
Sociopragmatic Functions of Igbo Proverbs used in Select Traditional Marriage Events

Adaobi Ifeoma Ik-Iloanusi¹ & Davidson U. Mbagwu²

Department of Linguistics

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ai.ik-iloanusi@unizik.edu.ng¹ & du.mbagwu@unizik.edu.ng²

Abstract

This study examines the sociopragmatic functions of Igbo proverbs in traditional wedding ceremonies, focusing on how language is strategically employed to facilitate effective communication and achieve social goals within specific contexts. A documentation of Igbo proverbs exists in the Igbo language, with predicted or assumed contexts in which they are used. Here, real-time use is targeted to do away with assumptions and predictions of context. In attending to this, the study identifies the sociopragmatic functions in the proverbs. Guided by the sociopragmatic principle adopted for this study, the data, which are proverbs extracted from audio recordings using a Zoom digital recorder from traditional wedding events 'Igbankwu' from two communities, Enugwu-Ukwu and Nawfia, both in Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, have been analysed. Twelve (12) traditional wedding events (Igbankwu) were recorded. These proverbs are glossed morpheme-by-morpheme, translated literally, and interpreted figuratively to capture their full semantic and pragmatic import. The results show the actual usage of these proverbs and reveal that the interpretation of proverbs depends on cultural context, the speaker's intention, and shared social norms between the speaker and listener(s). In conclusion, this study

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highlights that Igbo proverbs express their full meaning through sociopragmatic expression of the constructs, relying on the relationship between language, culture, and context to showcase their function as instruments of cultural expression, social regulation, and knowledge transmission, firmly rooted in communal experience and worldview. To further enhance scholarly understanding of the dynamics of Igbo proverbs, future research should extend its focus to other aspects of traditional Igbo events beyond those captured in this study, for a broader exploration of the functional corpus of real-time proverb usage within diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Igbankwū, Igbo proverbs, Proverbs, Sociopragmatic functions, Traditional events.

Introduction

Language is a vital tool for communication, identity formation, and cultural preservation. Among various linguistic resources, proverbs hold a unique place as they encapsulate the wisdom, values, and worldview of a people. Defined as short, pithy sayings that express general truths or practical precepts, proverbs convey complex ideas succinctly through metaphors and culturally embedded meanings. Proverbs are an important focus in linguistic research, particularly pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Functioning as pragmatic devices, they guide interpersonal communication, resolve conflicts, and reinforce societal norms. More than linguistic expressions, proverbs are a repository of collective wisdom and cultural principles. As Ismail (2021:10) affirms, “In all cultures around the globe, proverbs play a vital role as ingredients of human communication.”

Proverbs are central to oral tradition among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, renowned for their rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Achebe (1958:5) describes them as “the palm oil with which words are eaten.” They feature prominently in everyday communication and formal settings, especially during ceremonial events like *Igbankwu* (traditional wedding).

Despite their importance, the sociopragmatic roles of Igbo proverbs in specific cultural contexts remain underexplored. Events like *Igbankwu* present rich sites of linguistic exchange, where proverbs convey social norms, negotiate relationships, and celebrate virtues such as hard work and diligence.

While numerous studies exist, many focus on literary or semantic aspects, often using secondary sources. This study addresses that gap by creating a functional corpus of proverbs recorded during real-time *Igbankwu* ceremonies. Using a sociopragmatic approach, it explores how proverbs are employed in real-life discourse, considering linguistic, situational, social, psychological, sociological, and cosmological factors to account for their social and communicative functions in context.

Literature Review

Overview of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of language study that focuses on how language is used in specific contexts or situations. It examines how factors beyond language, such as context, speaker intentions, and shared knowledge, shape meanings. According to Yule (2018:128), “Pragmatics is the study of ‘invisible’ meaning, or how we recognise what is meant even when it is not said or written.” For communication to be effective, speakers and writers rely on shared

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assumptions and expectations, revealing how language conveys more meaning than what is explicitly stated.

Sperber and Wilson (1995:1) note that pragmatics examines how utterances communicate meanings beyond literal interpretations. Leech (1983:2) similarly defines it as the study of language in social contexts, considering speaker goals, hearer needs, and their social relationship. Pragmatics thus explores how utterances communicate meanings beyond surface structure, clarifying the complexities of human interaction. Mey (2001:6) describes pragmatics as the study of how humans use language effectively, focusing on the principles governing language in context. He introduces micro-pragmatics and macro-pragmatics: the former analyses individual language use, while the latter focuses on societal-level communication shaped by norms, hierarchies, and values. Together, they provide a comprehensive view of language use in both personal and social contexts.

In line with Mey's view, Levinson (1983:9) argues that pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalised or encoded in the structure of a language. A pure pragmatic setting cannot be achieved outside the communication of users and their social context. Although communication in society happens chiefly utilising language, the users of language, as social beings, communicate and use language on society's premises, where society controls their access to linguistic and communicative means.

As Grundy (2008:298) explains, context includes relevant elements of social structure and encyclopaedic knowledge, playing a key role in interpreting meaning. Context, therefore, is fundamental to interpreting utterances. Proverbs exemplify this, as their meanings are deeply tied to cultural and situational contexts. This highlights

the integral role of pragmatics in understanding how meaning emerges from the interplay between language, context, and intention.

Igbo Proverbs

Proverbs, known as *ilu* in Igbo, are central to communication, conveying complex ideas, moral lessons, and cultural values. Kanu (2014:164) describes them as *vox Igbo populi*, “the voice of the Igbo people”, highlighting their role as tools for social discourse, moral instruction, critique, and conflict resolution. Embedded within proverbs are the Igbo worldview, traditions, and generational wisdom. In Igbo society, speech lacking in proverbs is often considered shallow, and proficiency in the use of proverbs signifies strong cultural identity or affiliation and intellectual maturity, as expressed in the proverb:

1) *A tūorọ nwata ilu kọwara yā, ego e jìrì lụọ nnē ya fùrù efu*

‘If a proverb is explained to a child, then the bride price paid on the mother’s head is a waste.’

Onukawa (2018:76) notes that proverbs are used in various contexts, including bride price negotiations, entertainment, family meetings, advisory roles, and conflict resolution. Their use goes beyond embellishment; they function as strategic communicative tools for persuasion and social cohesion. For example, proverbs promote diplomacy and understanding in marriage negotiations or disputes.

Enyimba (2019:41) views Igbo proverbs as a medium for expressing abstract and logical truths. Similarly, Udensi (2012:53) highlights their function as a repository of ancestral knowledge, drawn from life experiences and observations, which provides a

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culturally resonant means for guiding future generations. The proverb:

2) *A tųọrọ ọmara ọ mara, à tųọrọ ọfèkè ọ fenye isi n'ọhia*

‘If a proverb is spoken to the wise, he understands, but when spoken to a fool, he plunges into greater foolishness’

illustrates how proverbs transmit wisdom that must be internalised by all members of the society.

Achebe (1958) famously likens proverbs to “the oil with which words are eaten,” underscoring their vital role in Igbo communication. Umeasiegbu (2007:63) affirms that their power lies in the people’s recognition of them as vessels of ancestral philosophy. Proverbs are foundational to Igbo discourse and nearly inseparable from cultural expression and social interaction.

Given the points raised thus far on Igbo proverbs and their significance in Igbo society, it is evident that proverbs are deeply interwoven with the Igbo way of life. Their relationship can be likened to that of fish and water; just as water is essential for a fish’s survival, proverbs are indispensable in Igbo communication, cultural expression, and social harmony.

A Survey of Sociopragmatics

Sociopragmatics, emerging from the intersection of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, provides a framework for understanding language use in social interactions. Terkourafi and Delbar (2023) recognise this interdisciplinary integration as forming the field of sociopragmatics. Lawal (1997:641) defines it as the relationship between language use and contextual factors such as persons, location, mood, beliefs, socio-cultural settings, and worldview. This highlights that effective communication requires not only

linguistic competence but also an understanding of social norms, values, and situational dynamics.

Similarly, Nurdianto and Resticka (2021:29-30) describe sociopragmatics as an interdisciplinary approach that studies how language functions within communities, shaped by their social and cultural dynamics. It explores how pragmatic strategies reflect societal norms, positioning language as both an interactive and societal tool.

Proverbs fall within the scope of sociopragmatics because they are used in social contexts to perform communicative and social functions. As Achebe (1958:5) notes, proverbs are “the oil with which words are eaten,” highlighting their communicative richness. They bridge language, tradition, and daily practices, serving across domains such as religion, governance, and social interaction. Okafor and Ikegwonu (2020:67) affirm that proverbs reflect the cultural values, philosophies, and norms of a people, making them significant within the sociopragmatic domain.

Their meanings stem from lived experiences and cultural contexts. For example,

3) *Otu aka rụta mmanụ, o zuo ọha ọny*

‘When one finger touches oil, it spreads to the others’

conveys the idea that one person’s actions affect the whole community. Such proverbs communicate moral lessons, support communal values, and function as tools for social regulation and cohesion.

Further examples include:

4) *Ọsọ chụwa nwata, ọ gbaje ikwu nne ya.*

‘If a child is being chased, the child runs to the mother’s maternal home.’

5) *Agbata obi onye bụ chi ya.*
'One's neighbour is his god.'

6) *Ikwu amaghị, ibe ezi ya.*
'If one is oblivious to something, his kinsman will enlighten him.'

These proverbs demonstrate how language encodes societal roles and communal relationships, reinforcing cultural values through shared expressions. They reflect the communal identity and serve as frameworks for social interaction.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, proverbs encapsulate traditional wisdom and experience, functioning as a vital repository of cultural knowledge. They are indispensable in cultural discourse, reflecting and reinforcing communal norms, expectations, and identity, while facilitating the transmission of societal values across generations.

Studies on pragmatics and proverbs

Oboko (2020), in a pragma-sociolinguistic study titled "Language as a Didactic Tool and Vehicle of Cultural Preservation", examined the societal and pragmatic functions of twenty Igbo proverbs selected from Onwudufor's *Mmanụ e ji eri okwu* (2013). The study focused on proverbs promoting respect and honour in Igbo society, using Lawal's (2012) model of pragmatic theory to analyse how context shapes meaning and interpretation. An illustrative proverb, *Okokporo kwanyere onwe ya ugwu, a juo ya kedụ maka umuaka ya*, was used to explore its illocutionary force and multiple contextual layers, linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological, and cosmological. Findings

show that respect and honour in Igbo culture are earned through proper self-conduct and social conformity. The study concludes that Igbo proverbs serve as effective didactic tools for transmitting cultural values and preserving heritage among younger generations.

Ik-Iloanusi (2021) investigated the use of “proverbs as a tool for effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic”, focusing on Igbo proverbs. The study examined how proverbs facilitated information dissemination and effective communication in a time of crisis. Data were drawn from twenty proverbs recorded during sensitisation activities held in four social settings within a community in Anambra State, Nigeria. Using the conceptual metaphor framework, the proverbs were categorised into four groups: solidarity, praise, encouragement, and warning/advice. Examples include:

7) *Anyukọọ āmīrī ọnū, ò gbọọ ufufù.* ‘When people urinate together at a spot, it foams,’ signifying unity.

8) *Mbèrèdé kà é jì àmá dikē.* ‘A hero is identified by how he handles an unexpected event’
expressing praise.

9) *Ágwọ nọ n'ákíríká.* ‘Snake is in the thicket,’ indicating danger.

These examples show how proverbs functioned in different speech scenarios during the pandemic, promoting unity, praising acts of courage, and warning of danger. The study highlights the multifunctionality of proverbs, revealing how a single proverb can convey multiple meanings depending on context. Ik-Iloanusi concluded that proverbs are central to Igbo discourse, asserting their indispensable role in effective communication. Among the

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Igbo people, meaningful conversations rarely occur without proverbs, underscoring their cultural and communicative significance.

Amadi, Okoli, and Mbah (2023) conducted a pragmatic analysis of selected Igbo proverbs to examine their sexist undertones and cultural significance. Applying pragmatic act theory, the study identified proverbs that reflect gender bias and reinforce female subordination in Igbo society. Examples include

10) *Nwata nwanyi zuru tooro onwe ya*

‘A child trained by a woman grew up alone’

11) *Nwoke lụchaa oḡu nwanyi e nwere akukọ*

‘The man fights the war while the woman tells the story’,

which depict women as ineffective caregivers or passive observers of male success.

These proverbs suggest that discipline and honour are attributed to men, while women are seen as overindulgent or idle. The study concludes that sexism is deeply embedded in Igbo proverbial discourse, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining women’s roles. It calls for increased awareness of how language reinforces gender inequality and impacts women’s social and psychological well-being.

While these studies highlight the cultural significance and functional roles of proverbs, their focus on specific aspects reveals a specific gap: the absence of a functional corpus of Igbo proverbs as used by real-time users during select traditional marriage events (Igbankwụ). Addressing this gap, this present study seeks to sociopragmatically analyse Igbo proverbs within the cultural context of traditional marriage events (Igbankwụ).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a sociopragmatic approach, which examines how social norms, values, and group identities shape language use and interpretation (Kasper, 1990), with an emphasis on the role of context in pragmatic meaning-making. Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) model is applied for data analysis, offering a suitable framework by integrating societal, cultural, and contextual elements. According to Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) theory, context operates at six interrelated levels:

Linguistic context: The foundational stage, including phonological, lexical, and syntactic elements.

Situational context: Pertains to discourse topic and physical setting.

Psychological context: Relates to the speaker's mood, beliefs, and mental state.

Social context: Focuses on interpersonal relationships.

Sociological context: Covers socio-cultural and historical background.

Cosmological context: Concerns the worldview and universal facts.

These align with six levels of communicative competence:

Linguistic competence: Lexical, phonological, morpho-syntactic, and micro-semantic knowledge.

Situational competence: Familiarity with discourse topic, setting, and participants.

Psychological competence: Awareness of mood, attitudes, and perspectives.

Social competence: Knowledge of social principles governing interaction.

Sociological competence: Understanding of socio-cultural and historical context.

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Cosmological competence: Knowledge of universal facts and worldview.

Methodology

This qualitative study explores the context-dependent meanings of proverbs using data collected from Igbotraditional weddings (Igbankwu) in Enugwu-Ukwu and Nawfia towns within the Umunri ancestral heritage of Anambra State. Audio recordings of natural speech were captured using a Zoom digital recorder, and proverbs extracted from these recordings serve as data for this study. Analysis is grounded in Lawal, Raji and Ajayi's (1997) pragmatic theory, examining proverbs across six contextual levels: linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological, and cosmological. The study applies Green and Igwe's (1963) tone-marking system, where all high-tone syllables are left unmarked, while low tones and down steps are explicitly marked to represent Igbo tonal patterns. Each proverb is translated in three tiers: morpheme-by-morpheme, literal, and figurative. This layered method supports cross-linguistic analysis and highlights the sociopragmatic functions of proverbs.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses the data collected on Igbo proverbs through recordings from Igbo traditional weddings (Igbankwu). Drawing on Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) framework: Model of the aspects of a pragmatic theory. The analysis explores how proverbs function as context-dependent communicative tools that reflect and reinforce cultural norms, social roles, and interpersonal expectations within the Igbo society. The section examines the meanings of these proverbs, their cultural

significance, and their social actions in various ceremonial contexts.

Event Type: Traditional Marriage (Igba nkwu)

Date: 3rd January 2025.

Location: Nawfia, in Anambra State.

Participants: Bride – Ebelechukwu; Groom – Tochukwu; Families and community members.

Context and purpose: field work/observation of Igbo marriage rites for Sociopragmatic analysis of Igbo proverbs used in speech during a Traditional wedding (Igba nkwu).

12) *Ijē à gà-àbụ ijè mmīlī, ò burō ijè nkū.*

Journey this be-Fut journey water Prn be-Neg journey
firewood

This journey will be a smooth journey without any hitches.

‘It is going to be a smooth sail.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: The proverb, *Ijē à gà-àbụ ijè mmīlī, ò burō ijè nkū.* carries a metaphorical meaning that extends beyond the literal interpretation of its constituent words. Figuratively, it suggests that the marital journey will be decorated with calmness, gentleness, and fluidity, qualities associated with water, other than tension, friction, or volatility, symbolised by dry wood that easily ignites. The proverb thus emphasises the ideal of harmony and peaceful coexistence in marriage.

Situational: The bride’s father offers his blessings to the couple, expressing his hopes for a harmonious and easy-going marital union.

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Psychological: The speaker expresses genuine happiness and encourages the couple with the assurance that they can build a peaceful and harmonious home together.

Social: A close relationship exists among the interlocutors.

Sociological: It is pertinent to note that Igbo cosmology acknowledges that a peaceful and harmonious marriage is fundamental to sustained happiness and well-being.

Cosmological: The knowledge that peaceful relationships contribute significantly to stability in marriage is essential.

In this context, the bride's father metaphorically blesses the marriage to be smooth and peaceful, like the gentle flow of water, in contrast to the friction symbolised by dry wood. This expression reflects a communal wish for harmony, understanding, and cooperation in marriage. It extends to the broader family network, hoping for a conflict-free relationship with in-laws. Thus, reinforcing the Igbo cultural emphasis on unity and peace within marriage.

13) *Ngu i jì akwà, aghārā àkọnarị gī̄.*

Hook 2sg hold Vp-push Vp-will-Neg Vp-lack-not 2sg

The hook with which you pluck will not disappear

‘Your means of livelihood will never be cut short.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: At a deeper level, the Igbo proverb *Ngu i jì akwà, aghārā àkọnarị gī̄* transcends its literal reference to a “hook” or “plucking.” Rather, it conveys the figurative message that one’s means of livelihood will not be interrupted or cut short, thus revealing a more profound interpretation rooted in assurance and sustenance.

Situational: The bride's father offers a blessing to his son-in-law, expressing a heartfelt assurance that his source of income will remain secure.

Psychological: The speaker is impressed with his son-in-law.

Social: A special relationship exists between the interlocutors.

Sociological: Fatherly blessings are considered essential in marriage, particularly in traditional Igbo culture, where they confer legitimacy, goodwill, and spiritual support.

Cosmological: Fatherly blessings are important in marriage.

In Igbo tradition, a father's blessing is a vital part of marriage rites, symbolising goodwill and spiritual support. Here, the bride's father prays for the groom's prosperity, assuring lasting wealth and uninterrupted livelihood. This blessing reflects cultural values linking marital success to family support and communal endorsement. It unites both families in the hope for a flourishing and stable union.

14) *Akpù ọrụnaabò gà-àbụ nkwoṭukọ nkwoṭukọ kà aghàlì*
Buttocks two will-be rub rub that none-will-Neg

inwē òke kwògbùlù ibè ya
have any crush another 3sg

Two butts can glide against each other without anyone injuring the other

‘Tolerance leads to a lasting relationship’

Contexts/Competencies

Linguistic: Proverbs are inherently metaphorical, and it is essential to recognise this characteristic before attempting any form of interpretation. For instance, *Akpù ọrụnaabò*, in the above proverb, shows that the terms *Akpù ọrù* (buttocks) and *abùò* (two)

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metaphorically represent two individuals or entities. While the literal translation suggests that ‘two buttocks can glide against each other without causing harm,’ the figurative meaning underscores the idea that tolerance is fundamental to harmonious coexistence.

Situational:The bride's father offers counsel to the couple, emphasising the importance of mutual tolerance in sustaining a harmonious marital relationship.

Psychological:The speaker encourages the bride and groom, urging them to remain united and approach their marital responsibilities as a team.

Social:A strong relationship exists between the interlocutors.

Sociological:The Igbo society upholds tolerance and unity as core marital values.

Cosmological:Tolerance fosters togetherness.

This proverb emphasises tolerance, unity, and collaboration as vital for a lasting marriage.

It shows that love alone is not enough; mutual understanding and shared responsibility are key. Its message extends to both families, highlighting the communal nature of marriage in Igbo culture. Family bonds and collective support are essential to the union’s stability and success.

Data context

Event Type: Traditional Marriage (Igba nkwa)

Date: 13th April 2024.

Location: Enugwu-Ukwu in Anambra State.

Participants: Bride – Nneamaka; Groom – Chukwuma; Families and community members.

Context and purpose: field work/observation of Igbo marriage rites for Sociopragmatic analysis of Igbo proverbs used during a Traditional wedding (Igba nkwa).

15) *Nwaànyị̀ bù ùgògbèè jì ènene mbala*

Woman is mirror imp prn. use look compound

A woman is the mirror used in viewing a home.

‘The character and outward appearance of a family says a lot about the morals and values instilled in them.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: It is important to recognise that the words that make up the proverb are employed figuratively. Terms such as *Nwaànyị̀* (woman), *ùgògbèè* (mirror), and *mbala* (compound) symbolise the morals, values, and character attributed to a family, town, or community.

Situational: A father advises his daughter to uphold good behaviour, as her character will shape her children and serve as a testament to a proper upbringing.

Psychological: The speaker advises the listener strongly on good character/behaviour.

Social: The interlocutors share a father-and-daughter relationship.

Sociological: The Igbo people revere good character.

Cosmological: In the Igbo worldview, good character is the real beauty of every woman.

This proverb highlights the sociopragmatic reality that a family’s outward conduct often reflects the values instilled by the woman. In Igbo society, she is a central figure in moral instruction and socialisation within the home. The family’s reputation is shaped by her influence, carrying interpersonal and societal implications. Thus, the proverb affirms cultural expectations of women as models of discipline and virtue.

16) *Ọ buru nà nwa ewu gbudo ikpèlè, ò ñuonnē ya ala*

3sg be that child goat kneel knee 3sg drink mother 3sg
breast

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If the kid bends/kneels, it will be able to suck the mother's breast.

‘Humility is the key to attracting grace and favour.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: To fully comprehend the proverb, it is essential to interpret it beyond its literal meaning, as it conveys an underlying figurative meaning, where *nwa ewu* (kid), *gbudo* (kneel), *o ñu o nne ya ala* (suck mother's breast) means an entirely different thing.

Situational: A father explains the gains of submission and humility to his daughter and the need to embrace them.

Psychological: The speaker advises the listener on the benefits of humility and encourages her to remain humble.

Social: The interlocutors share a father-daughter relationship.

Sociological: The Igbo cultural norms and values encourage humility, especially from a woman.

Cosmological: Humility begets favours.

The proverb reflects the sociocultural expectation that a wife should embody humility to attract favour. In Igbo society, humility is a core virtue linked to dignity, respect, and social poise, especially for women. Sociopragmatically, it serves as both a moral directive and reinforcement of gender-based communal norms. Ultimately, this proverb affirms the cultural belief that favour and communal acceptance depend on visible modesty and respectful behaviour.

17) *Ile oma ejuna jì àga n'ogwū*
Tongue good snail hold Vp-go-Cont Prep- thorns

The swift tongue the snail uses to tread on thorns.

‘Good character and humility pave the way through life’s challenges.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: To understand the proverb, the listener must recognise the figurative meanings of *Ile oma* ‘good tongue’, *ejuna* ‘snail’, and *ji aga n’ogwu*, ‘uses to move on thorns.’ While the literal meaning is ‘the good tongue the snail uses to move on thorns,’ the proverb metaphorically conveys that a good character and humility pave the way through life’s challenges.

Situational: A father advises his daughter on how to get by in her husband’s house.

Psychological: The speaker is encouraging.

Social: The interlocutors have a very close father-and-daughter relationship.

Sociological: The Igbo culture, as expressed in the proverb, teaches humility and good character as the way to navigate through tough times.

Cosmological: The knowledge that good character and humility serve as the key to overcoming challenges is emphasised here.

Within Igbo society, good character is seen as social currency that eases life’s challenges.

This proverb upholds values like humility, respect, and integrity, drawing grace and support.

It functions as both a moral directive and a communicative tool, reinforcing societal expectations. Especially in the domestic sphere, it shows how good character fosters harmony and mutual support.

18) *Di bu otuto, onuinu.*

Husband is sweet bitter

Husband is sweet and sour.

‘Marriage is not a bed of roses.’

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Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: To fully comprehend the proverb above, it is essential to recognise the metaphorical use of the words *Di* ‘husband’, *òtùtò* ‘sweet’, and *ònùinu* ‘bitter’. While the literal meaning suggests that ‘a husband is both sweet and bitter,’ the proverb metaphorically conveys that marriage is not always pleasurable, hence, the expression “marriage is not a bed of roses.”

Situational: A girl with fairytale fantasies about marriage will not know the realities involved in a marriage.

Psychological: The speaker tries to educate the listener on the societal norms involved in marriage.

Social: The speaker shares a special relationship with the listener.

Sociological: The knowledge of the Igbo worldview that marriage is seen as a journey that demands endurance and emotional resilience.

Cosmological: It is important to reaffirm that endurance is an important virtue in marriage.

In the Igbo worldview, marriage is not idealised as a flawless or effortless journey. Rather, it is portrayed as a complex union that demands endurance and emotional resilience. The use of *Di* ‘husband’ in the proverb extends beyond its literal meaning to symbolise the entire institution of marriage, an experience marked by both sweet and bitter moments. This expression prepares individuals for the realities of marital life, emphasising that understanding and anticipating its challenges is key to sustaining the union. This framing reflects communal wisdom and serves as a subtle, yet powerful, communicative strategy to reinforce perseverance as a core marital virtue.

Data context

Even Type: Traditional Marriage (Igba nkwu)

Date: 28th December 2024

Location: Enugwu-Agidi, in Anambra State.

Participants: Bride –Nwanneka; Groom – Ogochukwu; Families and some community members.

Context and purpose: Field work/observation of Igbo marriage rites for Sociopragmatic analysis of Igbo proverbs used during the Traditional wedding (Igba nkwu).

19) *Ukwà luò ogè ya ò dàa*
Breadfruit reach time it, 3sg fall.

The breadfruit falls when it is time.

‘There is time for everything.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: To understand the proverb’s meaning, *ukwa* (breadfruit) and *oge* (time) must be interpreted beyond their literal sense. *Ukwà luò ogè ya ò dàa* translates to ‘the breadfruit falls when it is time,’ figuratively expressing that there is time for everything.

Situational: A Father encourages his daughter who is getting married, emphasising that it is the right time because she is mature enough.

Psychological: The speaker encourages the bride, highlighting her maturity, hence the marriage.

Social: The interlocutors share a father-daughter relationship.

Sociological: The Igbo worldview recognises the aspect of time and events.

Cosmological: Once the time is right, events can take their course.

It is important to note that the meaning expressed in this proverb serves a vital sociopragmatic function by operating across multiple layers of communication. It reassures the daughter that her

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marriage aligns with cultural expectations and a cosmological sense of proper timing, reinforcing core Igbo values such as patience, maturity, and readiness for life transitions. Additionally, this proverb strengthens harmony by publicly affirming communal and familial support for the union. From a sociopragmatic perspective, by invoking natural imagery, “the breadfruit falling at its due season,” the proverb draws on indigenous knowledge systems to convey a sense of inevitability and divine order, subtly legitimising the marriage as timely and appropriate. It simultaneously fulfils interpersonal and cultural purposes, offering emotional encouragement while upholding societal norms through indirect yet profoundly resonant language.

20) *Ọlà* *a gbàn’aka,* *è* *jirō* *ùgègbè* *ènene*
yā.

Jewellery Imp-wear Prep-hand Imp.prn use-Neg mirror Vp-look it.

A beautiful jewellery worn on the wrist does not require a mirror for its admiration.

‘Quality speaks for itself.’

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: The words *Ọlà* (jewellery), *aka* (hand/wrist), and *ùgègbè* (mirror) possess meanings that differ from the deeper message conveyed by the proverb *Ọlā agba n’aka ejirō ugegbe enene ya* (A beautiful piece of jewellery worn on the wrist does not require a mirror for admiration). Understanding its figurative meaning, “Quality speaks for itself,” enables the listener to grasp the underlying significance of the proverb more effectively.

Situational: A father praises and cheers his daughter, telling the in-laws that she is of high quality and an excellent wife material.

Psychological: The speaker proudly commends the bride before their in-laws.

Social: A special relationship exists between the interlocutors.

Sociological: Igbo culture upholds high moral standards, discipline, and virtuous character in women.

Cosmological: Quality needs no advertisement.

In its figurative sense, this proverb likens a good woman to a piece of jewellery worn on the wrist, an object of value and beauty that does not require a mirror to reveal its worth. Within the Igbo sociocultural context, this proverb powerfully communicates the idea that a woman's good character is self-evident and does not need further validation. Her virtues, humility, respect, diligence, and grace are naturally visible through her conduct. Additionally, this proverb operates as a social evaluation and a communicative act that strengthens communal expectations about womanhood and virtues. It affirms that in Igbo society, good behaviour, particularly among women, is not only valued but also socially recognised as a visible and celebrated quality which cannot be hidden.

21) *Ogò bu chi ònyè.*

Inlaw be god person

An in-law is one's god.

'One highly revered and treated like a king'

Contexts/ Competencies

Linguistic: The words *Ogò* (in-law) and *chi* (god) in the proverb *Ogò bu chi ònyè* 'An in-law is one's god' do not imply that the in-law is a divine or supernatural being. Rather, in a figurative sense, the proverb conveys the idea that an in-law is someone highly revered and accorded great respect.

Situational: A man formally addresses the in-laws, highlighting the responsibilities associated with their status.

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Psychological:The speaker extends a warm welcome to the in-laws and assures them of a harmonious and mutually respectful relationship.

Social:The interlocutors are well known to each other.

Sociological:In the knowledge of the Igbo worldview, in-laws are accorded respect and treated with dignity.

Cosmological:The general knowledge that in-laws are treated with respect and dignity.

Within the Igbo cultural framework, in-laws are accorded profound respect, often likened to the reverence given to the 'gods.' This elevated status shows the crucial role that in-laws play in the social and family structure. Their involvement is not passive; rather, they actively participate in significant events and decisions concerning their extended family. This practice reinforces communal bonds, mutual obligations, and respect for kinship networks. Through the language and behaviour surrounding in-law relationships, the Igbo society sustains its values of honour, solidarity, and intergenerational respect, highlighting the importance of maintaining harmony and dignity within and across family lines.

Findings

This research reveals that Igbo proverbs extracted from selected traditional Igbo events derive their full meaning through sociopragmatic expression rather than syntactic structure or semantic analysis alone. Their interpretation depends on the interplay between language, culture, society, and context, requiring both speaker and listener to rely on shared cultural knowledge, social norms, and situational cues. Understanding a proverb involves more than decoding its linguistic form; it necessitates an awareness of the cultural setting, speaker's intention, and the communicative purpose. This underscores the role of

sociopragmatic competence in interpreting proverbs, as their effectiveness lies in conveying layered meanings within specific contexts.

Proverbs are inherently non-compositional. As shown in this study, they, alongside idioms, metaphors, and other figurative forms, often defy the principle of compositionality. The linguistic glossing of the analysed proverbs does not disclose their intended meaning; instead, interpretation relies on extralinguistic factors such as context, speaker intention, and cultural background. Thus, Igbo proverbs are highly context-dependent, carrying extra semantic features that go beyond surface-level semantics.

Summary and Conclusion

This research focuses on the sociopragmatic functions of Igbo proverbs extracted from recordings of real-time speeches during Traditional weddings (Igba nkwa), avoiding assumptions by analysing actual usage. Using Lawal, Ajayi and Raji's (1997) model of pragmatic theory, the study highlights proverbs as context-bound linguistic tools strategically deployed in specific communicative situations, reflecting the Igbo adage that a proverb is "the oil with which words are eaten."

Findings show that Igbo proverbs derive their meaning through sociopragmatic expression, relying on the relationship between language, culture, and context. Their interpretation goes beyond syntax or semantics, requiring shared cultural knowledge and communicative competence. The study also reveals that cultural orientation influences proverb use; tradition-oriented speakers apply them more than those inclined toward Western expressions. Additionally, the research affirms the non-compositionality of proverbs, where constituent words do not reveal the actual

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meaning, highlighting the crucial role of context in their functional deployment.

In conclusion, the study has examined the sociopragmatic functions of Igbo proverbs in Traditional wedding events (Igbankwụ), portraying them as functional expressions that preserve cultural identity, strengthen social bonds, and transmit intergenerational wisdom. This contributes to understanding African oral traditions by bridging linguistic form, pragmatic intent, and cultural practice. The continued study and preservation of proverbs are essential for maintaining indigenous knowledge systems in a changing world.

For broader scholarly insight, future research should explore other traditional Igbo events to develop a more comprehensive corpus of real-time proverb usage. This would enrich documentation and enhance understanding of when and where proverbs are most effectively applied in discourse.

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