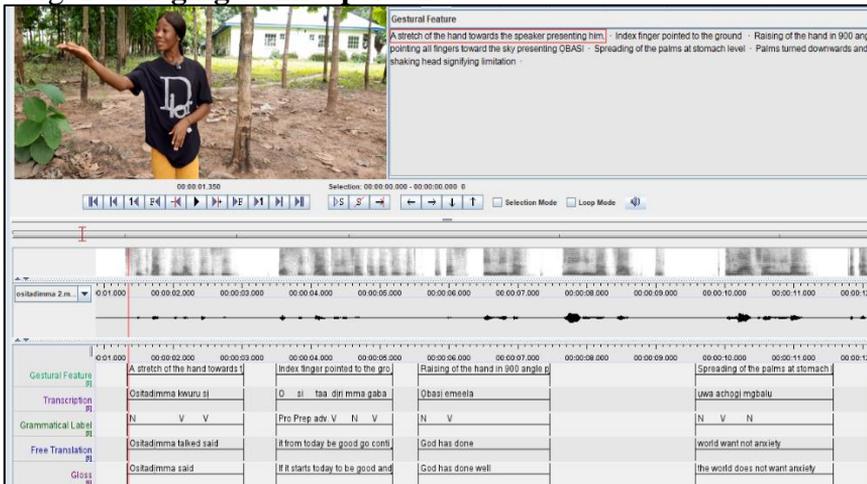
Imagistic Structure: Hand points sideways to reflect the third person viewpoint

Linguistic Structure: Ọsitadịmmakwuru sị (Ọsitadịmma talked and said)

The gesture is characterized by a deliberate forward extension of the right arm, with the palm rotated outward and slightly upward. This configuration functions as a presentational deictic gesture. It spatially 'introduces' the referent into the shared interactional space. The gesture is not merely pointing; it creates a conceptual scene that embodies the thematic entity, Ọsitadịmma. This imagistic framing is important because it motivates the linguistic form that follows.

On the other hand, the clause "Ọsitadịmmakwuru si…" ('Ọsitadịmma talked and said… = Ọsitadịmma said that…') introduces reported speech, a structure that typically functions as a discourse boundary or transition point. Its grammatical design, including the quotative verb 'kwuru' (said) and the complementizer 'sị' (say) signals that the speaker is about to embed an evaluative or predictive proposition, for instance, 'O si taadịrị mma gaba…' (If it starts today to be good…).

Where the gesture offers a synthetic image, the speech provides grammatical specification. It analytically unfolds the idea introduced gesturally, breaking it into thematic roles, clause boundaries, and conditional logic. This complementarity is a key characteristic of the growth point.

Fig. 3: Indication of confrontation

Imagistic Structure: The performer here points in different direction to indicate different beaters, 'otii'.

Linguistic Structure: Otiiotiiotii (Beater beater beater)

The expression functions as a reduplicated lexical item, often used in Igbo discourse to draw attention to, or of an agent or object, in this case a 'beater'. Repetition increases urgency and salience. In the expression "Otiiotiiotii" (beater, beater, beater), the speaker repeats the word 'otii' while pointing forward. The repeated word helps to identify and emphasize the person or object being referred to and also shows urgency. However, the spoken words alone do not show where the beater is located. The pointing gesture helps to

solve this by showing the exact direction of the referent. The gesture and the repeated speech occur at the same time, showing that they come from the same thought process. This example shows that meaning is not expressed by speech alone, but through the combination of speech and gesture, which is a key feature of the growth point.

Fig. 4: Fingers pointing inwards toward the chest
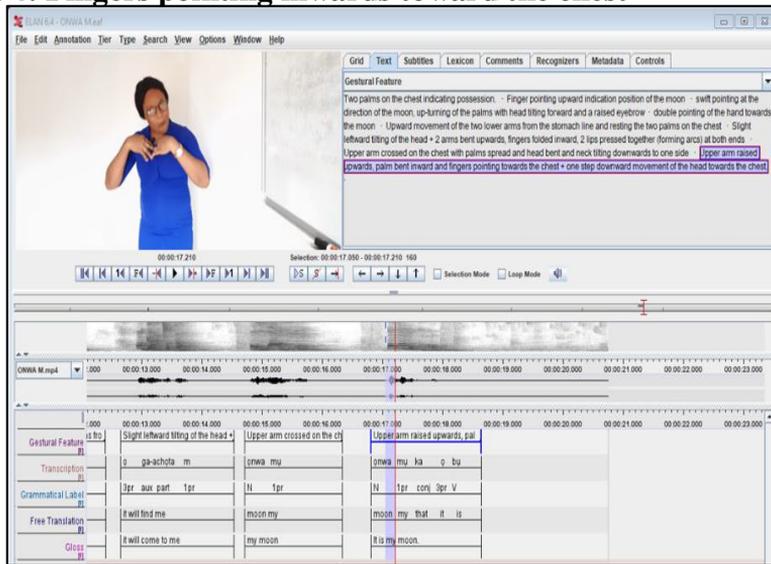
Imagistic Structure: Upper arm is raised upwards, palm bent inward and fingers pointing towards the chest

Linguistic Structure: ọnwa m ka ọ bụ

The utterance "ọnwa m ka ọ bụ" (literally 'it is my moon' or 'this is my time') is produced alongside a gesture in which the performer points both fingers inward toward the chest. This shows

how speech and gesture work together to create meaning. The words 'ọnwa m' already indicate personal ownership, but the inward pointing gesture toward the chest symbolically marks the speaker as the center of reference, visually reinforcing the notion of 'me' and concretises the abstract grammatical marker of possession into an embodied act. The gesture happens at the same time as the spoken words, showing that both come from the same thought. Through this combination, the speaker expresses a strong sense of personal claim or self-assertion. This example shows that meaning is not carried by speech alone but is formed through the close connection between speech and gesture, which is the main idea of the growth point.

Fig. 5: **Hand slightly above head level with fingers folded into a fist**
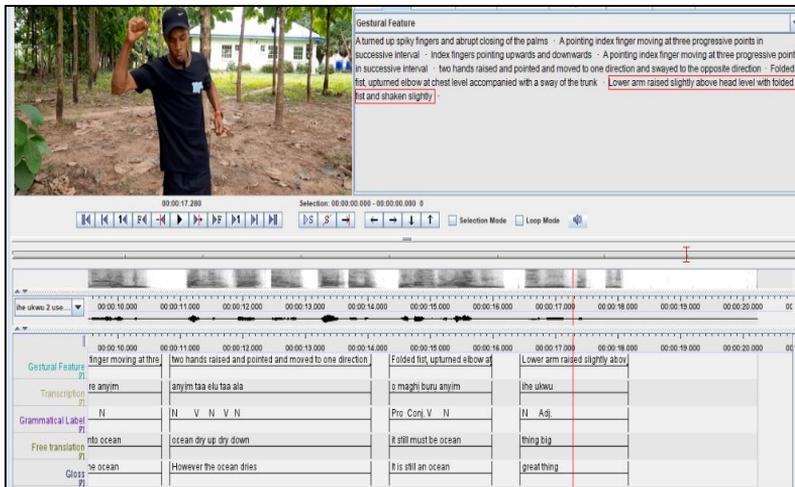
Imagistic Structure: Hand slightly above head level with fingers folded into a fist
Linguistic Structure: ihe ukwu

This Igbo expression literally means 'big or great thing'. Pragmatically, it could convey importance, seriousness, intensity, or significance, depending on the context. When this is produced with the hand raised slightly above head level and the fingers folded into a fist, it illustrates how speech and gesture combine to express a single idea. The spoken words 'ihe ukwu' linguistically describe largeness, greatness or importance, but they do not specify the degree or intensity of this 'largeness'. The accompanying gesture provides this missing information, raising the hand above the head visually represents height, magnitude, and emphasis, while the clenched fist adds a sense of solidity, intensity, strength, power, superiority and seriousness. The gesture and speech occur at the same time to show that they arise from the same thought process. They form a growth point in which the gesture gives a clear visual image of size and importance, while the speech labels it. This example shows that meaning emerges from the integration of spoken language and bodily action, which is the core tenet of GP.

Fig. 6: Hand below head level with fingers folded to form a fist

Imagistic Structure: Hand below head level with fingers folded to form a fist
Linguistic Structure: iwu gị siri ike

Comparing figure 5 and 6 where in figure 5 we have 'ihe ukwu' with a raised clenched fist above head level and in figure 6 we have 'Iwu gị siri ike' with a clenched fist below head level. In both cases, the fingers are folded into a fist, showing strength or seriousness, but the different hand positions affect the meaning. With 'ihe ukwu', where the fist is raised slightly above the head, the gesture emphasizes greatness or importance; the raised hand suggests something grand or elevated, highlighting the magnitude of the situation. On the other hand, 'Iwu gị siri ike' (your law is hard/strong) with the fist held lower signals strength and toughness, but the lower position of the hand might give a sense of grounded force, indicating something that is not necessarily elevated but still powerful and serious. The change in hand position helps shape how the listener interprets the intensity of the meaning. This shows how speech and gesture work together to create a fuller meaning, with the gesture adding a layer of imagery to the spoken words, reflecting the speaker's thought in a more physical and visual way.

Fig. 7: Arms wide open and stretched out forward

Imagistic Structure: The performer widely opens and stretches both arms outward while tilting the upper body forward. This gesture involves expansiveness and bodily engagement.
Linguistic Structure: ezi ịhụnanya

The Igbo expression, 'ezi ịhụnanya' translates as 'true or genuine love'. It is an abstract noun but being produced with the arms wide open and stretched, and the upper body tilted forward shows how speech and gesture combine to express a single idea. The spoken words label the feeling as genuine or true love, but on their own they remain abstract. The open and stretched arms create a visual image of readiness to embrace, acceptance, welcoming, openness and giving, while the forward tilt of the body suggests emotional involvement, advancement and closeness. These bodily actions happen at the same time as the words, showing that they come from the same thought process. The speech and gesture form one growth point in which love is not only described but physically shown as an entity that is open, accepting, giving, welcoming and deeply felt.

Fig. 8: Arms open and stretched a bit forward

Imagistic Structure: Arms narrowly open and stretched a bit forward
Linguistic Structure: ihe meghaị

In comparison of Fig. 7 and 8, we see the expressions 'eziịhụnanya' (true love) and 'ihe meghaị' (things should happen a bit) and how different gestures help shape meaning even when both involve open arms. In 'eziịhụnanya', the arms are opened wide and stretched forward, which visually shows openness, acceptance, and deep emotional involvement. This wide gesture makes the idea of love feel big, welcoming, sincere, and fully open. On the other hand, in 'ihe meghaị', the arms are only narrowly opened and stretched a little forward, which suggests caution, limitation, questioning and control. Although the words encourage allowing things to happen, the smaller gesture shows that this permission is partial and careful, not total. This comparison shows that while speech gives the basic message, gesture adds important details about how strong or limited the meaning is.

5. Summary of Findings
Findings from the analyses of select Igbo expressions show that meaning in communication is produced through the combination of speech and gesture to foster understanding, deeper interpretation and create meaning. Speech alone without the accompanying gestures, verbal communication alone would be less clear or open to misunderstanding. Also, observation shows that speech and gesture occur simultaneously. In both expressions, gestures occur at the same time as speech, showing that they come from the same thought process. This is the crux of growth point theory.

Similar gestures can convey different meanings depending on form. Although both expressions use open-arm gestures, differences in width and extension lead to different interpretations of emotional strength and intention. For example, in 'ihe ukwu', where the fist is raised slightly above the head, the gesture emphasizes greatness or importance; the raised hand suggests something grand or elevated, highlighting the magnitude of the situation. On the other hand, 'Iwu gị siri ike' with the fist held lower signals strength and toughness, but the lower position of the hand indicates something that is not necessarily elevated but still powerful and serious.

Gestures help show the size, degree or intensity of meaning. Widely stretched arms in *"eziịhụnanya"* express deep openness and strong emotional commitment, while narrowly opened arms in *"ihe meghaị"* indicate limitation, caution, or partial involvement.

The research equally revealed that deictic gestures are pronominal, adjectival or prepositional. This is because gestures such as pointing forward indicate pronouns like you, she, he, while pointing toward the chest indicate me, us, we. This is exemplified in *"Otiiotiiotii"* and *"ọnwa m ka ọ bụ"*. On the other hand, pointing forward, toward the ground or backward could indicate adjective of time like future, present or past. These gestures could also be used to indication distance or positions like there or here.

Different forms of gestures were noticed like iconic, metaphoric, expressive and expansive gestures. Each of these align with various grammatical categories. For instance, iconic gestures are mostly nominal as is revealed in "Ọnwa na anyanwụ na-ehikwaụra" where the gesture indicates the abstract noun, sleep.

Summarily, the study has shown that speech and gesture usually happen at the same time and come from the same thought process. This supports the main idea of McNeill's growth point theory, which says that gestures are not added after speaking, but are part of how people think and communicate. This implies that gestures play a very important role in helping speakers and listeners understand themselves adequately in Igbo communication.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the grammatical interpretation of gestures in the lightof growth point theory of McNeill (2005) using data from the Igbo language. The analyses demonstrate that spoken words alone are often not enough to fully express a speaker's intended meaning. Instead, gestures work alongside speech to provide grammatical information such as pronouns, nouns, adjectives, preposition and tense. This shows that gesture is not a secondary or decorative element of communication but an essential part of how thoughts are formed and expressed. Therefore, studies of language, especially in Igbo, should pay attention to both spoken words and body movements, since both work together to show what the speaker truly means.

References

Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral literature in Africa* (2nd ed.). Open Book Publishers.

Kendon, A. (2014). *Gesture: Visible action as utterance*. Cambridge University Press.

McNeill, D. (2005). *Gesture and Thought*. University of Chicago Press.

Nwoga, D. I. (1984). *Oral Literature in Igbo Culture*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Nwosu, P. C. (2019). *Multimodal Expression in Contemporary Nigerian Oral Performance*. Ibadan: University Press.

Morgenstern, A. & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2022) (Eds). *Gesture in Language: Development Across the Lifespan.* America: American Psychological Association and Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

McNeill, D. (1985). So you think gestures are nonverbal? *Psychological Review*, *92*(3), 350–371. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.92.3.350

McNeill, D. (1992). *Hand and mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNeill, D. (2025). *Language is Gesture*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Okorji, R. I., Eze, A. N. &Nwike, C. C. (2022). "Paralinguistic Communication in Igbo Nollywood Subtitles: A Case Study of Two Igbo Films". *Arabic Language, Literature & Culture*, *7*(1), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.allc.20220701.11

Okediadi, N. (2003). *Ije Ụwa: Akwụkwọ Abụ Igbo*. Enugu: Fulladu Publishing Company

Nwadike, I. U. (2006). *Akọnauche*. Obosi: Pacific Publishers.

Ekechukwu, R. M. (2003). *Akpa Uche*. Ibadan: University Press.

Emenanjo, N. (nd.). *ỤtaraNtị*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers.