

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF IGBO-BASED ONITSHA SLANG: A STUDY OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

What happens when artificial intelligence (AI) meets Igbo-based Onitsha slang? This study explores the pragmatic functions of Igbo-based Onitsha slang and how artificial intelligence (AI) systems such as ChatGPT interpret their meanings. Drawing on the relevance theory and the speech act theory as its theoretical frameworks, the study analyses the intention, the context and the implicature across human and machine understanding. A qualitative research design was adopted, and forty slang expressions were sourced from a public post on Facebook, which featured contemporary Onitsha slang. The analysis was presented in a tabular form to highlight the contextual interpretation, the pragmatic functions, AI-generated interpretations, the researcher's interpretation, and points of convergence and divergence between human and AI understanding. Findings reveal that while AI systems can process literal meanings, they often lack the capacity to grasp deeper cultural and contextual nuances that are characteristic of human inference. This underscores the need for context-sensitive and culturally informed AI models. The study offers a new insight into the intersection of African sociolinguistics and emerging AI discourse by demonstrating how AI's misinterpretation of Igbo-based Onitsha slang exposes the limitations of algorithms predominantly trained on Western linguistic data. It therefore foregrounds the urgency of developing AI systems aligned with African linguistic creativity and cultural expression.

Keywords: pragmatic functions, Onitsha slang, artificial intelligence (AI), speech act, sociolinguistics

Introduction

Igbo-based Onitsha slang is distinct from other Igbo slang because of its local colour and meanings. It is widely used by youths across the metropolitan city of Onitsha and often serve as a means of identity construction and solidarity. Slang, often regarded as informal or nonstandard usage of language, is commonly used by non-elites or lower-class groups to promote ingroup unity (Bussman, 1996; Crystal, 1997; Johnson and Shirley, 2005; McGregor, 2009).

The Igbo-based slang in Onitsha functions as a marker of identity for its speakers. They are loaded with meanings that may confuse outsiders, especially those living in other parts of Igboland. These slangs are a creative blend of indigenous Igbo, pidgin, and sometimes standard English, thereby producing expressions that go beyond the literal sense.

It is crucial to examine the meaning, the pragmatic functions of these slang expressions, and how Artificial Intelligence (henceforth, AI) tools such as ChatGPT interpret them. This is necessitated by the increasing reliance on AI for interpretation, communication and translation. This study, therefore, investigates the pragmatic functions of these Igbo-based Onitsha slang and evaluates how AI interprets them. This will highlight the gaps between human and AI interpretation.

The following questions will guide the study:

1. What pragmatic functions are performed by these Igbo-based Onitsha slang?
2. How does AI interpret these slangs in comparison to humans?
3. What do these differences in terms of interpretation reveal about AI?

Literature Review

Slang is an informal, non-standard words or phrases and lexical creations that take their root in subcultures within a society (Johnson and Shirley, 2005). Crystal (1997: 53) postulates that "slang is a colloquial departure from standard usage; it is often imaginative, vivid and ingenious in its construction so much so that it has been called the 'plain man's poetry'". Harris (1994) describes slang as an in-group language with distinct meaning to ward off others from participating in the discourse. Winkler (2007) added that slang could evolve from a given group before spreading to various regions of society. It is usually spoken by the less privileged and associated with persons of low reputation or character (McGregor, 2009; Bussman, 1996; Crystal, 1997; Johnson and Shirley, 2005).

Narrowing the discourse to the Onitsha slang variant, a substantial body of research has been conducted on the Igbo-based Onitsha slang. Nkamigbo and Eme (2011) examined Igbo slang in Otu-Onitsha by analysing eighty-three slang expressions based on their users, usage and context. Their findings reveal that the Igbo-based Otu-Onitsha slang is created by different Igbo speakers with different dialects and is gradually permeating Enu-Onitsha. Okafor (2023) investigated the variation, birth and death of some slang expressions in the Onitsha environment due to their informal nature. The study showed that the birth and death of slang expressions lead to their variation in usage. Onumajuru (2016) did a contrastive study of two varieties of Igbo language: Onicha and central Igbo language, and the findings revealed that there are variations in the speech forms of the central and Onicha Igbo varieties in their lexical and morphosyntactic domains. Anchored on the theoretical framework of language play and cultural context, Chibueze (2023) examined some selected Igbo romance slang to decode their linguistic and socio-cultural implications. The study reveals that a plethora of romantic slang in the Igbo language is marked by innovative linguistic forms involving phonological and morphological adaptations. The slang performs communicative functions like humour, strengthening in-group identity and addressing sensitive issues. Okafor-Maduka (2024) studied Igbo slang expression in literature, submitting that the use of Igbo slang in Igbo literature could increase readership. Similarly, Nwobu (2022) explored slang in relation to the Awka dialect. Despite these notable studies on the Igbo-based Onitsha slang, scant attention has been given to Onitsha slang in relation to its pragmatic functions, how AI interprets such slang, and how this compares with human understanding. These significant gaps in knowledge justify the present study. This study contributes significantly to African linguistics by providing a contemporary documentary of Igbo-based Onitsha slang through the highlighting of the pragmatic richness as well as demonstrating how indigenous linguistic creativity challenges existing AI systems

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on two interrelated pragmatic theories: speech act theory and the relevance theory. Together, they both provide a solid basis for understanding how Igbo-based Onitsha slang functions in communication and how its meaning is interpreted differently by humans and AI.

Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory was proposed by John L. Austin in his posthumous book, "How to Do Things with Words" (1962). It explores the pragmatic function of utterances by studying the performative function of utterances; language as performing an action beyond conveying meaning. Whenever we are stating a fact, performing or denying something, making a prediction, thanking or giving a piece of advice, we are engaged in speech acts. Our utterances could either describe situations, events, and states of affairs (constatives) (Osisanwo, 2003: 60). It is relevant to Onitsha slang because these expressions carry functions and meanings beyond the literal meaning. Speech act theory provides the ground for grouping these slangs into their pragmatic functions such as insult, solidarity, praise, warning, humour and so on. Speech acts are categorised into three, namely locutionary speech acts, illocutionary speech acts and the perlocutionary speech acts.

Locutionary Speech Acts- This is making utterances with meaning and truth value. This becomes possible when speakers have the intention of saying something meaningful and truthful (Ezeifeke, 2018; Osisanwo, 2003).

Illocutionary Speech Acts- This is the non-linguistic act performed through a linguistic or locutionary act. It becomes effective through performative sentences even when there is no clearcut performative verb (Osisanwo, 2003). The performatives are verdictives, commissives, behabitives and expositives.

Perlocutionary Speech Acts- This is the effect of the utterance on the listener.

Relevance Theory

The theory was developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). It explains how people interpret what is said. Deidre (2019) explains that the theory is a cognitive approach to pragmatics that believes in the Gricean assumption that:

1. Much human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, involves the overt expression and inferential recognition of intention.
2. In inferring these intentions, the addressee presumes that the communicator's behaviour will meet certain standards.

Relevance is defined in terms of cognitive (or contextual) effects and processing effort: other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects and the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance. For this study, the inferential dimension of relevance theory is relevant to the study. Sperber and Wilson (1986) argue that communication is not merely a matter of decoding words, but of inferring the speaker's intended meaning based on context, shared assumptions and background knowledge.

Onitsha slang is rich in implied context-dependent meaning that requires an inferential framework. Adopting the speech act and the inferential relevance theories will make a balanced analysis in terms of the function and the interpretative dimensions of slang usage.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study to examine the pragmatic functions of Igbo-based Onitsha slang and their interpretation by AI. This design was chosen over a quantitative approach because it focuses on meanings, functions and the contextual interpretations of slang usage in Onitsha. The data for this study were sourced from a public Facebook post containing commonly used slang by speakers in Onitsha. Facebook was selected because it is one of the most active social platforms for youth interaction in the Onitsha metropolitan area. Contemporary slang spreads rapidly on the internet and Facebook posts often contain authentic, natural occurring language used by speakers in their informal contexts. It matches the qualitative idea of research that prioritises the use of real-life, context driven language data. A total of forty slang expressions were purposively selected and extracted from the post for detailed analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using insights from the speech act theory and the relevance theory. Each slang expression was analysed to show its contextual meaning, pragmatic function and AI-generated interpretation. The contextual meaning were determined from the researcher's familiarity with the speech community as well as through the analysis of the expressions used in everyday communication contexts. Again, the researcher relied on the shared background knowledge among Onitsha speakers -the linguistic environment and the inferential process described in relevance theory.

The analysis was presented in a tabular format. The table entry consists of the slang expression; its contextual meaning; the pragmatic function; AI interpretation; the researcher's interpretation; the points of convergence and divergence between the contextual and AI interpretations.

S/N	Slang Expression	Contextual Meaning	Pragmatic Function	AI Interpretation (Chat GPT)	Researcher's Interpretation	Point of Convergence	Point of Divergence
1.	Ị na-akọ tuu park.	You are not making sense.	It is an expressive act of insult or mockery.	You are chilling at the park.	It is an expressive act that indicates that someone's argument is pointless	Nil	AI interprets it literally, which is different from the contextual meaning.
2.	Bịa kanyi lụọ	Come, let us reason together.	It is a directive speech act.	Let us count or enumerate.	It is a directive speech act used by a speaker to invite a person for a crucial discussion.	Nil	AI gives a literal meaning that differs from the contextual meaning.
3.	Atana afufu okwu ọnu	Do not bother.	It is a directive speech act.	Words flow from the mouth. Loose/careless talk.	It is a directive speech act used to caution a person not to waste time on frivolities.	Nil	The contextual meaning differs from the AI-generated interpretation.
4.	Mụ na gị adịrọ eme ofu ihe.	We do not share things in common.	It is an assertive speech act.	You and I do not do the same thing or we do not have the same ways.	It is an assertive speech which the speaker uses to assert their differences.	AI and the contextual interpretation is the same.	Nil

5.	Tinye lum ahụ.	(Come to my side, put body) Come over to my place.	It is a directive speech act.	Put it or bear it. Deal with it or take it the way it is.	It is a directive act which the speaker uses to invite the listener to his home, neighbourhood or even a gathering.	Nil	Different interpretations given.
6.	Anọ m na nleka.	I am broke (I am penniless).	It is an assertive speech act.	I am outside or outdoors.	It is an assertive speech act used by speakers to assert their financial hardships.	Nil	AI's interpretation differs from the contextual interpretation.
7.	Otu adịrọ asị ndo	We do not care.	It is an expressive speech act.	Sorry is not said, or one does not say sorry.	It is an expressive speech act used when one wants to say that they are indifferent.	Nil	AI interprets it literally and therefore produces a contrary view.
8.	Gbara ọgụ gị ñụ.	Respect yourself.	It is a directive speech act.	Fight your battle well/ win your fight.	It is a directive speech act used when one wants to warn someone.	Nil	The contextual and the AI-generated meanings differ.
9.	Film agwugwo.	It is finished.	It is an assertive speech act.	The film has ended.	It is an assertive speech act used to indicate that a situation or an action has ended.	Nil	Different interpretations.
10.	I na-ete amụ gị nsị.	You are messing up (you dey fuck up).	It is an expressive speech act.	You are spreading your breast for stool. It figuratively means that one is exposing oneself to disgrace.	It is an expressive act used when one wants to say that another person is behaving shamefully.	AI-generated meaning and the contextual meaning are the same.	Nil
11.	Ejero m ose	I did not suffer for it.	It is an assertive speech act.	pepper/ I am angry I have eaten	It is an assertive speech act used when the speaker wants to assert that they did not labour much for their huge success	Nil	Different interpretations

12.	Gba tue volume	Stop making a noise.	It is a directive speech act.	Turn up/increase the volume.	It is a directive speech act used when the speaker is requesting someone to stop making a noise.	Nil	Different interpretations.
13.	Onye osu imi / onye sabo	A betrayer	It is an expressive speech act.	A person who touches your nose.	It is used by a speaker to say that someone is a betrayer.	Nil	Different interpretations.

14.	Gbuwalum olu	Teach me levels or show me the way.	It is a directive speech act	Finish the work for me.	It is used when a speaker wants someone to share their ideas or tactics.	Nil	Different interpretations.
15.	Tido osiso.	Get out of here.	It is a directive speech act.	Speak quickly or talk fast.	It is used to command someone to get away from a particular place.	Nil	Different interpretations
16.	Achoro m ibu nwa	I want a girlfriend.	It is an expressive speech act.	I don't want to have a child, or I don't want to be pregnant.	It is used when the speaker wants to woo a lady.	Nil	Different interpretations.
17.	Ndi a etichago m	They stole my money.	It is an assertive speech act.	They have ignored me or neglected me.	It is used when the speaker wants to assert that they have been robbed by some hoodlums.	Nil	Different interpretations.
18.	Imu iyoo	Onitsha brought up.	It is an assertive/ or a declarative	Children of the wicked/ offspring of	This is used to refer to those raised in	Nil	Different interpretations.

			speech act	troublemakers.	Onitsha.		
19.	Aliji	It is a pity.	It is a declarative act.	A greedy person or a covetous person.	It is used when the speaker is saying something sorrowful or grievous.	Nil	Different interpretations.
20.	Ndi a naapiawa m azu	They are cheating me.	It is an assertive speech act.	They are deceiving me, or they are cheating me.	This is used when the speaker wants to say that they are being cheated.	The contextual and AI-generated meanings are the same.	Nil
21.	Oo mpa, choi!	A way of hailing someone.	It is an expressive speech act.	Wow! Amazing!	It is used by speakers to salute someone, especially men or guys.	Nil	Different interpretations.
22.	Kam kpoolu gi cassette.	Let me tell you something.	It is a directive speech act.	Let me play you a cassette or let me play a tape for you.	It is used when the speaker has a lot of insightful information to pass across to the listener.	Nil	Different interpretations.

23.	Taa, ọbulo ile ọiso!	It is not bragging (Nor be mouth)	It is an assertive speech act.	Today, nothing is hidden, and today everything will be revealed.	It is used when the speaker wants the listener to know that whatever they are saying is factual.	Nil	Different interpretations.
24.	Nwa otu	Onitsha indigenes (nwa Onitsha)	It is a declarative or an assertive speech act.	Member of a group or society.	It is used to refer to Onitsha indigenes or those raised in Onitsha.	Nil	Different interpretations.
25.	Nwanne, afulo onye akoolu.	It is a tiring situation (the thing tire me).	It is an expressive speech act.	My sibling/friend, don't underestimate anyone.	It is used by speakers to refer to a troubling or challenging situation.	Nil	Different interpretations.
26.	Onwelo ife na-eme.	Nothing is happening (nothing dey happen).	It is an assertive speech act	Nothing is happening.	It is used when the speaker wants to assert that everything is under control.	Both interpretations are the same.	Nil
27.	Nwanne, kam tachie ulcer.	Let me go and eat.	It is an expressive speech act.	My friend /sibling, let me treat your ulcer.	It is used when the speaker wants to say that they are eating.	Nil	Different interpretations.
28.	Onunu ugu	A beautiful and young girl	It is an assertive speech act.	Palm kernel/oil palm seed	It is used when the speaker is referring to a beautiful lady. "Onunu ugu" is fresh and tender.	Nil	Different interpretations.
29.	Nwanne, kam donyegodu iru efi.	To contort one's face. (let me bone my face).	It is a directive speech act.	My sibling/friend, let me help you apply ointment to your wound or sores.	The slang is used when the speaker wants to appear serious in any situation.	Nil	Different interpretations.
30.	Anyi adiwo kwa eme ihe ndi mpi anya here.	We are seriousminded (we nor dey dull).	It is an assertive speech act.	We don't do what our rivals/enemies do.	It is used when the speaker wants to assert that they are focused and intentional.	Nil	Different interpretations.
31.	I na-aku	You are enjoying (you just dey flex).	It is an expressive speech act.	You are angry or upset.	It is used when the speaker is praising or hailing the listener because they look good or are having a good time.	Nil	Different interpretations.

32.	Nna, kpọ onwe gi meeting.	Call yourself to order.	It is a directive speech act.	Please arrange a meeting yourself.	This slang is used when the speaker wants the listener (s) to caution themselves.	Nil	Different interpretations.
33.	Ugba adiṛọ	No case	It is an assertive speech act.	The snail is not moving.	It is used when the speaker wants to assert that there are no qualms or problems.	Nil	Different interpretations.
34.	Onye mgbu	A useless person.	It is an assertive speech act.	A troublesome person.	It is used when one wants to refer to someone as worthless.	Nil	Different interpretations.
35.	Nwanne, waa here!	Guy, leave here.	It is a directive speech act.	My sibling /friend, go here.	It is used by the speaker to command someone to leave a place.	Nil	Different interpretations.
36.	Kọọ lum	Stay away from me.	It is a directive speech act.	Hit me or strike me.	Speakers use it when they want their listeners to steer clear or beware of them.	Nil	Different interpretations.
37.	Kam fụ azụ gi	Get out	It is a directive speech act	Let me hit or beat your back.	Speakers use this slang to command someone to leave a place.	Nil	Different interpretations.
38.	Tinye onwe gi na chain.	Calm down	It is a directive speech act.	Restrain yourself	It is used when the speaker is commanding a listener to keep calm.	The same interpretation.	Nil
39.	Ọ na-ata mgbu	He skips class.	It is an assertive speech act.	He/she is wasting time.	It is used by a speaker to say that one is a truant.	Nil	Different interpretations.
40.	Onwe kwali ife i na-ahọta	Do you understand?	It is a directive speech act.	Don't meddle in what doesn't concern you.	It is used by a speaker to ascertain whether a listener understands them.	Nil	Different interpretations.

Discussion of Findings

An in-depth analysis of the pragmatic functions of Igbo-based Onitsha slang and their interpretation by AI revealed interesting insights. Out of the 40 slang expressions analysed, AI produced interpretations that aligned with the contextual meaning in only five slang expressions, while it differed significantly in thirty-five slang expressions. This indicates that AI struggles or failed to capture the contextual, figurative and pragmatic elements in speakers slang expressions in 87.5% cases. The pragmatic functions performed by the slang expressions are expressive, directive, assertive, and declarative speech acts. On AI interpretation, slang expressions were

interpreted literally and it ignored the emotional, cultural and pragmatic subtleties intended by the speakers or users of such slang expressions. For example, “i na ako tuu park” (you are not making sense) was interpreted as “you are chilling at the park”, and many more diverge from the actual meaning understood by native speakers. Finally, the implication of the differences in interpretation highlights the limitations of current AI models in interpreting culture-specific and context-dependent language use, particularly in African settings. Consequently, the research underscores the need for the development of African context-sensitive algorithms by AI developers, that is capable of capturing both the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions of African languages and slang expressions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that language interpretation extends far beyond the processing of literal meanings, which remains the primary focus of most contemporary AI systems. Through the analysis of Igbo-based Onitsha slang, the findings demonstrate that meaning is deeply embedded in context, culture, emotion, and shared social knowledge- dimensions that pose significant challenges for artificial intelligence. Specifically, AI-generated interpretations diverged from human contextual interpretations in 35 out of the 40 slang expressions analysed, thereby revealing substantial gaps in AI’s pragmatic competence. These discrepancies underscore AI’s limited ability to capture the emotional, cultural, pragmatic, and situational subtleties that characterise African linguistic creativity and everyday communication practices. The misinterpretation of slang expressions highlights how current AI models, which are largely trained on Western-centric linguistic data, struggle to engage with locally grounded meaning-making processes. As a result, such systems risk producing interpretations that are inaccurate, culturally insensitive, or pragmatically inappropriate when applied to African languages and varieties. In light of these findings, this study argues for the urgent development of African context-sensitive AI models that incorporate indigenous linguistic norms, cultural knowledge and pragmatic conventions. AI developers must prioritise the inclusion of African language data and sociocultural contexts in model training and evaluation. Doing so will not only enhance the accuracy of language processing systems but also promote linguistic inclusivity and equity in the global AI landscape. Ultimately, integrating African linguistic creativity into AI development represents a crucial step towards more socially aware, culturally responsive, and pragmatically competent artificial intelligence.

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