

## FIGURE-GROUND ALIGNMENT AND COGNITIVE CULTURAL SYSTEMS IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN GREETING PRACTICES AMONG THE IGBOS, HAUSA-FULANIS, AND THE YORUBAS

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### **Abstract**

*This work looks at the relationship between two distinct topics in cognitive semantics. On one hand, it looks at the concept of Figure and Ground alignment in cognitive language conception, and on the other hand the concept of the cognitive culture system. Figure and Ground alignment concerns the perceptual organization that highlights a focal object, element, or event (Figure) from its surrounding context (Ground). This principle extends beyond visual perception, it is also observed in various cognitive processes, linguistic realization of conceptualization processes, and social interactions and narratives. The cognitive culture system concerns itself with the acquisition and maintenance of culture. These two topics relate to each other in studying the importance of different cultural practices across different cultures. This research looks at the similarities and differences between the greeting methods of the three most populous tribes in Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulanis, the Yorubas, and the Igbos. It is observed that cultural differences allocate the roles of Figure and Ground to different elements based on the socio-cultural orientation of the tribes. The Hausa-Fulanis in their cognitive cultural system the broader social status and relation which is the ground is valued above the individual which is the Figure. The Yoruba cultural cognitive system has a more balanced approach it allows for interplay between the Figure (the individual) and the Ground (the social and environmental components). The Igbos tend to have a more Figure oriented approach, where the individual is the focus (Kedu ka i mere?) (How are you?) They often foreground the individual while the context and the socio-cultural elements are backgrounded. **Figure-Ground alignment, cognitive culture system, greetings, society, culture***

### **1. Introduction**

This work examines an inter-play between two areas of cognitive semantics as postulated by Talmy 2000. These are the areas of Figure-Ground alignment and the area of the Cognitive Culture System. This work examines how the concept of Figure-Ground alignment could be found relevant in the Cognitive Culture System of human society. Precisely this work will examine the interplay of the two notions mentioned above concretely in the greeting patterns of the three most populous tribes in Nigeria: the Hausa-Fulanis, the Yorubas, and the Igbos.

The first concept of Figure-Ground alignment, originally rooted in Gestalt psychology, refers to the perceptual organization that differentiates a focal object (Figure) from its surrounding context (Ground). This principle extends beyond visual perception, influencing cognitive processes, language, and social narratives. It is obtainable in all aspects of cognitive processes; in language, for instance, it differentiates the focal entity from the contextual background. This concept, however, could also be extended to the socio-cultural organization of a society. In multicultural societies like Nigeria, where ethnic diversity is a defining feature, understanding figure-ground distinctions is critical for exploring how cultural values and norms shape

cognition and intergroup relations. In the area of greeting patterns of a culture, Figure-Ground alignment helps one understand which elements are at the focal points of the culture and which elements are at the background.

The second concept, the Cognitive Culture System, deals with the acquisition, maintenance, and exercise of the culture of a given society. Talmy (2000) argues that cultural patterns exist primarily because of the cognitive organization of each of the individuals who collectively make up a society. This concept examines what is universal across cultures and what varies, which attributes are innate and those that are learned, and also how the individual and the group are related in acquiring, maintaining, and executing cultural practices. This concept also draws an analogy to the Leviathan social contract<sup>1</sup>, whereby the individuals of a society team up to achieve a higher unifying factor, in this case, the society's culture. Some of the cultural commonalities among humans according to Murdock 1965 are Age-grading, bodily adornment, community organization, courtship, divination, division of labour, mourning, superstition, religious rituals, taboos, family, feasting, tool making, weather control, fire, ethics, language, **greetings**, postnatal care, joking, hairstyles, etc.

The research at hand will look at the application of the concept of Figure-Ground alignment to the cognitive culture system of three tribes in Nigeria based on their greeting patterns. It sets out to look at the basic greeting patterns of these tribes and analyze the elements that are prioritized or focused on primarily, which will be deemed the Figure, and then the elements that are backgrounded. This information will then be compared to each other to make claims about similarities or differences.

This research work will proceed after this introductory part with section (2) which will present the theoretical background of the work. The next section (3) will deal with the methodology of the research which will be a collection of the usual daily greeting patterns of the three tribes mentioned above. Section (4) will be devoted to the analysis of the data collected. The final section (5) will then discuss the results of the analysis and provide the reader with concluding remarks.

## **2. Theoretical background**

This section will look at the theoretical underpinnings relevant to the research paper. It will first of all look at the greeting practices of the tribes in question and also the general significance of greetings in Nigerian cultures.

### **2.1 Greeting practices by the three most populous tribes in Nigeria**

The greeting cultures of Nigeria: Hausa-Fulanis, Yoruba, and Igbo tribes. Nigeria is the most populous country in West Africa and is home to over 250 ethnic groups and all these ethnic groups have their own different cultures and languages. The three most populous tribes are the Hausa-Fulanis, Yorubas, and the Igbos. The Hausas are found in the northern region of the country and are the most populous of the three they are quite similar to the Fulanis, sometimes they are called Hausa-Fulani as a single tribe because their mode of greeting, and even their cultures are quite similar. The women in this tradition crouch in greeting while the men shake hands with a little bow. The Yorubas on the other hand are a bit more formal and more respectful in a way, the men must prostrate fully with their chins and their chest touching the ground while the women must bend with their two knees on the floor, they must remain in

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<sup>1</sup> Leviathan is a philosophical theory developed by Thomas Hobbes (1651, 2008). He asserts that there is an agreement between the law of the society or the governing body and the people which he calls a social contract. He claims that the individual agrees to give up certain liberties for the collective good of society.

these positions with their eyes cast down and their heads bent a little low until the elder whom they are greeting finishes their oriki or praise attributive names. The Igbos are less formal, the women crouch in greeting and so do the children when greeting elders. The men on the other hand shake hands, but a young Igbo man seeking to greet an elder should never stretch out the hand first. The young man must wait for the elder to initiate the handshake. This is a sign of respect; sometimes the old men even forego the handshake and instead touch their walking sticks in greeting. (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tix5WlgrnCs>. Visited 1.11.2024).

## **2.2 The general significances of Greetings in Nigerian Cultures**

The first significance of greeting in the cultures of Nigeria is to show respect and hospitality. Greetings demonstrate respect for elders, the tradition of the people, and the general community. The greeting practices also signify the notion of social bonding. Through such exchanges, interpersonal relationships are established and unity is fostered. It also helps to strengthen family ties. Another significant aspect is that of cultural identity. Greetings play vital roles in the reflection of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of a nation or a group of people. The communicative aspect of greetings is also very significant in the sense that greetings convey messages, intentions, and emotions and also indicate the social status of the interlocutors. The final significant aspect of greeting is the spiritual implications of some greetings. Some greetings invoke prayers, blessings, and spiritual protection on the addressee (cf. Ekpe 2005).

Ekpe (2005), in his exploration of the greeting rituals and social norms across various Nigerian ethnic groups, asserts that the Yorubas in their greeting have respect for their elders entrenched in the practices. This they show by prostration or bowing when greeting. The aspect of social hierarchy is also shown clearly in their age and status-based approach to greeting practices. Their communication style is direct and expressive. All these work together to maintain the overarching norms and values of the society, which are based on hospitality and respect for tradition.

Greeting is of immense importance in Igbo culture to the extent that anybody who does not greet others is regarded as not having proper home training. Greeting precedes every interaction, between individuals, in the community, or during social gatherings. Traditionally, the child or the junior one must greet the elder or the senior first. Also, a woman greets her husband first as the children must greet their parents and seniors first. In the same way, Chiefs and titled men are greeted first, often by hailing their chieftaincy titles. Among elders, no one is under the obligation to greet the other first except in the case where the seniority is proven. The Igbos have different greetings for different occasions and circumstances. They consider the morning greeting in particular as very important and significant because it ushers one into a new day. Failure to greet or respond to morning greetings is considered unethical, and disrespectful and indicates disfavour or grudge. A brief list of some greetings that are for specific periods or times of the day with an example each are as follows: a) Morning greeting: *I buọọla chi* (have you seen a new day ?), b) For evening and night: *Ka chi bọọ* (let the day break), c) Journey greetings: *Jee nke oma* (have a beautiful journey), d) Greetings at formal occasions and Festivities: *Igbo mma mma nū* (Igbo be beautiful), e) Greetings to a Benefactor: *I meela* (you have done well)<sup>2</sup> (cf. Learning about Ndi Igbo. Ed. C. Uchechukwu 2022: 222ff.). The Igbos also have respect for their elders and the observation of the social hierarchy as a priority. Their social structure is seen as egalitarian and clan-based, where the individual plays

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive list of different Igbo greetings for different times and periods consult Learning about Ndi Igbo. Ed. C. Uchechukwu (2022).

a central role in the organization of the society. Their communication style is indirect and diplomatic. Their general societal norms and values revolve around the communal co-existence and respect for their ancestors.

Finally, the Hausa-Fulanis also show respect for their elders, which they do by bowing or placing their right hand on their hearts when greeting. This nonverbal gesture signifies their deep sincerity in all their proclamations to their interlocutors. The social hierarchy of the Hausa-Fulanis is patriarchal and highly influenced by Islamic doctrine. Their communication style is formal and polite. The social norms and values revolve around modesty and respect for elders and authority (cf. Information from meta AI, chat GPT, and Gemini).

### **2.3 Figure-Ground Alignment in Language**

This is a concept in Cognitive Linguistics developed under Cognitive Semantics by Talmy 2000. It is treated as a part of a topic complex that is summed under the overarching topic called "Attention". The other topics under the same umbrella are "The Windowing of Attention in Language" and "Structures that Relate Events". The concept in question, Figure-Ground alignment relates to the system by which language establishes one cognitive concept as a reference point or a mental anchor for another concept. This concept postulates the existence of two fundamental cognitive functions in languages. The functions include that of a Figure, performed by the concept that needs anchoring, and that of the Ground, performed by the concept that does the anchoring (cf. Talmy 2000. 311). Such a cognitive process could be verbalized or represented in a simple utterance like:

- 1) The egg lay on the bed.
- 2) The egg fell off the bed.

The two concepts interacting in the above examples could be two objects relating to each other in space in an event of motion or location. These are represented by a pair of nominals (the egg and the bed) in a single clause. In this example "the egg" is the Figure, while "the bed" is the Ground. These could also be a pair of concepts that can be two events relating to each other in a temporal, causal, or other type of situation (cf. Ibid)

The concept of Figure and Ground could also be identified in a complex event, following are examples of Figure and Ground distribution in a complex sentence:

- 3a) They left the room after he pressed the alarm bell.
- 4a) He pressed the alarm bell before they left the room.

The pair of events interacting with each other above depicts in (3a) the act of leaving as occurring before the act of pressing the alarm bell. In (4a) the act of pressing the alarm bell occurred before the act of leaving the room. Therefore the events could be depicted as follows:

- 3b) Their leaving the room (F) occurred after he pressed the alarm bell (G)
- 4b) His pressing the alarm bell (F) occurred before they left the room (G)

### **The General Conceptualization of Figure and Ground in Language**

The concept of the figure is considered to be a moving or conceptually movable entity whose path, site, or orientation is conceived as a variable, the particular value of which is the relevant issue. Whereas, the Ground is a reference entity, a concept that has a stationary setting relative to a reference frame, concerning which the Figure's path, site, or orientation is characterized. Even though one can refer to the Ground as a reference point the term 'point' can be ignored or disregarded. Neither the Figure entity nor the Ground entity needs to be topologically idealized as a geometric point for their basic definitional roles to be fulfilled. The Figure or the

Ground can as readily be a multiplicity of points, a linear extent, an area, or a volume (cf. Talmy 312).

A practical approach to the application of the Figure-Ground alignment will be done in this work using the greeting practices of the three most populous tribes in Nigeria as a case study.

## 2.4 The Cognitive Culture System

The Cognitive culture system concerns itself with the Cognitivist description of the acquisition, dissemination, and conservation of culture. Cognitivists think that cultural patterns in society exist fundamentally because of the cognitive organization in each of the individuals making up the society. The Cognitivists' understanding of culture is contrary to several other theoretical positions, for instance, those positions that postulate an autonomous existence of culture beyond the cognition of individual humans. Talmy 2000, rather argues and provides evidence for an individual-based cultural Cognitivism.

A comparison could be made between cultural cognition and Linguistic cognition, in the sense that one can argue that the same conditions apply to both the acquisition of language and culture. The Chomskyan tradition postulates the existence of a Language acquisition device (henceforth LAD). This is said to include a universal grammar, which is the complex of requirements, constraints, and parameters that underline most of the structural commonalities present across languages. However, Talmy 2000 does not imply that all the assumptions in the Chomskyan tradition pertaining to the LAD apply as well to the cultural system. Not even that all the assumptions of LAD are true to the language system either. There is much to dispute in the autonomous modularity that the Chomskyan tradition ascribes to the language system, therefore any extension of this attribution to the culture system would even attract a greater challenge (cf. Talmy 2000: 377).

It is even assumed that both the language and culture systems are more integrated and intertwined with connections from other cognitive systems than is envisioned by the strict modularity notion generally associated with the LAD concept. So in order to express its distinctive conception Talmy 2000 terms cultural cognition in this context, the cognitive culture system, rather than, say the "culture acquisition device" or, the CAD in analogy to the LAD. It also serves as an indication that these two concepts do not have much in common.

Having listed above the commonalities of cultural practices among humans including practices like courtship, mourning, religious rituals, ethics, language, greetings, post-natal care, etc. This work will look closely at the cultural practice of "greetings" among three tribes in Nigeria. It will use the concept of Figure-Ground alignment to analyze the similarities and differences in the greeting practices of the selected tribes.

## 3. Methodology

This section will present the method of research employed in this work, which involves the collection of language data for analysis. The greeting practices of three of the most populous tribes in Nigeria will be examined in this work. Three of the most frequently used greetings will be taken from every culture and examined based on the Figure-Ground alignments of the expressions.

### 3.1 Data

Tribes	Greetings	Translations
Hausa-Fulani	Sanuu or Sanuuku for plural	Hello, Welcome or Well done.
	Ina lafiya?	How are you?

	Ina kwana?	(literally) Are you in good health? Good Morning (literally) How did you sleep?
Yoruba	Báwo ni? / Ẹ n lẹ Şé àlàáfíà ni? Ẹ káárò	Hello, How are you? How are you? Good Morning
Igbo	Ndeewo or Ndeewonu for plural Kedu ka i mere/ Kedu? Ị buọọla chi / Ị saala chi	Hello, Welcome or Well done. How are you doing / How are you? Good Morning (literally) Have you seen a new day?

**Table 1. Tribes and their greeting practices**

### 3.2 Analysis

This section will dwell on the analysis of the selected greetings of the three tribes in question. For a uniform approach, greetings with similar semantic values have been selected for each tribe. Three different greetings for three different situations have been chosen for each culture and these greetings will be analyzed based on the figure-ground alignment they portray.

#### 3.2.1 Hausa-Fulani

a) Sanuu or Sanuukuu for plural: this is the most common way of saying hello or well done to somebody among the Hausa-Fulanis. This is usually initiated by the younger participant which indicates respect and the acknowledgement of the social hierarchy. It also signifies that the speaker is conforming to the general social norms of their culture by acknowledging the presence of the addressee. However, the greeting is not personalized and it does not directly address any particular individual. Therefore the culture and the social norms are figured in this context while the individual is backgrounded in the event.

b) Ina lafiya?: this is translated as “How are you?”, it is a greeting aimed at ascertaining the general disposition of the addressee. The greeting is directed at the individual and it expresses the wish of the speaker to know how the addressee is doing. This greeting recognizes the addressee and places her as the figure of the event. In this situation, the social and the cultural context serve as the background.

c) Ina kwana?: this is translated as “good morning” or literally “how did you sleep?” This is the usual greeting used in the morning by the Hausa-Fulanis. It is directed at the addressee aimed at finding out how the individual in question has slept. This greeting like in the case of “Ina lafiya?” is directly aimed at the individual thereby making her the figure of the event. The socio-cultural aspect that specifies this greeting is then regarded as the ground of the event.

#### 3.2.2 Yoruba

a) Báwo ni? / Ẹ n lẹ: this is translated as "hello or well done" in some cases also accepted as "How are you?" This is the most usual way of saying hello to an addressee in Yoruba. The greeting does not focus on the individual even though it acknowledges the individual in the situation. It is more about the socio-cultural relationship. Therefore the culture is figured in this context while the individual is the ground.

b) Şé àlàáfíà ni?: this is translated as "How are you?" and is used to ascertain the general well-being of the addressee. This greeting directly asks the addressee how she is, thereby putting her

as the primary focus of the situation. This depicts the addressee as the figure of the situation and the culture of the people that demand the greeting as the Ground.

c) *Ẹ káárò*: this greeting is translated literally as “good morning” It is a greeting used by the Yorubas in the morning hours. It is not directly focused on the individual in particular but rather a fulfillment of the socio-cultural norm. The prefix “Ẹ” indicates that the addressee is older or superior in social status to the speaker. However, it does not address the individual directly rather it fulfils a socio-cultural norm. The greeting therefore has the culture as its primary focus, the Figure, and the individual as the Ground.

### 3.2.3 Igbo

a) *Ndewoo* or *Ndewoo nu* for plural: this is literally translated as “Hello” and is the general greeting used by the Igbos for the period between the morning greeting and the night greeting. The Igbos do not originally have the divisions of afternoon and evening greetings like the Europeans and the Western world<sup>3</sup>. (cf. Ekwealor, 1998; Onwudiwe 2020. Quoted in Learning about Ndị Igbo Ed. Uchechukwu 2020). This greeting does not focus on the individual addressed but rather conforms only to the socio-cultural norm of acknowledging an individual. This therefore makes the cultural context the Figure of the greeting and the individual the Ground.

b) *Kedu ka imere* or *Kedu* for short version: This greeting is literally translated as “How are you (doing)?” It is a greeting that is used to ascertain the well-being of the addressee by the speaker. It focuses on the individual addressed; who in turn has to answer if she is doing good or not. This greeting therefore puts the individual as the Figure and the cultural context as the Ground.

c) *Ị bụọọla chi* / *Ị saala chi*: depending on the region, these are the two most usual ways of greeting someone in the morning in Igbo. The former has the root verb “boo” meaning the cut or to slice open, therefore could literally be translated as “Have you cut or slice open the day?” Whereas, the latter has the root verb “saa” meaning to wash, therefore could have the literal translation of “Have you washed the day?” In both cases, the individual is clearly in the focus of the speaker therefore the Figure, while the cultural context is the Ground.

## 4. Results

The Analysis above shows a brief presentation of the three different greetings of the three most populous tribes in Nigeria. The greetings selected are chosen because of their similar semantic values so that they can be compared to each other. The first is the general greeting of the three tribes that could be translated to “Hello”. The second is the greeting that demands information about the well-being of the addressee which could be translated to “How are you?” Finally the last greeting selected is the morning greeting of the three tribes. In the analysis, using the Figure-Ground alignment as the framework it was discovered that in the greeting of the Hausa-Fulanis, the general greeting “*Sanuu* or *Sanuukuu* for plural” translated as Hello or well done, the individual is in this context the Ground while the culture is the Figure. The second greeting, which demands information about the well-being of the addressee “*Ina lafiya*” which is translated as “How are you?”, presents the individual as the Figure and the cultural context as the Ground of the event. The final greeting analyzed for the Hausa-Fulani tribe is the usual morning greeting “*Ina kwana*?” this could be translated as “Good morning” or literally “How did you sleep?” This greeting also puts the individual addressed as the Figure of the event and the culture as the Ground.

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<sup>3</sup> However, a new trend in many Igbo communities is the literal translation of the English greetings as (1) *Ụtụtụ ọma* (for Good morning); *Ehihie ọma* (for Good afternoon), etc (cf. Learning about ndị Igbo. Ed. C. Uchechukwu 2020).

In the case of the greetings of the Yoruba tribe examined, the first greeting “Báwo ni? / Ẹ n lẹ” is the general greeting that could be translated as "Hello or well done" and also in many cases accepted as "How are you?" puts the individual as the focus of the event, therefore making the addressee the Figure and then the culture the Ground of the event. The second greeting that ascertains the well-being of the addressee “Şé àlàáfíà ni?” which is translated as "How are you?" definitely puts the individual that is directly asked how is doing as the Figure and the culture is then consequently the Ground in the situation. The final greeting looked at, is the usual greeting for morning hours “Ẹ káárò” which is translated as "Good morning", this greeting does not directly address the individual, even though the presence of the individual is acknowledged. Therefore, in this case, the individual is the Ground and the culture is the Figure of the situation.

The final tribe examined, the Igbos have their first general greeting “Ndeewo or Ndeewo nu for plural”, which translates into "Hello or Well done". In this case, the addressee even though acknowledged is not the primary focus therefore is the Ground of the event while the cultural context is the Figure of the situation. The second greeting analyzed for the Igbo tribe, “Kedu ka imere or Kedu” which is translated as "How are you?" places the individual as the focus of the situation therefore as the Figure, while the culture is the background. The final greeting, “Ì buọọla chi / Ì saala chi” which is translated literally as have cut open or washed the day respectively is focused on the individual, therefore, it has the addressee as the Figure. The cultural setting is consequently regarded as the Ground in this context. Table 2 below presents an overview of the results obtained from the analysis.

Tribes	Greetings	Individual	Culture
Hausa-Fulani	Sanuu / Sanuukuu	Ground	Figure
	Ina lafiya?	Figure	Ground
	Ina kwana?	Figure	Ground
Yoruba	Báwo ni? / Ẹ n lẹ	Figure	Ground
	Şé àlàáfíà ni?	Figure	Ground
	Ẹ káárò	Ground	Figure
Igbo	Ndeewo / Ndeewo nu	Ground	Figure
	Kedu ka imere or Kedu	Figure	Ground
	Ì buọọla chi	Figure	Ground

**Table 2. Results of the analysis of Figure-Ground alignment**

The overview of the result in Table 2 shows similarities and differences in the allocation of Figure and Ground to either the individual or the culture in greeting practices. The major difference lies in the general greetings of the three tribes. On one hand, the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo have the individual as the Ground and the culture as the Figure. On the other hand, Yorubas in their general greeting have the individual as the Figure, whereas they put the culture as the Ground of the event.

Furthermore, all the tribes, Hausa-Fulanis, Yorubas and the Igbos are similar in their greetings of ascertaining the well being of the addressee. In all cases the three cultures have the addressees as the Figure and the culture as the Ground. The final difference lies in the morning greetings, where the Hausa-Fulanis and the Igbos have the individual as the Figure and the culture as the Ground. The Yoruba tribe on the contrary have the culture as the Figure and the individual as the Ground.



## 5. Conclusion

This work has introduced the concept of Figure-Ground alignment alongside the notion of a Cognitive Culture System as postulated by Talmy (2000). It looked at both concepts separately and then examined the possibilities of interactions between the two. This interaction has been successfully demonstrated by looking at the application of Figure-Ground alignment in the cultural practice of greeting. This research uses the three most populous tribes in Nigeria as the case study. Even though it was a small-scale study using 3 language data samples each from the three tribes it was able to demonstrate similarities and differences in the application of Figure-Ground alignment in their greeting practices. This research could serve as a stepping stone for a more elaborate study of the similarities and differences in other cultural practices across cultures of the world using the Figure-Ground alignment as the framework of the study. The study on greeting practices has clearly shown that this is a fruitful venture, for future studies, one can take a look at other cultural practices, for instance, marriage ceremonies, burial rites, divination, courtship, etc.

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