

A RELEVANCE THEORY ACCOUNT OF PROVERBS IN OVIM DIALECT OF IGBO, ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The study is a relevance theory account of proverbs in Ovimi dialect of Igbo in Abia State, Nigeria. The study seeks to categorize Ovimi proverbs into the male and female perspectives. Thus, it establishes the contexts of use and explains how the proverbs are understood by the hearer within the parameters of relevance theory propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1986). The study as a qualitative research is a survey research design, where data were collected through face-to-face interview and participant observation. A total of six elderly men and four elderly women were the informants used for the study. The data collected were categorized and analyzed using relevance theoretical model. The findings of the study revealed that there are proverbs that are targeted towards men and women respectively. Ovimi proverbs function as an artistic expression of the people and cultural contexts are the right cognitive environment needed to process the proverbs.

Key Words: Proverb, pragmatics, language, relevance theory and context.

Introduction

An enormous and appreciable work has been carried out by different scholars on the concept of Igbo proverbs which form part of Igbo folklore traditions. One such is Nworga (1975) who states that proverb has been variously defined as “the wisdom of many and wit of one, the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression”. He further defines proverb as “a terse statement which figuratively gives expression to the point of traditional wisdom relevant to a given situation”.

The Igbo people cherish proverbs because it is one of their folklore traditions. Thus, proverbs are seen to be crucial in their discourses because of its literal attributes of figurativeness and wittiness and the fact that it points to the socio-cultural and historical dignity and nobility of the Igbo. This work is based on the Ovimi dialect of Igbo which belongs to the kwa group of languages, a member of the Niger-kordofanian family of languages (Greenberg, 1963). The dialect is spoken by the people of Ovimi, Isuikwuato Local Government Area of Abia State.

Dabaghi (2011) defines proverb as “a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form which is handed down from generation to generation”. This definition concentrated on two important aspects of the proverb; its economy of words and its being a vehicle of traditional wisdom.

Nworga (1975) opines that there are three

elements which proverbs contain; they are – imaginative economy of words, traditional wisdom, and usage which calls for interpretation. Thus, Echeruo (1971:66) avers “to understand Igbo thought, even to know what Igbo proverbs mean, one has first to understand the Igbo language. There is absolutely no other way”. Achebe (1958:32) says that “proverbs are palm oil with which words are eaten”. This can explain why even though proverbs may be put in groups in their occurrence to point to the same idea; they are like synonyms, particular in their connotation. Essentially, proverbs reveal the cultural attributes and the system of values of the society in which they exist. In the Igbo society for example, mutual co-existence is the core of its value system, hence the proverb:

“Egbe bere, ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwakwa ya”

(Let the hawk perch, let the eagle perch, any that wishes another the contrary, let its wings break).

At this point, we would like to make mention of the fact that every Igbo proverb has a particular function which it performs, its folkloric wisdom not just cited in isolation of one life event or the other, so, whenever the Igbo proverb is used, it points to a specific thing. Some of the functions range from encouragement, admonition, caution, dissuasion, praise, etc. Proverbs have a fixed word order and are equally expressed or rendered in a definite form such as: “it is said...”. “Our fathers said...”, the Igbo people said...”, etc. Also, more often than not, those folkloric wisdom are used by the elderly male folks in Ovimi community in

particular and the Igbo society in general as it is only on rare occasions would the elderly female use proverbs, hence it is considered not just disrespectful but a social degradation for the younger ones (both male and females) to speak in proverbs before the elders, such that when such occurs, these proverbs can be used to caution them:

“Nwanta tujọ ilu nna ya tujọ, ya kwujọkwa ujwo nna ya ji”

(If a child cites the proverbs his father cited, let him pay the debts his father owes).

“Nwa atujọ ga-epu mpi, ekwo kwakwa ya”

(The lamb that will develop horns should first develop stiff neck).

Therefore, proverbs are statement of facts which draws largely from the cultural attitudes and values of the society for their potency; either they are put in the mouths of animals or humans.

Previous Studies on Proverbs

According to Okolo (1985), the use of proverbs is seen as an embodiment of philosophy and wisdom; hence, people who are gifted in using them are highly respected in the society. He further states that proverbs reveal cultural attitudes and values of the society in which they exist. This is why a speaker who uses proverbs not only effectively passes across his points, but equally reiterates a cultural value. In Nwachukwu-Agbada's (2002) view, the Igbo proverb is not only a performance-oriented linguistic art and act, but also one in which contextual variables explicitly informs its beauty and instructional function, he points to the fact that context is very important and can't be overlooked in the appreciation of proverbs from any culture. He states:

“...it must be seen to be inadequate, the structuralist explanation of the proverb which argues that for a proverb to be cross-culturally relevant, it must shed its traditional-cum-linguistic background, forgo its cultural nuances, so it would assume universality...such a proverb, we dare say, would have lost much in terms of meaning and communication potential...a proverb text is much more than its wording in any language, whatever the fidelity with which this is done” (Nwachukwu-Agbada,

2002:31).

Furthermore, he elaborates on the proverb as a linguistic act and art which is historically, socially, religiously and otherwise relevant. In the essay. Oha (1998) also carried out a study on one of the Igbo folklore traditions, namely, proverbs in a work titled the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs. The objective of the study is to show that Igbo proverbs produce meanings that are sexually derogatory, and that in the milieu, one of the ways the patriarchal system has tried to invigorate and sustain itself is through the craft of proverbs which always mean more than they say as culturally-valued modes of oral education and semiosis. The researcher used the secondary method of data collection, employing the Discourse Theory on “facework” as its framework. The researcher explained that a current theory of “facework” explains that individuals and groups have certain “facewants” which include “fellowship face” (“the want to be included or to be seen as a desirable member of society”), “competence face” (“the want that their abilities be respected”), (Oha, 1998:89). The findings of the study reveal that sex-bias in the use of proverbs clearly undermines the integrity of the proverbs as expressions of folk wisdom. The derogation and denigration of womanhood by men in their use of Igbo proverbs also suggests men as being dominance-and-hostility-oriented. The study also shows that the proverbs of womanhood in Igbo land reveal an attempt at denigrating and disempowering women. Apart from this, the encoding of a negative of womanhood in what is seen as an expression of the wisdom of the society has another disturbing significance: it seems to make such construction of negativism law, and as proverbs constantly used in discourse (and thus kept “alive”), the negative image and uncomfortable space allocated to women are unfortunately made permanent. (Oha, 1998:97)

This work differs from the present study in many aspects; it focuses on the semantics of female subjugation and derogation in Igbo proverbs while the present study is on the pragmatic analysis of Igbo proverbs: A case study of Ovim dialects. Oha used the Discourse Theory on “Facework” as the theoretical framework while the present study adopts the relevance theory

framework.

Soi (2014) presents the results of a linguistic study on Kipsigis proverbs titled the stylistic and pragmatic study of Kipsigis proverbs. The study aimed at subjecting Kipsigis proverbs through a stylistic analysis. Also, it sought to find out the attitude of Kipsigis speakers towards their proverbs. In the study, the researcher used primary sources of data collection which includes the use of questionnaire and face to face interview. She used the stylo-pragmatic framework which combines both stylistics and pragmatics field of study. She opines that when someone uses a proverb, such a person is making a linguistic choice because what is being said can as well be stated in plain language. The findings gathered from that study include the fact that there is a varied attitude towards the proverbs among Kipsigis speakers depending on the age of the speaker and that proverbs are used for various reasons which include to advise, warn, educate, conceal a secret, correcting, settle a dispute and to pass cultural knowledge. Also, faithfulness in the use of Kipsigis proverbs were associated with the elderly members of the Kipsigis society.

The stylistic and pragmatic study of Kipsigis proverbs is directly related to the present study in regard to the study of the meanings of proverbs in relation to speech situation (pragmatics), the methodology employed are also the same but differs in the area of use of questionnaire as the present work uses observation and face to face interview. Furthermore, the framework differs from the present work in the sense that the previous study used the stylo-pragmatic framework while the present study employs relevance theory.

Obadan (2015) has an interesting study on language endangerment: Issues of Igbo proverbs. The work takes a different approach on the subject of language endangerment as it sets to examine the gradual loss of an important aspect of Igbo language: proverbs. The central claim of the work is that language endangerment is gradual, starting with the loss of some vital aspects of the language which propels losing of its communicative relevance in certain domain, and if such continues in other domains without being checked, might lead to an eventful total loss of the language. The

researcher in that work adopted the direct observation method, using the Linguistic Vitality and Endangerment (LVE) framework. This, according to the researcher has been used mostly by scholars to ascertain the vitality of a language as a whole, though it was used in ascertaining the vitality in the use of an aspect of a language (proverbs) in that study; the competence level in the use of proverbs between the older generation of Igbo speakers and the younger generation were gathered, the findings of the study show that most youth speakers lack competence in the use and interpretation of proverbs.

This research relates to the present study in the areas of focus and methodology of the study which are proverbs and primary sources respectively, however, it differs from the present study in its framework which is the Linguistic Vitality and Endangerment (LVE) while the present study employs relevance theory.

Nwankwo (2015), undertakes a study titled Igbo proverbs in the context of early communicative competence and social stability. The study sets out to study an early exposure to social learning and interaction as a reciprocal of language development. The unstructured questionnaire and observation are the two major instruments of data collection used. The study was premised on social learning theory. The findings of the study reveal that Igbo proverbs are precise and incisive and if appropriately applied to the intellectual and moral development of a child can serve as tool to reprimand, discourage, instruct and correct or praise the growing child's derailing tendencies more intricately.

This study relates to the present one in showing the nature, attributes and importance of Igbo proverbs as is reflected in the society. Like the present study, their methods of data collection are the same. However, it differs from the present study in the framework used. Nwankwo used the theory of social learning as reciprocal determinism while the present work is based on relevance theory. The present study will go a step further by showing the relevance of proverbs in specific community such as Ovim using the relevance theoretic lens. This is the gap the present study seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Relevance Theory as its theoretical framework. Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in details one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice, 1989). Relevance theory claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is more relevant than any alternative input available to us at that time. The proponents of this theory are Wilson & Sperber (1986), and in their view, relevance theory is a cognitive psychological theory which treats utterance interpretation as a cognitive process. The comprehension procedure of relevance theory bridges the gap between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning. For the hearer to reach the most relevant information that will justify the speaker's meaning, Sperber and Wilson (1986) gave the steps below: (a) Consider interpretations in order of accessibility. (b) Stop when your expectation of relevance is satisfied.

Relevance theory is a suitable framework for this study because when a speaker says something, it is designed to attract a hearer's attention which makes the hearer to focus on the meaning intended by the speaker (speaker's meaning) and through this the hearer eventually draws certain conclusion which is the intention of the speaker. This is the tenet of Relevance Theory.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data in this paper were grouped into two categories: (i) masculinity, (ii) femininity. This grouping will help in fulfilling the objectives of this study. Through this analysis, the perception of women in Ovim community would be known, the context of use of these proverbs and how relevance theory helps hearers to understand the proverbs would be equally highlighted. The proverbs analyzed in this section are interpreted against the cognitive environment of Ovim culture, norms, customs and beliefs; and they are based on the context or circumstances under which the proverbs are uttered or used.

Masculinity in Ovim Proverbs

Here, the proverbs selected for analysis are those that project men as the "stronger vessels" as opposed to their female counterparts. As earlier stated, men are the producers and users of proverbs and they are generally seen as the "head".

1. *He eghu hiri gbabiri enya ka okuko hikwaru la-atu.*

Literal meaning: What the goat saw and kept quiet/silent is also what the fowl saw and started to cackle.

Contextual meaning: What a man will consider irrelevant, a woman will definitely nag about it.

The concept IRRELEVANT will trigger the following encyclopedic entry:

- (a) Not important because it is not connected to the situation you are dealing with.
- (b) Having no real or useful purpose.
- (c) Not related or applicable.

The above assumptions will yield the following implications:

- (d) A man does not involve himself with things that are not important because they are not connected to the situation he is dealing with.
- (e) A man is not concerned with things that have no real or useful purpose.
- (f) A man does not involve in things that are not related or applicable.

The hearer will pick an interpretation that will take less effort to process thus yielding greater cognitive effects. So, the hearer will pick (1d) "A man does not involve himself with things that are not important because they are not connected to the situation he is dealing with". Men are being projected here as people who only involve themselves with things that are important or connected to them, this of course is in contrast to the women who waste their time, energy and resources on what doesn't concern them.

2. *Adu aso mgbagbu aga ogu.*

Literal meaning: Fear of being shot to death doesn't prevent people from going to war.

Contextual meaning: One doesn't give up on a project because he met with some obstacles in his previous attempt.

The concept OBSTACLE causes a lot of interpretations which is done in the encyclopedic entry in the brain where the concept obstacle is stored. When retrieved, obstacle comes with the following meanings:

- (a) Something that makes it difficult for one to achieve their aim.
- (b) An object which blocks one's way so that one must go around it.
- (c) Something that holds up progress.

The contextual implications that would be yielded are:

- (d) A man sees something that makes it difficult for him to achieve his aim.
- (e) A man sees an object which blocks his way so that he must go around it.
- (f) A man sees something that holds up his progress.

From the above, the hearer will pick an interpretation that will take less effort to process thus yielding greater cognitive effects. The hearer after considering the interpretation in order of accessibility will stop when his expectation of relevance is satisfied. In this, the hearer will stop at (2d) "A man sees something that makes it difficult for him to achieve his aim". As earlier mentioned, in Ovim community, men are expected to be "keepers" of their household, this involves taking in everything that comes to their household (both good and bad); in this process however, they often encounter things that delay their plans in life, but such cannot make them to relent because they are symbols of strength and as heads of their families, are expected to be strong always.

3. *Enya kporu akpo laru nna ya ukwu l'isi.*

Literal meaning: A blind eye is still in the head of the blind person.

Contextual meaning: There is always a way out of every predicament in life.

The word PREDICAMENT yields the following meaning:

- (a) A difficult or unpleasant situation in which one doesn't know what to do.
- (b) An unfortunate position.
- (c) A tight spot.

From the above assumptions, the following implications will be yielded:

- (d) A man handles a difficult or unpleasant situation in which one doesn't know what to do.
- (e) A man handles an unfortunate position.
- (f) A man handles a tight spot.

The hearer will pick an interpretation/implication that will take less effort to process thus yielding greater cognitive effects. So, the hearer will pick (3d) "A man handles a difficulty or unpleasant situation in which one doesn't know what to do". Men who are the head of their families are laden with the responsibilities of catering for their wives and children, with this in mind, they try to overcome all sorts of predicaments that come their way even those that may try to defile solutions.

4. *Ohia ogwu maru okuko, aduu epio ya epio.*

Literal meaning: The bush in which the chicken's foot is pierced by thorns is impenetrable.

Contextual meaning: Being cautious is a key to a happy life.

The word CAUTIOUS will yield the following meaning:

- (a) Careful to avoid danger or risks.
- (b) Warning against evil.
- (c) Security, guaranty.

From the above, the following implications will be yielded:

- (d) A man is careful to avoid danger and risks.
- (e) A man warns against evil.
- (f) A man gives security, guaranty.

Following the comprehension heuristic procedure, the hearer will settle on (4d) as it is the one which satisfies the hearer's expectation of relevance. The contextual Implication chosen will be "A man is careful to avoid danger and risks". Men in their day to day activities often encounter difficulties but their cautiousness helps them. What a man cannot withstand with his high level of cautiousness will be extremely hard and impossible for a woman to withstand.

Femininity in Ovim Proverbs

This section analyzes proverbs that focus on women with a view to show their inferiority in the Ovim community. The proverbs selected for analysis in this section shows the derogation and denigration of womanhood by men and the society at large which projects them as weak and less important when compared to men in the Ovim community in particular and Igbo land in general.

1. *Nwanyị sụ la ya la nwoko ha, ya nyulie mamiri elu.*

Literal meaning: If a woman claims equality with a man, let her urinate upwards.

Contextual meaning: It is always good to acknowledge individual boundaries.

The words ACKNOWLEDGE will trigger some interpretations which is carried out in the encyclopedic entry in the brain. When retrieved, acknowledge comes with the following meaning:

- (a) To admit or accept that something is true or exists.
- (b) To own or recognize a particular quality.

From the above, the contextual implications that will be yielded are:

- (c) A woman should admit or accept that something is true or exists.
- (d) A woman should own or recognize a particular quality.

Following the path of least effort according to accessibility, the hearer will stop at (1c) because this satisfies their expectation of relevance, thus, the hearer will further make the inference that “A woman should admit or accept that something is true or exists”. From this proverb, women are seen as those who cannot measure up with men in any way. It seeks to humiliate and disdain women by proving that what men can do, women cannot do the same.

2. *Onye jiru nwanyị wuru ivu vu la isi okpọ.*

Literal meaning: Any person who uses a woman as a pad in carrying a luggage is carrying the luggage without a pad.

Contextual meaning: Humans are not reliable.

From the above, the word RELIABLE will trigger the encyclopedic entry which will produce the following meanings:

- (a) Someone or something that can be trusted.
- (b) To depend on someone or something.

The following contextual implications will be yielded:

- (c) A woman is not someone that can be trusted.
- (d) A woman is not someone to be depended on.

From the above, the hearer will settle on (2c) having followed the path of least effort in computing cognitive effects and having considered the interpretations in order of accessibility. This is because (2c) satisfies the expectation of relevance to mean that a woman is not someone that can be trusted; so she is useless.

3. *Nkịta nwanyị zuru la-atagbu mmadu.*

Literal meaning: A dog trained by a woman bites people to death.

Contextual meaning: Anything done by a woman ends up in the negative.

From the above, the word NEGATIVE will trigger the following:

- (a) Considering only the bad qualities of a situation.
- (b) Damaging, undesirable, unfavourable.

The above assumptions will yield the following contextual implications:

- (c) A woman considers only the bad qualities of a situation.
- (d) A woman does things that are damaging, undesirable, unfavourable.

Following the comprehension heuristic procedure, the hearer will settle on the fourth option (3d) which produces the interpretation that “A woman does things that are damaging, undesirable, unfavourable”. This proverb points to the fact that women are not worthy of existence.

4. *Nwoko luru otu nwanyị kpuru isi.*

Literal meaning: A man that married one wife is blind.

Contextual meaning: A man with one wife has blind eyes.

The concept BLIND will trigger the encyclopedic entry which will produce the following assumptions:

- (a) A person who cannot see.
- (b) Depends on others for support.
- (c) Has to be treated with care.
- (d) One feels uncomfortable.
- (e) Seemingly to be out of control.

The contextual implications that will be yielded are:

- (f) A man with one wife cannot see.
- (g) A man with one wife depends on others for support.
- (h) A man with one wife has to be treated with care.
- (i) A man with one wife feels uncomfortable.
- (j) A man with one wife seems to be out of control.

Following the comprehension heuristic procedure, the hearer will settle on (4j) "A man with one wife seems to be out of control". This brings us to the conclusion that a monogamous man lacks control of his anger when his wife dies because there is no other wife that remains to console him.

5. *A zutara nwanyi ekwa maru mma, o gaa mgbaru onye du ndu.*

Literal meaning: When a beautiful dress is bought for a woman, she would pay a condolence visit in respect of somebody who is alive.

Contextual meaning: When people have more than they need, they tend to misuse what they have.

The word MISUSE will trigger the following encyclopedic entry:

- (a) To use something in the wrong way or for a wrong purpose.
- (b) An incorrect, improper or unlawful use of something.

The following contextual implications will be yielded:

- (c) A woman uses something in the wrong way or for a wrong purpose.
- (d) A woman uses something in an incorrect, improper or unlawful way.
- (e) The hearer will settle on (5d) following the path of least effort according to accessibility. Thus, the hearer will make the inference that "A woman uses something in an incorrect, improper or unlawful way". This proverb projects women as senseless and a set of people who wastes resources.

6. *Nwanyi bu ashawo.*

Literal meaning: Girl be prostitute.

Contextual meaning: A girl is a prostitute.

This is a negative proverb. It is figurative as the meaning cannot be accessed directly. Thus, the word PROSTITUTE triggers a lot of interpretations. This is done in the encyclopedic entry in the brain where the concept PROSTITUTE is stored as a label, when it is retrieved; PROSTITUTE comes with several meanings, including the following:

- (a) Has sex for money.
- (b) Leave home for greener pastures.
- (c) Doesn't stick to one man.
- (d) Attracts men through her adornment.

With the above assumptions in the hearer's mind, a path of least effort for greater cognitive effects will be followed in order of accessibility. Depending on the context, the following contextual implications will be derived.

- (e) A girl who has sex for money.
- (f) A girl who leaves home for greener pasture.
- (g) A girl who does not stick to one man.
- (h) A girl who attracts men through her adornment.

With the help of comprehension heuristic procedure, the hearer will settle on the second option (6f) which will bring forth the contextual implication that a girl is a person who has to leave her ancestral home one day,

to go to another place for marriage as per the Igbo culture. Just as a prostitute, a woman is not committed to one place. It is believed that one day they have to leave their ancestral home and settle somewhere else.

Findings and Conclusion

It is observed from the study that proverbs used among the people in Ovim community comprised of masculine and feminine types. These proverbs selected for this article having undergone critical analysis using the Relevance Theory portray men as strong vessels that are seen as heads in their various families. And women viewed as inferior and weaker vessels, hence the use of derogation and denigration words against them. From the analysis, we have shown how and in what ways the Ovim proverbs function as an artistic expression of the people which is shown or exhibited through their cultural and customary beliefs as shown in their proverbs. The context used in this study is based on the Ovim culture without which one can't arrive at the right

inference. The study was based on proverbs that relate to men and women in the Ovim community, a further research can be carried out targeting children, and other creatures such as specific trees, using relevance theory which will aid in knowing how they are perceived in the Ovim community. Furthermore, a further research can equally be carried out on the same topic using a different theory for its analysis. Also, Cultural contexts are the right cognitive environment needed to process these proverbs in Ovim. Finally, the users of these proverbs rely solely on the cultural and customary beliefs of the Ovim community which is what hearers use in meeting up the expectations of relevance.

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