

## COMMUNICATIVE FEATURES OF IGBO PROVERBS USED IN SELECT TRADITIONAL IGBO EVENTS

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the communicative features of Igbo proverbs as employed in traditional cultural contexts, specifically during Ichi Ozọ (Ozọ title-taking ceremony) and Ili Ji (New Yam Festival) in Enugwu-Ukwu and Nawfia communities of Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. While existing documentation of Igbo proverbs often includes projected or assumed usage contexts, this study focuses on real-time performance to capture authentic contextual applications. Proverbs were extracted from audio recordings made during the selected events using a Zoom digital recorder and analysed within a sociopragmatic framework, with particular emphasis on the speech act concept. Each proverb is glossed morpheme-by-morpheme, translated literally, and interpreted figuratively to reveal its full semantic and pragmatic dimensions. Findings show that Igbo proverbs typically perform assertive direct illocutionary acts that affirm cultural truths and shared values. Indirectly, they function as expressives, directives, or commissives, conveying emotions, advising, cautioning, or encouraging certain behaviours. The study concludes that the communicative value of Igbo proverbs lies in the relationship between language, culture, and context, making them powerful tools of cultural expression, social regulation, and transmission of indigenous knowledge. Future research is encouraged to extend this analysis to other traditional Igbo events to deepen understanding of the functional scope of proverbs across diverse sociocultural domains.*

**Keywords:** Communicative features, Ichi Ozọ, Igbo proverbs, Ili Ji, Illocutionary act, Traditional even

### Introduction

Language plays a critical role in everyday life; it is central to communication, the preservation of culture, and identity formation. The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria are celebrated for their rich linguistic and cultural heritage, with proverbs playing a central role in their oral tradition. Achebe captures this vividly when he observes that, “proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe 1958:5), highlighting how speech is enriched and made palatable by the skillful use of proverbs. Ismail (2021:10) says, “Proverbs play an important role in all cultures worldwide, serving as essential tools in human communication.” These sayings are integral to formal discourse, particularly during ceremonial events, where they add depth and meaning to communication.

Proverbs are especially prominent among linguistic tools because they distil a community’s wisdom, values, and beliefs into concise, memorable expressions. Most often defined by scholars as short, pithy sayings that express general truths or practical advice, with their meaning not fully determined by the literal meanings of their individual words; rather, it emerges from the metaphorical, contextual, and cultural associations that transcend those constituent parts. They also function as instruments of instruction, persuasion, and reinforcement of communal values, often embedding intergenerational wisdom and ethical guidance.

Existing documentation of Igbo proverbs largely presents them with projected or assumed contexts of use. In contrast, this study examines their real-time performance in authentic cultural settings,

specifically during *Ichi Ozọ* (Ozọ title-taking ceremony) and *Ili Ji* (New Yam Festival) in Enugwu-Ukwu and Nawfia communities of Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. By analysing how selected proverbs are structured, when and where they are deployed, and how they function in live discourse, the study foregrounds their communicative features and pragmatic relevance. In doing so, it bridges the gap between linguistic competence and cultural proficiency in the interpretation and use of Igbo proverbs.

Added to the recognised importance of proverbs in the Igbo culture, it is important to note that traditional Igbo events such as *Ichi Ozọ* (Ozọ title ceremonies), and *Ili Ji* (New yam festivals), provide a rich tapestry of linguistic interactions where proverbs are employed to function as key communicative resources used in negotiating relationships, celebrating hard work/diligence, and showing gratitude to God for a bountiful harvest. These events, deeply rooted in Igbo cultural heritage, represent ideal settings to examine the communicative relevance of proverbs.

### Literature Review Overview of Proverbs

In Indigenous societies, proverbs serve as vehicles for transmitting traditional knowledge, social norms, values, and historical beliefs through oral tradition. Abraham (1964) affirms their enduring relevance and interpretive flexibility while maintaining that proverbs are rooted in the culture from which they emerge. Although their precise origins remain uncertain, their longevity underscores their significance as culturally embedded expressions. Mieder (1993:24; 2004:3) further highlights that proverbs, passed down through generations, encapsulate collective wisdom, beliefs, and experiences in succinct and memorable forms.

Acheoah (2012:111) highlights the longstanding difficulty in tracing the origins of proverbs, noting that their emergence is as ancient as language itself. Although their exact beginnings remain unknown, human societies have always engaged in proverbial discourse. Similarly, Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga (2015) observe that proverbs encapsulate everyday experiences and shared insights in figurative, concise forms, transmitted across generations as carriers of cultural wisdom and universal truths. Mieder (2014:29) adds that proverbs often originate from individuals who articulate communal experiences, which are gradually refined, adapted, and standardised through collective usage over time. In the case of Igbo proverbs, Isidienu (2016:69) points out that:

Igbo proverbs embody accumulated wisdom, philosophy, and cultural heritage passed down through generations. They reflect the knowledge, observations, and insights of the ancestors who, in the absence of a written tradition, artfully distilled their thoughts into concise and memorable expressions to preserve and convey essential cultural and philosophical values.

Proverbs' long-lasting presence can be traced back to a time predating the development of writing systems. Rooted in oral tradition, their lasting relevance and effectiveness in preserving cultural wisdom and transmitting knowledge across generations stem from their brevity and memorability. Proverbs, known as *ilu* in Igbo, are essential to communication, serving to express complex ideas, moral teachings, and cultural values effectively. Kanu (2014:164) notes that Igbo proverbs originate from the Igbo people and can thus be seen as the *vox Igbo populi*, the voice of the Igbo people. Describing proverbs in this way highlights the esteem in which they are held, particularly as a vital instrument of communication and social interaction.

Recognising the vital role of proverbs in Igbo society, Umeasiegbu (2007:63) acknowledges that their power lies in the people's perception of them as vessels of ancestral wisdom and philosophy. This perspective is intrinsic to the Igbo worldview, where proverbs occupy a respected and central place in cultural expression. As a core element of communication, proverbs function as tools for conveying wisdom, values, and societal norms. Any discussion of Igbo society and its cultural identity would be incomplete without reference to proverbs, as they are intricately embedded in discourse and reflect a long-standing tradition of reverence. The vital role of proverbs in Igbo society cannot be overemphasised, a significance that led Achebe (1958) to describe proverbs as "the oil with which

words are eaten,” highlighting their essential place in Igbo culture and communication.

Considering the points discussed on the significance of Igbo proverbs, it is clear that they are intricately woven into the philosophy and life of the Igbo people. Their connection to the people is akin to that of fish and water, just as a fish depends on water to survive, proverbs are essential to Igbo communication, cultural expression, and the maintenance of social harmony.

### Functions of Proverbs

Abrahams (1972), from his perspective on the functions of proverbs, asserts that paremiologists examine the communicative functions of proverbs, including their roles in advising, expressing judgments, teaching morals, and reinforcing cultural norms. They also explore the contextual usage of proverbs and their impact on social interactions. Alternatively, by offering advice and expressing judgments, proverbs function as versatile tools in daily interactions, playing various roles and serving different degrees of functions, like; social, cultural, literary, and emotional functions.

Different functional features define proverbs by shaping their form, meaning, and usage across sociocultural contexts. Structurally, proverbs employ syntactic patterns like parallelism and brevity, enhancing memorability. Linguistically, they rely on figurative language, including metaphor and symbolism, to convey deeper meanings. Functionally, proverbs serve pragmatic roles such as imparting wisdom, reinforcing social norms, and shaping discourse. According to Coinnigh (2014:112), Structural elements are among the most universally recognised and easily identifiable features of proverbs, particularly concerning traditional fixed formulas and syntactic patterns.

The following are key functions identified in this study.

**I) Pragmatic Functions of Proverbs:** Proverbs are multifunctional linguistic tools that serve various pragmatic purposes across different contexts. They are strategically employed to convey meaning, influence behaviour, and foster social cohesion, often through advising, instructing, encouraging, or reinforcing cultural norms. As speech acts, proverbs perform roles such as warning, persuasion, threat, admonition, and demand (Rohrich & Mieder, as cited in Ezekulie & Umeh, 2023:113). Similarly, Bobuafor (2021) affirms their illocutionary capacity to persuade, rebuke, ridicule, and support arguments.

For example, the proverb

1. *Wèrè ìrē gị guọ èzē gị omụ*

‘Use your tongue to count your teeth’

functions as a cautionary device, urging restraint or careful thought. Likewise,

2. *Onye ñdidi nà-èri azụ ukpoò*

‘The patient person eats the hook fish’ symbolically demands patience.

These examples demonstrate how proverbs operate as pragmatically charged expressions, enabling speakers to perform a wide range of communicative acts effectively.

**II) Syntactic Functions of Proverbs:** Syntax refers to the rules governing the arrangement of words and the structural relationships within sentences. In proverb analysis, syntactic structures play a vital role in shaping meaning and enhancing communicative impact. Coinnigh (2014:113) notes that proverbs occur in various sentence forms, which can be categorised syntactically. A prominent feature is parallelism, a structure where the second part of a proverb mirrors or reverses the first. As Ollenu, Obeng, and Donkor (2024: 99) explain, parallelism enhances emphasis, rhythm, and memorability. For instance,

3. *Ónyé kwe chi ya e kwe*

‘If one agrees, his god will agree’

4. *Onye wetara oji wetara ndu*

‘He who brings kola, brings life’ uses repeated elements (*kwe* and *wetara*) to reinforce core messages.

Rothstein (1998:269) supports the view that such syntactic parallelism highlights thematic concerns in proverbial discourse. Another key structure is the binary construct, which often reflects cause-and-effect relationships. Examples like

5. *Ónyé rúó, ò rié*

‘Whoever works will eat’ and

6. *E mee ngwa e meghara odachi*

‘A stitch in time saves nine’

Illustrate how these paired elements convey moral insights while maintaining structural balance and rhetorical force.

**III) Semantic Functions of Proverbs:** Semantic functions are linguistic mechanisms that extend meaning beyond the literal interpretation of individual words, particularly in proverbs, which rely heavily on figurative and cultural encoding. They enable the transmission of complex moral, philosophical, and social insights, enriching communicative depth and interpretative value.

As Grzybek (2014:75) notes, the meaning of a proverb often transcends sentence boundaries, emerging from broader contextual and cultural frameworks rather than from lexical items alone. For example,

7. *Anu gbaa ajo oso à gbaa ya ajo egbè*

‘If an animal runs recklessly, it will be ruthlessly shot at’

Conveys the idea that desperate actions attract harsh consequences. Similarly,

8. *Isi kòta èbù o gbaa ya*

‘If the head triggers the wasp, it will sting it’ metaphorically warns of the repercussions of harmful actions.

These examples illustrate how proverbs function semantically through connotation and metaphor, with meaning shaped by cultural context rather than literal composition. Thus, the semantic construct of a proverb relies on figurative language and shared cultural knowledge for its full interpretation.

**The Sociopragmatic aspect of Proverbs**

Sociopragmatics emerges from the overlap of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, offering a vital framework for analysing language use within social contexts. As Terkourafi and Delbar (2023) observe, the convergence of these disciplines has led to the development of sociopragmatics as a distinct domain within linguistics, focusing on how social factors shape pragmatic meaning.

Lawal (1997:641) defines sociopragmatics as the interaction between language use and broader contextual variables such as participants, location, mood, personal beliefs, socio-cultural settings, and worldview. This perspective highlights that effective communication extends beyond linguistic competence to include sensitivity to social norms, cultural values, and situational dynamics. Similarly, Mey (2001:289) describes sociopragmatics as the study of language use within its societal context, focusing on how individuals employ language to manage relationships and navigate real-life interactions. This framework supports the present study's sociopragmatic approach, highlighting how proverbs function as tools for conveying meaning and negotiating social relations in context.

Proverbs serve as a tool for sociopragmatic expression, as they are employed within social contexts to convey meaning and perform various social functions. In Igbo society, proverbs are indispensable, serving as a potent vehicle for expressing cultural values, beliefs, and collective experiences. They encapsulate the Igbo worldview, functioning as both linguistic and cultural instruments that link

language with tradition, social norms, and everyday life. Corroborating this, Ogbalu (1965:2) asserts that Igbo proverbs embody the cumulative experiences of the Igbo people, suggesting that their politics, religion, and history are most effectively understood through proverbs. This view highlights proverbs as vital cultural repositories that encapsulate the history, customs, values, and beliefs of the community. Beyond their communicative function, proverbs preserve collective memory and identity, reflecting the worldview and philosophical outlook of the people. They serve as a means of transmitting societal narratives, norms, and moral values across generations, making them essential tools for interpreting and understanding Igbo cultural practices.

Proverbs are inherently interwoven into the lives of the communities or societies from which they originate, capturing the collective beliefs, values, and cultural heritage of the people. They act as living repositories of wisdom, preserving societal norms and philosophies that have been passed down through generations. More than just words, proverbs draw their meaning from real-life experiences, traditions, and cultural contexts, making them a natural part of how people express identity, share knowledge, and make sense of the world around them.

For example, the Igbo proverbs

9. *Otu aka rụta mmanụ, o zuo ọha ọmụ*  
 ‘When one finger touches oil, it spreads to the others,’

Meaning ‘the wrongdoing of one person taints the whole community,’ this proverb emphasises the deep interconnection among individuals within a society. It is commonly used to advise, caution, or reprimand, drawing attention to the broader social impact of personal behaviour. The expression underscores the idea that the actions of a single individual can disrupt communal harmony and affect the collective well-being.

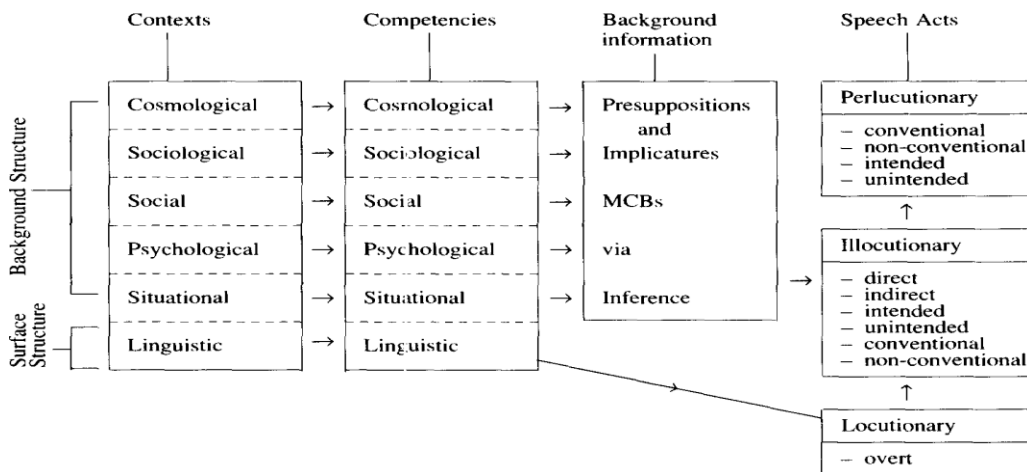
10. *Agbata obi onye bụ chi ya.*  
 ‘One’s neighbour is his god.’

This proverb assigns the neighbour the role of a ‘god,’ symbolising qualities like protection, selflessness, mediation, and support. It reflects the deeply interdependent nature of communal life, where individuals are expected to uphold and support one another, often stepping in with the kind of care and presence likened to divine intervention in times of need.

These proverbs highlight the close connection between societal values and language, showing how everyday experiences and social relationships are reflected in proverbial expressions. They offer a meaningful lens through which the cultural norms and social dynamics of the Igbo community are preserved and passed down.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the relationship between society, culture, context, and language, positioning sociopragmatics as an appropriate framework. Sociopragmatics examines how language use is shaped by social factors, including societal norms, collective values, and group identities, which influence how conversations are conducted and interpreted (Kasper, 1990). This study adopts Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji’s (1997) conceptual framework: a model of the aspects of a pragmatic theory for data analysis.



The graphic illustration demonstrates that Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji (1997) propose six hierarchical contexts of an utterance as essential components of a comprehensive pragmatic theory. However, this study will focus on the speech acts aspect of the theory, specifically the Illocutionary, to showcase the communicative features identified in the proverbs used in this study.

The way linguistic expressions function within sociopragmatic frameworks is illustrated through the hierarchical structure. Effective communication depends on the speaker's ability to navigate both explicit language and implicit meaning through three interrelated speech acts. Locutionary acts represent the speaker's literal utterance, considered the surface structure. Illocutionary acts, which express the speaker's intent (direct or indirect), operate at a deeper functional level. Finally, perlocutionary acts refer to the effects or outcomes, intended or unintended, produced by the utterance on the listener.

### Studies on Proverbs

A review of scholars' contributions is important and will provide valuable insights into this research.

Ogwu (2015) conducted a pragmatic analysis of Igala proverbs, focusing on how context shapes meaning and the illocutionary acts performed in discourse. Using Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) model, the study analysed twenty-six proverbs across themes such as caution, truth, and fate. One example,

11. *Ejo ki de efu otube ibe ma du kpa*

'To kill a snake in an earthen pot, caution is required' illustrates how metaphor and context guide interpretation.

Findings show that direct acts are often assertive, while indirect acts are expressive, offering advice or caution. Contextual factors, linguistic, situational, psychological, social, sociological, and cosmological, are essential to grasping meaning. Ogwu concludes that Igala proverbs are flexible, rich in folk wisdom, and remain relevant despite modernity, reinforcing their continued use in everyday interactions.

Anazodo (2016), in *A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Contradictory Proverb Pairs in Igbo*, examined the illocutionary acts and contextual competencies necessary for interpreting contradictory Igbo proverbs. Using Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) Model of Pragmatic Theory, the study analysed proverb pairs from paremiological texts.

Two examples include:

12a. *Isi kòta èbù ọ gbaa yā*

‘If the head touches the wasp, it will sting it.’

which means that one reaps what one sows. Direct act: Assertive; Indirect: Expressive (warning).

Contextual competencies: Linguistic metaphor (head = person; wasp = problem); situational (trouble caused by wrongdoing); psychological (speaker’s disapproval); sociological (Igbo norms condemn bad behaviour); cosmological (actions have consequences).

12b. *Otù mkpuru aka ruta mmanu ọ zùe ọhà onu*

‘One finger dipped in oil spreads to others.’

meaning ‘one person’s misdeed affects the whole community.’

Direct act: Assertive.

Indirect: Expressive (warning).

Contextual competencies: Linguistic metaphor (finger/oil = individual/community); situational (a father warning a son); psychological (condemnation); social (familial relationship); sociological (individual behaviour has communal effects); cosmological (actions implicate others).

Although these proverbs appear contradictory, the study shows context resolves tension, affirming that proverbs require sociopragmatic competence for accurate interpretation.

Ik-Iloanusi (2021) explored the role of Igbo proverbs as a tool for effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study analysed twenty proverbs from sensitisation activities held in four social settings within Nawfia town in Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. Using the conceptual metaphor framework, proverbs were grouped into solidarity, praise, encouragement, and warning/advice to highlight their effective use during conversations.

Examples include:

13. *A nyu kọọ amiri onu*

‘When people urinate together at a spot, it foams.’

Meaning ‘unity in crisis response’.

14. *Mbèrèdè kà é jì àmá díkè*

‘A hero is identified by how he handles an unexpected event.’

Meaning ‘showing praise for timely support’.

15. *Ágwọ nọ n'ákiri ká*

‘Snake is in the thicket.’

Meaning ‘a warning of imminent danger’.

Findings show that proverbs convey layered meanings based on context and serve as powerful communicative tools during the pandemic. The study affirms the centrality of proverbs in Igbo discourse and their indispensability in meaningful communication.

The studies reviewed highlight the pivotal role of proverbs as cultural repositories and pragmatic tools. Ogwu (2015) analysed how context shapes the interpretation of Igala proverbs, illustrating the interplay between language and culture. Anazodo (2016) examined contradictory Igbo proverb pairs, focusing on their illocutionary acts and contextual competencies. Ik-Iloanusi (2021) explored the communicative function of Igbo proverbs during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing their effectiveness in expressing solidarity, advice, and encouragement. Building on identified gaps in the literature, this study offers insights that will meaningfully advance scholarly understanding in the field.

### Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the communicative features of Igbo proverbs, drawing data from two traditional events, *Ichi Ozo* (Ozo title-taking ceremony) and *Ili Ji* (New Yam Festival), conducted in Enugwu-Ukwu and Nawfia, communities within the Umunri ancestral heritage of Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State. Natural speech interactions were audio-recorded using a Zoom digital recorder, from which proverbs were extracted as the primary data. The analysis is guided by Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) model of pragmatic theory, which outlines six hierarchical contextual and competence levels for interpreting utterances. However, this study focuses specifically on the speech acts aspect of the model, particularly illocutionary acts, to examine the communicative features embedded in the proverbs. Green and Igwe's (1963) tone-marking convention is employed to accurately reflect the tonal nature of the Igbo language. Each proverb is presented in three translational layers: morpheme-by-morpheme, literal, and figurative. This multi-tiered translation framework facilitates cross-linguistic interpretation and illuminates the sociopragmatic functions of the proverbs within their cultural contexts.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses data on Igbo proverbs recorded from two traditional events: *Ichi Ozo* (Ozo title-taking ceremony) and *Ili Ji* (New Yam Festival). Drawing on Lawal, Ajayi, and Raji's (1997) Model of the Aspects of a Pragmatic Theory, the analysis focuses on the speech acts aspect of the theory to examine the communicative features of the proverbs and the roles they perform within specific cultural and social contexts. Categorized into two groups of *Ichi Ozo* and *Ili Ji*, with five proverbs in each group.

#### Group A – Proverbs from *Ichi Ozo* (Ozo title-taking ceremony)

16. *Nwa yà àkalì nnà ya*  
Child will vp-great-cont father 3sg

A child will be greater than his father. 'The student surpasses the master.'

Direct illocutionary acts: Assertive (Stating)

Indirect illocutionary acts: Expressive (Blessing /Encouraging)

Taken literally, the idea of a child surpassing the father may seem unlikely, but figuratively, the proverb reflects the cultural expectation of generational progress. Used during the *Ichi Ozo*, its direct illocutionary act is assertive, sustaining the belief of the speaker, while indirectly it functions expressively, offering both a blessing and a call to diligence. The proverb underscores Igbo values of hard work, legacy, and the aspiration for each generation to build and surpass the previous one.

17. *I bù ùgo bee n'ojì*  
2sg be eagle perch prep-tree

You are an eagle that perched on an iroko tree. 'An epitome of great achievement.'

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Informing)

Indirect illocutionary act: Expressive (Praising)

Likening a human to an eagle, the proverb symbolises strength, excellence, and prestige, qualities reinforced by the image of perching on the mighty iroko tree. Used during an Ozo title conferment, the communicative feature of the direct illocutionary act assertively affirms the individual's elevated status while indirectly expressing admiration and communal pride. The proverb celebrates personal achievement and underscores the Igbo cultural values of honour, excellence, and societal recognition.

18. *Aka nnī gī ife aka èkpè gī ife*  
Hand right 2sg something hand left 2sg something

Your right hand and left hand will bring abundance.  
‘All round blessings will surround you.’

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Stating)  
Indirect illocutionary act: Expressive (Blessing)

This proverb symbolically conveys to the *Ozọ* title holder that he has entered a season of comprehensive blessings, success, and abundance. The speaker directly asserts this belief by stating it. Indirectly, the utterance performs an expressive act, expressing the speaker’s joy and extending heartfelt blessings and goodwill to the new title holder. This communicative act not only marks the recipient’s new social elevation but also reinforces communal values of recognition, solidarity, and the affirmation of personal achievement.

19. *Ife nwokē bù n'ùkpa bù nya nà nwunyè ya nwè*  
Something man carry prep-bag is 3sg aux wife 3sg have

What a man has in his bag belongs to him and his wife.  
‘United we stand.’

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (informing)  
Indirect illocutionary act: Directive (instructing)

The idea that a man achieves greater success through the support of his wife underscores the Igbo cultural emphasis on spousal collaboration. Here, the direct illocutionary act is assertive, as the speaker acknowledges the integral role and responsibilities of the title holder’s wife concerning her husband’s new status. Indirectly, the utterance performs a directive illocutionary act by subtly instructing/encouraging the couple to embrace shared responsibilities and function as a unified team. This act reflects cultural values of cooperation, mutual support, and collective achievement.

20. *Ọkukò tufie omu èno yā.*  
Chicken stray neck bend it  
If the chicken strays, its neck bends.  
‘Every misconduct has its  
consequences.’

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Informing)  
Indirect illocutionary act: Directive (Warning/Advising)

This proverb conveys a culturally embedded moral principle that every wrongdoing incurs corresponding consequences. The direct illocutionary act is assertive, as the speaker affirms the truth expressed in the proverb, informing the *Ozọ* title holder of the moral expectation it entails. Indirectly, the utterance performs a directive illocutionary act by cautioning/advising adherence to the norms and regulations governing the group. As a communicative act, the proverb reinforces communal values, promotes social harmony, and serves as a pragmatic guide for appropriate conduct within the cultural context.

Group B – Proverbs from *Ili ji* (New Yam Festival)

21. *Aguū yà ezū anyị walụ*  
*osō.*

Hunger will meet 1pl run-pst race

Hunger will meet us and run away.  
‘Our barns shall overflow, and our tables shall never lack.’

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Stating)  
Indirect illocutionary act: Commissive (Promise)

This proverb, used during the Ili Ji (New Yam Festival), symbolically marks the end of hunger, with *Aguu* (hunger) metaphorically depicted as fleeing in the proverb. The Igwe's declaration performs a direct assertive illocutionary act, affirming the end of scarcity, and an indirect commissive act, signaling his commitment to ensuring food security. This communicative act highlights the role of authoritative speech in traditional leadership, reinforcing communal assurance and social responsibility.

22. *Gidi gidi bu ugwu ezè.*  
 Bustle bustle be respect king  
 Unity is the pride of the king.  
 'Unity is strength.'

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Stating)

Indirect illocutionary act: Expressive (Appreciating)

Evoking the sound of force, "gidi gidi" in this proverb symbolises the collective strength and unity of the people that sustains the king's authority. The direct illocutionary act is assertive, affirming this truth, while the indirect act is expressive, conveying communal gratitude and solidarity. This communicative act underscores the reciprocal relationship between leadership and community, celebrating unity and shared success through culturally embedded language.

23. *Ónyé lúó, ò líé.*  
 Person work 3sg eat

He who works will eat.  
 'Hard work begets  
 success.'

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Stating)

Indirect illocutionary act: Directive (Advising/ Encouraging)

This proverb, used during the New Yam Festival to emphasise that hard work yields success, performs an assertive direct illocutionary act by affirming the cultural belief in the value of diligence. At the indirect illocutionary level, it functions as a directive act, advising listeners that success is unattainable without sustained effort. This communicative act reinforces societal norms that uphold labour as a prerequisite for achievement within the Igbo cultural context.

24. *Nwá ágū ánārā àtá áfífíá*  
 Child tiger do-Neg Vp-chew grass  
 The child of a tiger does not eat  
 grass. 'A chip off the old block.'

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Stating)

Indirect illocutionary act: Expressive (Encouraging)

At the direct illocutionary act, this proverb asserts a cultural truth: that a child should emulate his father. As such, the offspring of industrious and accomplished farmers should not go hungry. This assertive act affirms the value of lineage-based excellence in Igbo society. Indirectly, the proverb performs an expressive illocutionary act, encouraging members of the community to strive for greatness and live up to inherited standards of success. Reinforcing the communicative feature of cultural ideals of continuity, hard work, and social aspiration.

25. *Aka aja aja nà-èbute ọ̀nụ mmanụ m̄manụ*  
 Hand sand sand aux-bring mouth oil

o

il A soiled hand makes an oily mouth.  
 ‘Hard work begets success’.

Direct illocutionary act: Assertive (Informing)

Indirect illocutionary act: Directive (Advising/ Warning)

In this proverb, ‘soiled hands’ indicate labour, while the ‘oily mouth’ metaphorically represents the reward of success. The direct illocutionary act is assertive, buttressing the truth, while the indirect illocutionary act highlights a directive act, which warns/ advises on the importance of hard work as a prerequisite for achieving success. This communicative act projects a cultural value within the Igbo society where diligence is rewarded. Through its figurative structure, the proverb functions not only as a moral instruction but also as a tool for shaping attitudes toward responsibility and industriousness.

### Findings

The findings from the analysis reveal that Igbo proverbs exhibit distinctive communicative features that serve both explicit and implicit functions within discourse. The direct illocutionary acts performed through these proverbs are predominantly assertive, whereby the speaker confidently affirms culturally grounded truths or expresses widely accepted social beliefs. These assertive acts function to reinforce communal values, validate shared experiences, and articulate moral standards within the society.

Conversely, the indirect illocutionary acts embedded in the proverbs assume expressive, directive, and commissive forms. Expressive acts convey emotions such as gratitude, admiration, praise, and happiness, while directive acts function to advise, warn, or caution. Commissive acts, on the other hand, involve making promises or commitments. These indirect functions often rely on contextual interpretation and shared cultural knowledge, allowing the proverbs to operate as subtle yet powerful tools for shaping behaviour and guiding interpersonal relations.

The dual illocutionary structure of Igbo proverbs highlights their communicative richness and versatility. By affirming cultural values and prompting social actions, these proverbs function not just as rhetorical expressions but as pragmatic tools for maintaining order, promoting unity, and preserving indigenous knowledge. This emphasises their vital role in the Igbo sociopragmatic discourse, where meaning is shaped by context, culture, and communal norms.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined the communicative features of Igbo proverbs in select traditional events, portrayed through the direct and indirect illocutionary acts in the highlighted cultural events of *Ichi Ozọ* (Ozọ title ceremony) and *Ili Ji* (New Yam festival). To deepen scholarly understanding of the communicative features of Igbo proverbs, future studies should broaden the scope of investigation to include other traditional Igbo events beyond those examined in this research. Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of African oral traditions by integrating linguistic structure, pragmatic function, and cultural practice in the analysis of Igbo proverbs. It demonstrates that, within Igbo society, proverbs extend beyond traditional sayings to operate as functional expressions, manifesting as assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives, that sustain cultural identity, strengthen social bonds, and transmit intergenerational knowledge. Accordingly, their continued study and preservation remain vital to the maintenance of indigenous knowledge systems in an era of rapid sociocultural change.

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