

THE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF PROVERBS IN *ACHOWA ISI QCHU*

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic functions and cultural significance of Igbo proverbs as used in *Achowwa Isi Qchu* by Chinedum Oformata, with particular focus on the application of Impoliteness Theory. Proverbs in Igbo discourse are not merely rhetorical flourishes; they are powerful communicative tools embedded with social meaning. Drawing on ten selected proverbs from the novel, the research explores how these expressions perform specific pragmatic roles such as correcting behavior, asserting authority, expressing disapproval, and subtly enacting face-threatening acts. The analysis reveals that impoliteness strategies, particularly positive impoliteness, sarcasm, and bald-on-record expressions are tactically deployed through proverbs to communicate social criticism without overt hostility. These proverbs reflect the sociocultural norms of the Igbo people, demonstrating how language, tradition, and interpersonal dynamics intersect in everyday communication. The study further highlights the impact of these proverbs on character interactions, showing how linguistic impoliteness functions not merely as a stylistic device but also as a mechanism for power negotiation and cultural reflection. By applying a pragmatic lens to indigenous literature, this work contributes to a broader understanding of African oral traditions, cultural linguistics, and the nuanced role of indirectness in communication.

Keywords: Igbo proverbs, pragmatic function, Impoliteness theory, sarcasm, implicature, indirectness

1. Introduction

Proverbs occupy a central place in Igbo communication, functioning not only as aesthetic expressions but as potent carriers of social meaning. In Chinedum Oformata's *Achowwa Isi Qchu*, these proverbial forms become strategic tools through which characters negotiate power, convey criticism, and reinforce communal values. This study investigates the pragmatic functions and cultural significance of thirty selected proverbs from the text, examining how they serve as mechanisms for shaping interpersonal relationships. Using Impoliteness Theory as its analytical framework, the research explores how proverbs enact face-threatening acts through strategies such as positive impoliteness, sarcasm, and bald-on-record expressions. The findings reveal that these proverbs articulate social disapproval, assert authority, correct misconduct, and deliver critique in culturally resonant ways that avoid overt hostility. In doing so, they illuminate the intricate interplay between language, tradition, and social behavior within Igbo society. By applying a pragmatic lens to indigenous literature, the study contributes to broader scholarly conversations on African oral traditions, cultural linguistics, and the subtle yet powerful role of indirectness in everyday communication.

Proverbs are concise and insightful expressions that convey general truths, moral lessons, and cultural wisdom. Rooted in the lived experiences, traditions, and worldviews of a people, proverbs serve both communicative and pedagogical purposes, and are transmitted across generations as part of cultural heritage. In Igbo society, proverbs known as *ilú ndí* Igbo play a particularly important role. They encapsulate the values, beliefs, and social norms of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Typically brief, metaphorical, and memorable, Igbo proverbs are used to teach morals, offer advice, resolve conflict, reinforce communal norms, and articulate cultural identity.

Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics concerned with the contextual use of language, provides a useful framework for analyzing how speakers employ linguistic expressions including proverbs to achieve communicative goals. Pragmatics explores how meaning is negotiated between speakers and listeners, how language functions in social interaction, and how linguistic choices reflect or shape relationships and intentions. Various pragmatic theories have been applied to the study of Igbo proverbs, including Politeness Theory, Positive and Negative Politeness, and Impoliteness Theory.

This study adopts Impoliteness Theory, also known as the face-threatening theory, which examines how language can threaten or undermine a speaker's or hearer's "face" their social self-image. In Igbo culture, the strategic use of proverbs often allows speakers to communicate criticism, disapproval, correction, or authority in culturally acceptable ways. Proverbs serve as indirect linguistic tools that soften or mask direct confrontation while still effectively conveying social regulation. Thus, the application of Impoliteness Theory provides a fresh perspective for understanding how certain proverbs perform subtle face-threatening acts or express social tension.

The growing scholarly interest in proverbs across cultures highlights their communicative, /cultural, and literary significance. Within Igbo literature, proverbs are deeply embedded in narrative structure, character development, and thematic expression. Chinedu Oformata's *Achowa Isi Ochu*, written in Igbo, offers a rich source of proverbs that reflect the worldview, values, and lived realities of the Igbo people. Investigating the use of proverbs in this novel provides an opportunity to understand how literary texts preserve, transmit, and interpret cultural knowledge.

This research therefore examines the pragmatic roles of Igbo proverbs in *Achowa Isi Ochu*, focusing particularly on their impoliteness functions. By analyzing how the proverbs are used within social interactions in the narrative, the study explores their communicative purposes, cultural implications, and contributions to literary meaning. Politeness and impoliteness frameworks, especially those proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Culpeper (1996), guide the analysis. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how proverbs help shape character relationships, negotiate power dynamics, and articulate cultural norms within the text.

There is a significant body of scholarly work that explores the use of proverbs in African oral traditions, particularly in the Igbo context. However, only but a few have viewed Igbo proverbs through the lens of the impoliteness theory. This work therefore bridges the research gap examining Igbo proverbs as used *Achowa Isi Ochu* using the Impoliteness theory which not only deepens the appreciation of Igbo linguistic heritage but also offers valuable insights into the pragmatic functions of proverbs in literary discourse.

2. Proverbs

Proverbs are short, metaphorical, and often poetic expressions that embody the accumulated wisdom, moral codes, and philosophical outlook of a people (Etta, 2012). Within African literature, proverbs transcend mere linguistic embellishment; they function as powerful communicative tools, cultural transmitters, and mechanisms for encoding social knowledge. Their influence is profound across various dimensions of African life, from everyday interactions to formal occasions such as traditional legal proceedings, initiation rites, storytelling, and public discourse (Agu, 2018).

Finnegan (1970) asserts that proverbs are fundamental to African literary culture, serving as carriers of wisdom and linguistic artistry. According to her, they are not simply decorative language features but are integral to the structure and meaning of oral narratives. Finnegan further explains that proverbs operate as a sophisticated system of communication that demands deep cultural and contextual understanding. They reveal a speaker's intelligence, rhetorical competence, and awareness of communal values, thereby playing a vital role in maintaining social order and identity.

A key characteristic of African proverbs is their metaphorical nature. Proverbs frequently employ allegory and analogy to express complex ideas in ways that are both vivid and accessible (Lee, 2025). For example, a proverb like "When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you" conveys the importance of internal strength and self-control more powerfully than a direct statement would. These figurative expressions commonly draw from nature, animals, everyday objects, or shared experiences to construct meanings that are culturally resonant and symbolically rich (Behrmann, 2012).

African proverbs also fulfill diverse communicative functions. In interpersonal interactions, they are used to counsel, caution, advise, praise, or rebuke, often in an indirect and respectful manner. This indirectness is a critical aspect of African politeness strategies, where face-saving and social harmony are greatly valued. Proverbs enable speakers to convey potentially sensitive or controversial messages with subtlety and tact. In public and legal discourse, elders and community leaders invoke proverbs to lend authority and traditional legitimacy to their decisions or judgments, reinforcing communal values and historical continuity (Ehondor, 2017).

In both oral and written African literature, proverbs contribute significantly to plot development, characterization, and thematic exposition. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka have skillfully employed proverbs to firmly root their works in African linguistic and cultural soil. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for instance, is celebrated not just for its narrative but also for its rich use of Igbo proverbs, which reflect the worldview, social order, and emotional life of the people. Achebe himself famously stated that proverbs are "the palm oil with which words are eaten," highlighting their role in making speech stylish, profound, and persuasive.

Furthermore, the communal nature of proverbs reflects the collective worldview prevalent in African societies. Proverbs are often not attributed to specific individuals but to the community or ancestors, emphasizing their inherent authority and universality. Handed down from generation to generation, often unmodified, they serve as

vital vessels of cultural memory. Their transmission is primarily oral, necessitating attentive listening, memorization, and mastery of contextual usage. In this way, proverbs function as powerful educational tools through which children learn cultural and societal values, appropriate behavior, and cognitive skills such as metaphorical thinking, memory retention, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving (Etta, 2012).

2.1 Studies on Igbo Proverbs

In Igbo society, proverbs are more than mere clever sayings; they are active instruments of wisdom, tradition, and communication. They act as a guide for navigating life, offering wisdom on how to live well, interact with others, and comprehend the world. A common Igbo saying, “ilu bu mmanụ e ji eri okwu,” translates to “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.” This well-known phrase, popularized by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), beautifully conveys how proverbs enrich language, making speech not only informative but also engaging and impactful.

Igbo proverbs are typically concise yet deeply meaningful. They often employ metaphors, symbolism, and poetic language. Many proverbs draw upon everyday aspects of Igbo life such as animals, farming tools, trees, rivers, and seasons to deliver potent messages in relatable ways. For instance, the proverb in example (1) uses birds to illustrate the concepts of tolerance and coexistence. Its metaphorical richness makes it memorable, while its rhythmic and balanced structure gives it an almost musical quality: (1): "Egbe bere, ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya." Meaning: "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch; if one says the other should not perch, let its wings break."

The straightforwardness of Igbo proverbs contributes to their ease of memorization and transmission. Their oral tradition has ensured their survival through many generations. Even today, children hear and repeat these sayings, often grasping their full meaning only as they gain life experience.

Igbo proverbs fulfill a variety of communicative and social roles. They are not simply used to appear wise but serve distinct purposes in various situations. The functions of Igbo proverbs encompass advisory, didactic, expressive, persuasive, and aesthetic roles. A proverb performs an advisory function when it offers guidance or a warning. When someone is contemplating a hasty decision, this type of proverb subtly advises caution without direct confrontation.

Proverbs serve a didactic purpose when they are used to impart moral values and life lessons. For example, the proverb: "O nweghi onye na-azu nwa ka chi," meaning "no one trains a child better than his personal god," teaches about fate and the limitations of human influence in shaping others. They embody an expressive function help convey emotions such as joy, disappointment, pride, or sorrow. These types of proverbial expressions communicate pride in a subtle, culturally resonant manner. For their persuasive function, proverbs are employed in debates, negotiations, or appeals as potent rhetorical tools. A speaker might use a proverb to win an argument or reduce resistance without being aggressive. Aesthetically, proverbs enhance language. They lend rhythm, depth, and style to speech, often transforming ordinary conversations into rich, artistic expressions.

However, proverbs can also be used negatively, for example, to promote sexism. It has been observed that some Igbo proverbs, which reflect "accumulations of the Igbo view about life, practical experience and beliefs held over the generations," portray women as gossips and talkative, devilish and wicked, liars, cheats and mediocre, as well as childish, selfish, unreliable and senseless (Oyeka, 2016). For example, the proverb, "Nwata nwaanyi zuru tooro onwe ya," literally meaning that a child raised by a woman has no guardian, is used to reinforce the cultural belief that women are incapable of successfully raising a child or to emphasize the essential role of the male in a family unit. Similarly, the proverb, "Ubochi nwaanyi muru nwoke ka o muru onye kari ya," which translates literally as, "The day a woman births a son is the day that she births the one greater than her," serves to reinforce the idea of male gender superiority over females based solely on having male genitals (Ezenwafor-Afuecheta & Idoko, 2023).

Igbo proverbs are deeply embedded in their cultural context. They are frequently heard during family meetings where elders counsel younger members, at traditional ceremonies where values and customs are upheld, in storytelling sessions where lessons are embedded in narratives, and in conflict resolution where they temper anger and encourage reflection (Etta, 2012). Through such applications, proverbs strengthen social cohesion and underscore communal values like respect for elders, humility, hard work, and the importance of unity. They are not merely ornamental elements; they are the binding force of Igbo interpersonal and communal life.

3. Methodology

This paper investigates the strategic deployment of proverbs in Chinedum Ofomata's play, *Achowa Isi Ochu'*. Ofomata, a contemporary Igbo playwright, is celebrated for his seamless fusion of traditional culture with modern

storytelling. His works are particularly noted for their authentic integration of Igbo idioms, folklore, and especially proverbs, which he skillfully embeds in dialogue to enrich characterization and underscore thematic concerns. *'Achowwa Isi Ochu'*, which translates as "He who seeks war invites death," is a didactic play exploring themes of justice, pride, community order, and the personal consequences of evil. In this text, proverbs are not mere embellishments; rather, they are deliberately positioned to convey wisdom, offer forewarning, or articulate communal judgment.

Characters strategically deploy proverbs to navigate conflicts, express nuanced emotions, assert authority, and transmit ancestral wisdom. For example, a proverb might subtly issue a veiled threat, offer counsel to an intractable individual, or succinctly encapsulate a complex moral dilemma. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of these proverbs necessitates not only proficiency in the Igbo language but also a deep appreciation for the specific cultural and situational cues inherent in each dramatic context. Given this, *'Achowwa Isi Ochu'* presents a rich opportunity for pragmatic analysis. The proverbs within the play function as potent speech acts, imbued with significant illocutionary intent and perlocutionary force. By meticulously analyzing these proverbs within their precise dramatic contexts, this research aims to show how language actively performs action and effectively transmits profound cultural meaning.

This work adopts Culpeper's 1996 Impoliteness theory in the data analysis. A total of 10 proverbs were selected from the play for analysis. These proverbs were chosen because they connect to the idea of impoliteness theory and clearly show how people use language to share important ideas in indirect ways. The following methods were used to study the proverbs:

Context analysis: This looks at the situation where the proverb was used. Who was speaking? Who were they speaking to? What was happening? This helps to figure out why the proverb was said at that moment. (Esimaje, n.d)

Implicature: This is about the hidden meaning behind the proverb. For example, a proverb might not directly name someone, but the listener understands who or what it means. (Honeck, 1978).

Presupposition: This means the information or beliefs the speaker thinks the listener already knows. Proverbs often use ideas that everyone in that culture understands. (Finnegan, 1970)

Speech act analysis: Each proverb does a specific job. It might be used to ask for something, give advice, warn someone, or criticize without being rude. This part of the study figures out what the speaker is trying to do by using the proverb. (Finnegan, 1970)

Effect on the listener: The researcher also looked at how the proverb might change how the listener felt or acted. Did it make them change their behaviour? Did it make things calmer or more stressful? (Esimaje, n.d)

By combining these methods, this work is able to show the true meanings and purposes of the proverbs in the play.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes excerpts from the novel in the form of proverbs, highlighting their meaning, context, pragmatic function and the Impoliteness strategies that they employ. It examines the selected proverbs within the framework of Culpeper's (1996) Impoliteness Theory. The analysis is organized thematically, highlighting how the proverbs function in discourse to convey criticism, mockery, warnings, or social regulations. Each proverb is presented in its original Igbo form, followed by an English translation, explanation of meaning, pragmatic function, Impoliteness strategy and cultural implication. Contexts from the narrative are also incorporated where necessary.

This novel revolves around the life of Chigozie, the son of Okwudiri and Obiageri. From childhood, Chigozie developed the habit of demanding food, particularly *Akara* and *Agidi*, often through tantrums. This habit gradually led him to stealing from his parents and later from outsiders. While his father reprimanded him, his mother indulged his misconduct, excusing it as harmless because he was their only child. As the story unfolds, Chigozie's misbehavior worsens, ultimately portraying him as a symbol of moral failure bred by parental negligence. The narrator employs proverbs extensively to describe characters, explain events, and highlight the consequences of actions, making them key to the didactic style and strength. The following proverbs are analyzed :

1. Igbo proverb: *O bu naani omara ajụ nọkatara juwa nne ya ma ugbogiri o na-ami anyu. (Pg 4)*

English translation: "It is only an inquisitive person that decides to ask his mother if broadleaf pumpkin produces muskmelon".

Meaning: Only a curious or sometimes overly curious person asks questions that might seem unnecessary or obvious to others. It highlights the nature of curiosity or sometimes foolish questioning, where someone seeks information that might be irrelevant or shows a lack of common sense.

Context: It was used by the narrator to point out the fact that Chigozie's mother knew why he was crying but still chose to ask him.

Pragmatic function:

This proverb functions to highlight and sometimes gently criticize a person's curiosity or inquisitiveness, especially when the questions asked seem unnecessary, obvious, or show a lack of common sense. Pragmatically, it serves to point out naive or foolish questioning, encouraging people to think carefully before asking questions that may appear silly or irrelevant. It can also be used to warn against unnecessary probing that might lead to embarrassment or trouble. In conversation, this proverb helps regulate social interactions by promoting discretion and thoughtful inquiry, reflecting cultural values that balance curiosity with respect for social norms and common knowledge.

Impoliteness strategy:

The proverb uses an **indirect form of negative impoliteness** by subtly mocking the inquisitive person's lack of judgment without openly insulting them. It challenges the hearer's positive face their desire to be seen as sensible and knowledgeable by implying that their question is foolish or unnecessary. Rather than direct confrontation, the proverb employs metaphor and humor to criticize the behavior, which softens the impact but still conveys disapproval. This indirectness aligns with Igbo cultural communication styles that prioritize maintaining respect and social harmony while addressing undesirable behavior. The strategy effectively exposes the hearer's social misstep, encouraging self-reflection and restraint in future interactions. By doing so, it enforces social norms around appropriate questioning and careful speech without causing open conflict or damaging relationships.

Cultural implication: This proverb reflects the Igbo cultural value placed on wisdom, discretion, and respect for social norms. In the community, asking unnecessary or foolish questions is seen as a lack of maturity or common sense, which can lead to embarrassment or loss of respect. The proverb encourages individuals to exercise thoughtfulness and restraint in their speech, highlighting that curiosity should be balanced with an understanding of what is appropriate to ask. It also underscores the importance of respecting elders and social hierarchies, as questioning in a way that seems disrespectful or naive can disrupt social harmony. Overall, the proverb serves as a cultural reminder to prioritize careful communication and social awareness, which are highly valued in Igbo society.

2. Igbo proverb: *O bu ebe Nwata na ebute onu mmanu mmanu ka o na-apu oriri.* (Pg 4)

English translation: 'It is where a child eats that he hangs out.'

Meaning: The proverb means that someone who contributes very little or makes a small effort expects to benefit or enjoy a lot. It highlights selfishness, unfairness, or hypocrisy; taking more than what one deserves based on their contribution.

Context: The narrator used this proverb to describe Chigozie gluttony that was discovered by his Mother.

Pragmatic function: This proverb functions as a social corrective tool used to criticize selfishness or unfairness in a subtle, indirect way. It highlights situations where someone expects to gain more benefits than their small contribution justifies, pointing out an imbalance in effort and reward. Pragmatically, it serves to reprimand greed, warn against exploitation, and encourage fairness and reciprocity within the community. By reminding individuals that rewards should match their input, the proverb reinforces important cultural values of equity and mutual support. Its indirectness helps maintain social harmony while still addressing problematic behavior, making it an effective way to manage relationships and uphold social norms in Igbo society.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb employs a form of indirect **negative impoliteness**, where the speaker criticizes the hearer's selfish behavior without directly insulting them. By highlighting the unfairness of expecting to consume more than one contributes, the proverb threatens the hearer's positive face, their desire to be seen as fair, generous, and socially acceptable. This indirect criticism is less confrontational than outright accusations, allowing the speaker to express disapproval while minimizing open conflict. The use of a metaphor (the child bringing only a mouthful of oil but eating a lot) softens the impact but still effectively challenges the hearer's behavior. It exposes the inconsistency between what the person gives and what they take, which can cause embarrassment or shame, motivating the hearer to reconsider their actions. In Igbo culture, where respect and harmony are important, such indirect impoliteness strategies are preferred as they balance the need to correct behavior with the desire to maintain good social relations. This proverb thus acts as a polite but firm social corrective, leveraging cultural norms to regulate behavior without damaging interpersonal bonds.

Cultural implication : In Igbo culture, mutual exchange, hardwork and contributions are core values . So this proverb generally reinforces the idea that respect and reward must be earned not demanded. It also reflects communal expectations that one must bring something to the table before expecting to benefit. The use of child in the proverb reflects cultural hierarchy and humility, reminding the hearer to know their place.

3. Igbo Proverb: *Omegburu di buru ụzọ akwa.* (Pg 8)

English Translation: ‘It is the husband-killer who first begins to cry.

Meaning: This proverb refers to someone who commits a wrong but tries to appear innocent or gain sympathy before being accused. It exposes guilt masked as grief, or when a wrongdoer pretends to be the victim.

Context: The pragmatic context of the proverb as seen in the text was when Chigozie's mother kept on asking him about the money he stole, rather than apologize he started shouting and crying as though he was innocent, that is when the narrator uses the proverb to describe the situation whereby the most guilty person feigns ignorance and acts as though he is innocent and the real innocent ones are now the guilty ones.

Pragmatic Function: Proverbs such as “Omegburu di buru ụzọ akwa” serve multiple pragmatic functions within Igbo discourse. Primarily, they act as tools for indirect rebuke or criticism, allowing speakers to address wrongdoing without resorting to open confrontation. Such proverbs also function as warnings, cautioning listeners to be vigilant against deceit or manipulation. In addition, they serve a moral and didactic role, emphasizing values like honesty, accountability, and justice. Through their figurative language, these expressions contribute to social control, reinforcing communal expectations and discouraging deviant behavior. Proverbs like this one are also used to expose hypocrisy revealing situations where the guilty seek to appear innocent or victimized.

Furthermore, they help manage conflict, allowing sensitive issues to be raised in a culturally acceptable way. By using proverbs, speakers maintain emotional restraint while still performing face-threatening acts, subtly challenging the hearer’s social image. Overall, such proverbs preserve and transmit cultural norms and wisdom, making them vital in both linguistic and social contexts.

Impoliteness Strategy: Sarcasm / mock politeness and positive impoliteness

The proverb uses sarcasm to expose hypocrisy. It highlights how someone may act innocent, emotional, or aggrieved after secretly committing a grave offense. It also reflects positive impoliteness by attacking the person’s reputation or moral standing implying deceit, guilt, or manipulation of public sympathy. The speaker isn’t directly accusing, but the proverb clearly mocks the subject’s false emotional display.

Cultural Implication: In Igbo society, shame and honor are deeply tied to one’s public image. Proverbs like this function as indirect accusations, allowing someone to rebuke or expose wrongdoers without direct confrontation. They reflect the society’s preference for indirectness, wisdom, and subtle confrontation, especially in handling sensitive issues such as guilt, deceit, or shame. Instead of accusing someone openly, the speaker uses a proverb to communicate disapproval or suspicion in a socially acceptable and less confrontational way. This approach maintains respect and face-saving for both the speaker and the hearer, in line with the Igbo value of preserving social harmony. Additionally, the proverb reinforces communal norms and moral expectations, warning against hypocrisy and false innocence. Its figurative nature requires shared cultural understanding, showing how Igbo proverbs serve not just as linguistic tools but as carriers of collective wisdom, ethical standards, and group identity.

4. Igbo Proverb: *Ndị be anyị sị na ọ buru na ọkuko hapị kwom-kwom, o were gịni zụọ ụmụ ya?* (Pg 12)

English Translation: “Our people say that if a hen stops scratching, with what will it train its chicks?”

Context: The proverb is used by the narrator to describe Chigozie's habitual attitude of always crying in the morning, because if he doesn't cry that way, his mother will not pay attention to his pleas of buying some sweet things for him, even when there was food at home.

Meaning: This proverb emphasizes the importance of consistency, responsibility, and effort, especially from those in leadership or caretaking roles. It warns against abandoning one's duties or natural role, as others (e.g., dependents) will suffer the consequences.

Pragmatic function: The pragmatic function of the proverb “*Ndị be anyị sị na ọ buru na ọkuko hapị kwom-kwom, o were gịni zụọ ụmụ ya?*” is to rebuke, correct, and remind someone of their responsibilities, especially in situations where their actions or inactions affect others. It serves as a subtle but firm criticism, addressing someone who is neglecting their duty, such as a parent, leader, or provider. The proverb functions as a face-threatening act, particularly challenging the hearer’s sense of responsibility and dependability.

It may also act as a warning, reminding the individual of the consequences of abandoning one’s natural or social role. Furthermore, it encourages self-reflection by prompting the hearer to reconsider the impact of their behavior on those who rely on them. Delivered indirectly, the proverb allows the speaker to maintain social harmony while still enforcing communal expectations and moral conduct.

Impoliteness theory: The proverb “*Ndị be anyị sị na ọ buru na ọkuko hapị kwom-kwom, o were gịni zụọ ụmụ ya?*” employs primarily **negative impoliteness** as its strategy. This type of impoliteness targets the hearer’s negative face wants that is, their desire for freedom, independence, and to not be imposed upon. By comparing the hearer to a hen neglecting its natural duty of feeding its chicks, the proverb imposes a social obligation and strongly implies that the individual is failing in a critical responsibility. It creates discomfort by highlighting negligence and indirectly questioning the hearer’s sense of duty, reliability, or care.

This strategy is powerful in that it doesn't openly insult the person, but it makes the criticism clear through a culturally familiar analogy. The underlying message is confrontational, yet it's delivered in a figurative and socially accepted way, allowing the speaker to challenge the hearer’s autonomy while staying within the bounds

of respectful speech. It's a form of social pressure, demanding that the individual act responsibly, especially in roles where others depend on them (like parenting, leadership, or caregiving).

Cultural Implication: The proverb "Ndi be anyi si na o buru na okuko hapi kwom-kwom, o were ginu zuo umu ya?" reflects core Igbo cultural values of responsibility, hard work, and communal care. In Igbo society, roles such as parenting, leadership, and caregiving are not optional they are moral obligations tied to one's identity and respect within the community. The hen is symbolically used because it instinctively scratches (kwom-kwom) to feed its chicks, just as humans are expected to care for their dependents. By using this imagery, the proverb culturally condemns laziness, neglect, or abandonment of duty, especially when others are affected. Rather than confront someone harshly, the Igbo use proverbs to indirectly correct and advise, maintaining peace and respect while enforcing communal norms. This proverb, therefore, reinforces the idea that personal responsibility is not only expected but is crucial for social and family balance.

5. Igbo Proverb: *O kwa ndi be anyi si na onwu na-egbu nwankita anaghi ekwe ya anu isi nsi.* (Pg 14)

English Translation: "Our people also say that the dog destined to die does not resist the smell of faeces".

Meaning: This proverb implies that someone headed for destruction often walks into it willingly, ignoring warnings or danger signs. It reflects self-destructive behavior or stubbornness that leads to downfall.

Context: used by the narrator to describe how stubborn Chigozie can be even he is about to be punished.

Pragmatic Function: The pragmatic function of the proverb "O kwa ndi be anyi si na onwu na-egbu nwankita anaghi ekwe ya anu isi nsi" is to warn, criticize, and highlight self-destructive behavior. It is used to describe a person who, despite clear signs of danger or repeated warnings, continues to make reckless or foolish decisions. The proverb serves as a cautionary rebuke, pointing out that some people bring misfortune upon themselves by knowingly engaging in harmful actions. It can also function as a subtle condemnation of stubbornness or ignorance, especially when advice or help is ignored. In conversation, it may be used to scold indirectly or advise others not to follow a similar path. It encourages reflection and behavioral change by showing that choices have consequences, even if they seem appealing or harmless at first.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb "O kwa ndi be anyi si na onwu na-egbu nwankita anaghi ekwe ya anu isi nsi" uses the positive impoliteness strategy. It attacks the hearer's positive face their desire to be seen as wise, rational, or competent—by comparing them to a dog that blindly follows a deadly scent. This figurative comparison mocks their judgment, implying that they are foolish, reckless, or stubborn despite clear signs of danger. The insult is not direct, but through the imagery, the hearer is made to feel embarrassed or criticized. The proverb strips them of social dignity while still operating within culturally acceptable, indirect language. It is especially effective in calling out self-destructive choices, warning that persistence in such behavior will lead to one's downfall.

This strategy serves not only as a reprimand but also as a social corrective tool, encouraging the hearer to reconsider their actions to avoid further loss of face or social respect. In Igbo culture, where indirect communication and respect are highly valued, such proverbs skillfully balance face-threatening acts with cultural norms of politeness and communal harmony.

Cultural implication: This proverb carries significant cultural implications within Igbo society. It reflects the community's deep value on wisdom, foresight, and responsible behavior, emphasizing that individuals should avoid actions leading to their own harm. The use of the dog a common and relatable animal symbolizes stubbornness and lack of judgment, traits frowned upon in Igbo culture. This proverb serves as a cultural tool for indirect social control, allowing elders or peers to criticize or caution someone without direct confrontation, thus preserving respect and social harmony. It also underscores the Igbo belief in personal accountability, where people are expected to heed advice and avoid self-destructive paths. Ultimately, the proverb reinforces communal values that prioritize prudence and collective well-being, warning that ignoring these principles leads to inevitable consequences.

6. Igbo Proverb: *Qcho ihe ukwu ga-ahuri agba enyi.* (Pg 16)

English Translation: One who seeks great things will encounter fierce enemies.

Meaning: This proverb means that ambition or striving for significant achievements often attracts strong opposition or challenges. It warns that the pursuit of success or greatness is rarely easy and may provoke rivalry, envy, or conflict. It encourages preparedness and resilience in the face of adversity when aiming high.

Context: Chigozie's constant cries for *Agidi* and *Akara* and even when begged by Okwudiri his father to stop, he continues hoping that his father will give him money and to buy them and when that happens he will stop crying. But the opposite happened, when Chigozie's father beats him and this makes him cry the more.

Pragmatic Function: The pragmatic function of the proverb "*One who seeks great things will encounter fierce enemies*" is to warn and prepare the hearer for the challenges that come with ambition or success. It serves as a cautionary reminder that pursuing big goals often attracts opposition, jealousy, or conflict. The proverb can be used to encourage perseverance and resilience despite obstacles, as well as to justify struggles or setbacks encountered on the path to achievement. It also functions to temper expectations by highlighting the social realities

that accompany ambition, helping the hearer to be mentally and emotionally prepared for resistance. In conversation, it may act as advice, consolation, or motivation, depending on context.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb employs a **negative impoliteness strategy**. It indirectly threatens the hearer's negative face, their desire for freedom from imposition or interference by implying that their ambitions will inevitably bring conflict and opposition. The proverb can function as a subtle warning or challenge, suggesting that pursuing certain goals will invite hostility or trouble, and the hearer must be ready to face these consequences. This face-threatening act highlights potential social costs and pressures linked to ambition, serving both as a deterrent and a realistic appraisal of the risks involved. The indirectness of the proverb allows for this critique without open confrontation, aligning with culturally accepted ways of delivering uncomfortable truths.

Cultural Implication: This proverb reflects the Igbo cultural understanding that ambition and success often attract rivalry and opposition within the community. In Igbo society, striving for prominence or wealth is respected but also comes with social challenges, including jealousy and competition. This proverb conveys a realistic worldview where personal advancement is not isolated from social dynamics; achieving greatness may disturb existing power balances or relationships. It underscores the importance of resilience, caution, and strategic navigation in social interactions. The proverb also serves as a cultural reminder that success is rarely easy or free of conflict, encouraging individuals to be prepared both mentally and socially. It highlights the communal nature of Igbo life, where individual actions inevitably impact and provoke responses from others.

7. Igbo Proverb: *Onye a na-agwo ibi na-etozi afo.* (Pg 16)

English Translation: "The person who is being treated/healed is getting worse."

Meaning: This proverb highlights situations where efforts to help or improve someone's condition actually cause more harm or worsen the situation. It warns against misguided help, negligence, or harmful interventions and serves as a critique of how well-intended actions can backfire, especially if the person being helped does not benefit or changes negatively.

Context: It is important to note more than one proverb can have the same context. The narrator's use of proverb is unparalleled and we see it in how he uses different proverbs in a particular context to provide more insight and beauty to his work. In last two Proverbs analyzed above, we discover that when Chigozie began to cry, His father knowing that his unnecessary tantrums is becoming unbearable, decided to get a cane and flog him so that he can have a tangible reason to cry.

Pragmatic Function: The pragmatic function of the proverb "The person who is being treated/healed is getting worse" is to criticize ineffective or harmful interventions and to warn against careless or misguided help. It serves as an indirect way to point out that despite efforts to improve a situation or help someone, things may deteriorate instead. This proverb can be used to highlight responsibility, either of the helper or the person being helped, suggesting that actions meant to cure or assist might sometimes worsen the problem. It functions as a cautionary statement and an indirect rebuke, encouraging careful consideration and proper methods in providing help. The proverb also prompts reflection on the outcomes of one's actions, emphasizing accountability in social and personal interactions.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb employs a form of negative impoliteness, which threatens the hearer's negative face that is, their desire for autonomy, freedom from imposition, and not being criticized. By implying that help or treatment is making the situation worse, the proverb indirectly criticizes the competence or intentions of the helper or the behavior of the person receiving help.

This face-threatening act can be seen as a blame or reprimand, suggesting negligence, incompetence, or stubbornness. The hearer's agency or ability to manage the situation is challenged, which can provoke feelings of embarrassment or defensiveness. Moreover, the proverb may also contain sarcastic or ironic tones, subtly mocking the failure of an intervention that was expected to bring improvement. This indirect criticism allows the speaker to convey dissatisfaction or disappointment without outright confrontation, which aligns with many African communicative norms where preserving social harmony is valued, yet truths still need to be communicated.

Cultural Implication: The proverb "Onye a na-agwo ibi na-etozi afo" (The person who is being treated is getting worse) carries strong cultural implications within the Igbo worldview. It reflects a deep societal awareness that not all help is helpful, and that careless, insincere, or ignorant intervention can worsen a person's condition. In Igbo culture, communal support is important, but it is equally expected that such support be wise, genuine, and properly guided. This proverb warns against blind trust in those who claim to offer help and emphasizes the cultural value of discernment, competence, and responsibility in both giving and receiving assistance. It also points to the cultural belief in self-awareness and accountability suggesting that sometimes individuals worsen their own condition through poor choices or resistance to proper care. Ultimately, the proverb reinforces the idea that help, advice, or leadership must be effective and rooted in knowledge, not just well-intentioned, or it may lead to harm rather than healing.

8. Igbo Proverb: *Nkịta nyara akpa, nsi agwụ n'ohịa. (Pg 21)*

English Translation: “When the dog carries its bag into the forest, all the faeces in the forest will finish”.

Context: used by the narrator to describe Chigozie as a thief who knows where different sweet things are sold in the market.

Meaning: This proverb means that when someone who consumes or takes advantage of others' waste or leftovers arrives, the resources or “waste” will be quickly used up. It reflects the idea that some people or situations can rapidly deplete what's left behind by others. Culturally, it can serve as a warning about those who exploit or take undue advantage, especially in communal spaces or situations, leaving nothing for others.

Pragmatic Function: The proverb “When the dog carries its bag into the forest, all the faeces in the forest will be finished” functions as a cautionary statement that warns against exploitation and greed. Pragmatically, it serves to alert listeners to be wary of individuals who consume or take advantage of resources meant for the community, signaling that such behavior leads to depletion and unfairness. It can also be used to criticize or indirectly call out opportunistic behavior in a socially acceptable way, preserving politeness while conveying disapproval. In conversation, the proverb acts as a face-saving mechanism to highlight problems of overconsumption or selfishness without direct confrontation, encouraging reflection on the consequences of such actions for both the individual and the group.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb “When the dog carries its bag into the forest, all the faeces in the forest will be finished” employs a form of indirect negative impoliteness. It subtly criticizes and shames those who are exploitative or greedy, suggesting that they consume or take advantage of resources that do not belong to them. Instead of a direct insult, the proverb uses metaphor to highlight selfish behavior in a socially acceptable manner. This impoliteness strategy works by threatening the hearer's negative face their desire to be unburdened and free from imposition by implying they are overstepping social boundaries and taking more than their fair share. It also implicitly attacks the hearer's social identity, hinting that their actions are inconsiderate and harmful to the community. By cloaking the criticism in metaphor, the speaker maintains politeness on the surface but delivers a sharp social rebuke beneath, encouraging the hearer to reflect and possibly change their behavior without outright confrontation. This indirectness is typical in cultures valuing harmony and respect, like the Igbo, where proverbs serve as tools for social regulation.

Cultural Implication: This proverb reflects the Igbo cultural understanding of community resource management and social responsibility. In Igbo society, communal living and shared resources are highly valued, but there is also an expectation that individuals act responsibly and ethically within the group. The proverb warns against exploitation and selfishness, highlighting how some individuals (like the dog eating faeces) can deplete communal resources or benefits meant for everyone.

It underscores a cultural norm that discourages greed and opportunism, promoting fairness, moderation, and respect for shared spaces. The imagery of the dog an animal known for scavenging and consuming waste symbolizes those who take advantage of situations without contributing or considering the impact on others. In essence, the proverb serves as a social check, reminding members of the community that unchecked selfishness harms collective well-being and disrupts social harmony, which is a core value in Igbo culture.

9. Igbo Proverb: *Eleke ntioba si na ebe obu na ndi mmadu amutala igba ya uta na-atughi atu, na o ga-amutazi o fewe efe o gaghizi na-ebe n'osisi.*

English Translation: The bird said that since people have learned to shoot it without missing, it will now learn not to perch on tree branches anymore.

Meaning: This proverb highlights wisdom through experience. It suggests that when someone faces repeated attacks, betrayal, or danger in a particular situation, they learn to avoid it for their own survival or protection. It teaches caution, adaptability, and strategic withdrawal from harmful environments or people.

Context: The last three proverbs above share the same context, the narrator used three different proverbs successively to describe a particular context which goes ahead to describe Chigozie's mischievous attitude at home, especially when his father Okwudili is absent.

Pragmatic Function: The pragmatic function of the proverb “*The bird said that since people have learned to shoot it without missing, it will now learn not to perch on tree branches anymore*” is to advise, warn, and promote strategic self-protection. It is used to encourage someone to learn from repeated negative experiences and adjust their behavior or environment to avoid further harm. This proverb can function as a justification for withdrawal, a cautionary reminder, or an indirect rebuke to those who stay in harmful situations despite obvious danger. It emphasizes the value of wisdom gained through hardship, urging people to be alert, proactive, and self-preserving. In communication, it allows the speaker to suggest a change in behavior without directly commanding or confronting, making it a subtle yet powerful tool for guiding action in sensitive situations.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb reflects the use of **negative impoliteness strategy**. This form of impoliteness challenges the hearer's independence or autonomy, subtly implying that their repeated exposure to harm or failure is due to their poor judgment or lack of self-protection. The speaker uses this proverb to highlight the foolishness of not adapting suggesting that if someone continues to place themselves in harm's way, they are partly to blame

for the consequences. Though not overtly insulting, the proverb contains a face-threatening act, as it indirectly criticizes someone's behavior or decisions. It may also carry a mild warning or dismissal, implying that the speaker is no longer willing to remain vulnerable or accessible, just as the bird now avoids branches. In Igbo culture, such indirect criticism is socially accepted, using proverbs to pass strong messages without violating respect norms.

Cultural Implication: This proverb reflects the Igbo cultural emphasis on adaptability, wisdom, and self-preservation. In Igbo society, individuals are expected to learn from experience especially painful or harmful ones and adjust their behavior to ensure survival and dignity. The proverb teaches that it is honorable to withdraw from danger rather than repeatedly fall victim to it. It also implies that excessive openness or availability can attract harm, and so one must know when to retreat or protect themselves. Furthermore, the bird symbol reflects vulnerability, while the act of perching represents exposure. By choosing not to perch, the bird reclaims control just as individuals are culturally expected to respond wisely to repeated mistreatment or threat. This aligns with broader Igbo values that prize discretion, resilience, and strategic thinking in navigating social life.

10. Igbo proverb: “*Ka bja mere awo, o jighi puo odu*” (Pg 20)

English Translation: “Being constantly called to help is what made the toad never grow a tail.”

Meaning: This proverb suggests that overburdening someone with help or service to others can hinder their own growth, development, or success. It reflects the idea that when someone is always being pulled into other people's issues, they may neglect themselves and fail to reach their full potential.

Context: This proverb describes the way Chigozie squanders money as a result of his addiction to *Akara* and *Agidi* and because of this habit of his, money doesn't last long in his hands, it vanishes almost when it enters.

Pragmatic Function: The pragmatic function of the proverb “*Ka bja mere awo, o jighi puo odu*” is to warn against self-neglect caused by excessive availability to others. It serves as a gentle criticism or reflective advice, especially for people who are always helping others at the expense of their own progress or well-being. The speaker uses this proverb to encourage balance between helping others and prioritizing oneself. It may also subtly caution those who over-rely on others, suggesting that their actions could hinder the helper's growth. In conversation, it functions as a face-saving way to express frustration, draw boundaries, or justify withdrawal from constant assistance, all while staying within culturally acceptable indirectness.

Impoliteness strategy: The proverb employs positive impoliteness by subtly undermining the hearer's desire for social approval or recognition. The speaker implies that the recipient of help or those who over-rely on others have caused harm by constantly demanding support, leading the “toad” (the helper) to lose something vital (symbolized by the missing tail). This use of figurative criticism is common in Igbo culture, where open confrontation is often avoided. Instead, proverbs allow the speaker to pass a judgment, express resentment, or draw attention to exploitation while still appearing composed and respectful. In this case, the impoliteness is not direct insult, but rather a socially acceptable way of shaming or calling out unfair behavior. The proverb also questions the hearer's values, suggesting selfishness, entitlement, or lack of consideration. It forces the hearer to reflect on their behavior whether they are the ones draining others or reminds the listener (if they are the helper) of the consequences of neglecting their own needs. So, the strategy functions as both reproach and self-defense, using indirectness to protect face while delivering a strong social message.

Cultural Implication: This proverb reflects a key Igbo cultural value: the importance of balance between communal responsibility and personal well-being. In Igbo society, individuals are encouraged to support others and contribute to the community. However, this proverb warns that excessive self-sacrifice, especially without recognition or rest, can lead to personal loss, stagnation, or regret.

It suggests that while helping others is noble, one must also protect their own growth, dignity, and purpose. The toad, a humble creature often symbolizing patience or endurance, becomes a metaphor for the overused individual always present, always needed, but never able to focus on their own development. Culturally, this proverb challenges the idea that constant availability equals virtue. Instead, it promotes self-awareness and the need for boundaries, especially in communal or familial settings where demands can be high. It also subtly calls out exploitative behavior in the community those who take without considering the toll it takes on the giver.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the pragmatic use of proverbs in *Achowwa Isi Ochu*, an Igbo novel by Chinedum Oformata, focusing specifically on how impoliteness strategies are embedded within these traditional sayings. Proverbs in Igbo culture are not merely figurative expressions but powerful communicative tools that reflect societal values, norms, and interpersonal relationships. The research involved the identification and selection of ten proverbs from the text, followed by a detailed pragmatic analysis grounded in Impoliteness Theory.

The analysis also highlights the cultural implications of the proverbs. They reveal deeply rooted Igbo values such as respect for elders, communal responsibility, and the consequences of immoral behavior. The use of proverbs containing impoliteness elements underscores the tension between social harmony and necessary confrontation in traditional Igbo society. The pragmatic functions of the proverbs studied include reprimanding, warning, advising,

and, at times, shaming. The employment of impoliteness within proverbs therefore functions pragmatically to regulate behavior, maintain social order, and reinforce cultural norms.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that proverbs in *Achowa Isi Ochu* transcend mere literary decoration. They serve as pragmatic instruments that carry significant social and cultural weight. The application of Impoliteness Theory unveils the nuanced ways in which seemingly polite or traditional sayings can function to challenge, correct, or subtly insult within the Igbo social context. Proverbs in Igbo culture encapsulate collective wisdom and act as a medium for social education; yet they also serve as tools of social regulation through face-threatening acts embedded in cultural idioms. The strategic use of impoliteness within these proverbs reflects a complex balance between maintaining respect and enforcing discipline, illustrating how language operates as a form of power in everyday interactions.

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