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FOREWORD

With this volume the *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics* marks its first decade of publication. The editors are bringing out Volume 10 in two numbers, the first of which is devoted to theoretical issues, general linguistics, and old-world-language topics. Volume 10, number 2 is the fourth in the *Studies in Native American Languages* series.

Volume 10, number 1 is comprised of papers on topics as diverse as the theory of the sign, the comparison of language-specific entailment systems, and motherese in modern Greek. Much of the work represented here is quite original, and has seen little discussion before (Greek motherese, Igbo proverb and Idiom).

The editors wish to thank all the contributors, both those whose papers appear in Volume 10, number 1, and those whose papers we did not include. We wish also to thank the faculty of the Linguistics Department of the University of Kansas for their support and encouragement for the *KWPL* throughout the year.

RWL

AN ANALYSIS OF IGBO PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

Bertram A. Okolo

ABSTRACT: This paper looks at Igbo proverbs and idioms in the light of the existing linguistic theories. It tries to show that application of the current linguistic theories in the interpretation of Igbo proverbs and idioms will be futile without a consideration of context, pragmatics and the people's cultural tradition.

1. Introduction

The Ibos of Nigeria possess a rich folklore tradition. Among the various forms of folklore practised by the people are folktales, riddles, legends, proverbs, idioms, myths, and rituals. Proverbs and idioms are particularly crucial to Igbo discourses for a number of reasons. They seem to be most frequently used "because of their literal attribute of being figurative, colorful and terse, and their earthy qualities of containing truths and hard facts borne out of experience" (Peters, 1971:98). There is hardly any situation or aspect of life of the people in which proverbs and idioms could not be employed. They are copiously used in such 'high-level' discourses as formal litigation, formal oratory or bride-price settlements, as well as in everyday situations like advising, praising, encouraging, and so on. Application of proverbs and idioms in practically all varieties of human communicative situations arises from the fact that the people regard proverbs and idioms as 'oil with which the words are eaten,' and as devices and means by which one can communicate effectively. "Can a man make an effective speech," the elders say, "without a tinge of proverb and idiom, it would boil down to a watery, childish talk, similar to the babble of children playing in the sand." Proverbs and idioms are, therefore, indispensable in authentic Igbo discourse. In their use is seen an embodiment of philosophy and wisdom, hence people who are gifted in using them are highly respected in the society.

The wordings of the proverbs and idioms are as fixed as their contents, and the messages transmitted in them have a cultural standardization in both form and

content. This fixed nature makes for easy memorization and retention so that anybody wishing to acquire them will not have to grapple with the problem of variation. It has to be mentioned that in using the proverbs or idioms it is not enough simply to memorize and recite them. A good speaker has to use them in appropriate contexts because context plays a major role in their correct interpretation. Mere rendering of proverbs or idioms out of context not only makes the exercise boring and uninteresting, but also conceals the color and beauty they give to language. In fact, it is rather difficult to elicit proverbs or idioms from gifted users out of context, because as an Igbo proverb has it, 'onye okwu kwu o, a hu ihe a ga-asa' (When a person speaks, then you know what to answer). In other words, contexts and situations give rise to proverbs.

Proverbs and idioms sum up the people's collective experience, and as Nwoga (1975:186) puts it, in their use "the experience and wisdom of several ages" are "gathered and summed up in one expression." In other words, to understand a proverb or idiom, one needs to understand not only the language of the proverb or idiom, but also the users of the language and their cultural tradition. This additional knowledge is very important because a specific application of a proverb or idiom is a collocation of an element already existing in the folk literary tradition (i.e., the proverb or idiom), and of a conceptual structure by which the situation is experienced, thus combining the situation with cultural meaning by linking it to a chain of situations, all of which could be interpreted through the proverb or idiom.

Proverbs and idioms reveal cultural attitudes and values of the society in which they exist. Thus, when a competent user in a discourse says:

Nnunu okenye chiiri uta na aku jee igba,
ma o bughi ugo, o buru okpoko.

(A bird for which an elder goes to hunt with
bow and arrow, if it is not an eagle,
it will be a horn-bill)

he does not only pass across his point more effectively, but also reiterates a cultural value. Bird hunting is the preserve of children who indulge in such pastimes as diversions from playing in the sand. Adults are sup-

posed to have outgrown such pastimes just as they have outgrown hunting lizards and squirrels or playing in the sand. But hunting an eagle or a horn-bill is a different matter. These birds are associated with greatness and royalty, and being able to hunt down any of them is seen as a rare achievement. What the proverb above conveys is simply that adults should always aspire towards something that is great and noble.

Apart from using proverbs to advise, teach, encourage, praise, admonish, lament, and make allusions, they are frequently used in reiterating the beliefs of the people, or even to provide a secular precedent for present action (similar to citation of cases as legal precedents in English culture). The Ibos, for example, believe in fairness. Whether in social or judicial aspects of the people's traditional life, equal treatment for all is emphasized. The laws and regulations of the land are for the old as well as the young, thus ruling out any preferential treatment. In fact, this is the reason behind the idea of collective responsibility (which is at the basis of the people's traditional life) in judicial rulings, where consensus is always sought. In reiterating this traditional belief relating to fairness, the use of a proverb seems to be the best way to emphasize it. Thus, the proverb:

E mee nwa ka e mere ibe ya,
obi adi ya mma.

(Treat a child the way his fellows are
treated, and he will be happy)

clearly emphasizes that as long as all are treated with equal fairness everything would be alright; problems arise when preferential treatments come in.

I mentioned earlier that Igbo proverbs (as probably is the case with proverbs in other languages) have a fixed word order, and any rearrangement of the syntactic elements composing them can render them incomprehensible. Not only are the lexical items fixed, but the use of some fixed stereotype phrases (such as: "our people say...", "our fathers say...", "it is said...") sets them apart as something impersonal, thus producing an understanding or reaction in the person to whom it is directed without directly involving the speaker. This indirection, while it achieves the effect intended, also saves both the speaker and the addressee

from any embarrassment. Thus, a person being admonished or satirized in a proverb takes the admonishment or satire in good spirits, since the speaker is not held responsible as the originator of the proverb. This indirection is one of the things that distinguishes a proverb from other sentences in the language.

In my analysis of Igbo proverbs and idioms, I shall divide the discussion into sections. First, I shall briefly review some of the linguistic treatments of figurative utterances. Then I shall take up the analysis of proverbs and idiomatic expressions, showing that any semantic interpretation of these aesthetic modes of speech should include contextual, pragmatic and cultural considerations.

2. Some Linguistic Treatments of Figurative Expressions

Although proverbs and idioms abound in languages of the world, it is rather surprising that they have been totally excluded in most linguistic treatments. To my knowledge, no adequate linguistic theory has been developed to handle these modes of speech. Such a theory would not only distinguish proverbs and idioms from other parts of speech, but also should be able to explain how people are able to recognize and use them. Although native speakers do not find it difficult to identify proverbs and idioms, it has so far not been proven how this is possible. It is not my aim here to provide explanations for these crucial facts. What I intend to do in this section is to look at these modes of speech in the light of the existing linguistic theories, and see how the theories can be of use in their analysis.

Before I go into the discussion, let me clarify an important point. All along (even up to the present), treatment of figurative language has been restricted to such forms as metaphor, simile, irony, and the like. And since these modes of speech are regarded as occurring only within sentences, naturally proverbs lie outside the range of figurative language because proverbs are full sentences. Here, I shall regard proverbs as figurative utterances for two main reasons. They share with other figures of speech the fact that their meanings are not easily deduced from the literal meanings of the words composing them. Also, as with other parts of speech, they require the recognition of some extra-linguistic and extra-sentential factors for their full

interpretation. It is my belief that figures of speech, like metaphor, are closely linked to proverbs because if I say, for example:

A stitch in time saves nine

I generally mean it to apply metaphorically to the situation under consideration. It is as a result of this similarity that I believe that whatever explains proverbs is likely to explain metaphor as well, and vice-versa. Therefore, what I shall discuss here about any figure of speech I consider as applicable to proverbs as well.

The analysis of metaphor, for example, has occupied the interest of philosophers for a long time. Figurative language flourished in Greek myths and poetry. Plato (popularly regarded as a master of metaphor), despite his copious use of metaphor to convey his most important philosophical convictions, left no explicit treatment of his primary art, but simply attacked poets and sophists whose 'misuse' of language led others away from the truth. He argued that these people (poets and sophists) made trifles seem important and important things trivial by the force of their language.

Probably the first philosophical treatment of metaphor was given by Aristotle in his description of metaphor under poetry as a means by which the poet provides knowledge through artistic imitation and making persuasive arguments. His famous definition of metaphor in Poetics (1457) not only established metaphor as a deviance from literal language, but also restricted its semantic unit to the level of words. It was only at the beginning of this century that this precedent was challenged when people came to realize that the semantic unit of a metaphor extends beyond that of the word.

Before the advent of generative grammar, the commonest strategy people employed in identifying and analyzing figurative language was to look for any syntactic or semantic deviance that might give a clue to the presence of this mode of speech. Figurative utterances were assumed to be located only within sentences, and although they give clearness and charm to style, they were regarded as deviations from the literal language because they involve transference of the names of objects to some other objects to which those names do not properly belong. In fact, Latin rhetoricians re-

garded 'deviant' expressions like metaphor as having no unique function or importance; therefore, reasoning based upon them was like wandering amongst innumerable absurdities. The main reason why people express their thoughts, they argued, was to communicate knowledge and ideas, but the use of these 'deviant' modes of speech frustrates and impedes this function. The only concern at the time was to recognize these deviant modes and avoid them as much as possible. What they failed to understand is that syntactic deviance alone is not necessarily sufficient in identifying figurative utterances because they could be as syntactically well-formed as any other type of utterance (I shall take up this point later in the discussion).

One could say that there are two options in a syntactic treatment of figures of speech: either we regard them as grammatical, or we regard them as ungrammatical. Taking them as grammatical implies that the current grammar is incomplete, and regarding them as ungrammatical means that they transgress the rules of grammar. The question then arises: if a grammar is actually a formal reconstruction of the native speaker's competence as many scholars believe, why can't it handle these figurative utterances? An answer to this question might be that a grammar is after all a theory only of literal linguistic competence. But is this so? I believe it is not. Figurative utterances are intrinsic elements in the use of language, and whether or not they could be accounted for in the grammar, it might be difficult to produce and comprehend them in terms of storable rules. Therefore, their analysis might involve more than mere grammatical considerations.

Generative grammar attempts to offer syntactic and semantic treatments of figurative utterances. The term 'selectional restriction' was introduced as a type of contextual feature which specifies the conditions regarding where in deep structure a lexical item can occur. Selectional features specify the restrictions on permitted combinations of lexical items within a given grammatical context. These restrictions are stated with reference to the relevant features inherent in adjacent or nearby complex symbols. For example, a sentence like:

*Peter killed the corpse.

is semantically anomalous because kill imposes a

selectional restriction on its object that the object be animate. This information is thus incorporated in the dictionary entry for kill, as in:

kill : V + [- [NP + Animate]]

Semantically, the characterization focuses on the competence level where compatibility between related elements must exist. The distinction between deviant and non-deviant is based on whether or not the elements are compatible or incompatible. For example, the elements are compatible in: John ate the apple, and not in: John ate the table. If considered in this light, figurative utterances violate selectional restrictions, and this violation explains the semantic tension one experiences in trying to comprehend them. Take for example the utterance: Peter is a lion. The incompatibility between the [+ two-legged] marker attached to Peter, and the [+ four-legged] marker for lion becomes difficult to comprehend since Peter cannot be two-legged and four-legged at the same time. Therefore, there is a clash in the interpretation that made earlier scholars regard such figurative utterances as either self-contradictory or blatantly false.

If proverbs are taken into consideration, one would not necessarily say that they are contradictory in this regard although their literal meanings differ equally greatly from their actual meanings. One could argue that the incompatibility in the case of proverbs goes beyond the sentence boundary. The intrusion of a proverb in a piece of discourse impedes the normal thought- or comprehension-flow, thereby obstructing the continuous flow of literal interpretation. That is, the cues and processes involved in the interpretation of the sentences preceding and following the proverb are different from those involved in interpreting the proverb itself. Thus, there is a sort of incompatibility between the literal meanings of the preceding and following parts of the discourse and that of the proverb.

The main problem with this and other analyses that place emphasis on contextual deviance as a necessary condition on figurative utterances is that a violation of selectional restriction or incompatibility relation is not sufficient for the detection of these modes of speech. Loewenberg (1975:322) notes that "any sentence can be provided contexts ... in which it can receive either literal or metaphorical interpretations." For

example, the supposedly deviant utterance: John is a lion may not be anomalous in a situation where John is the name given to one of the lions in a zoo (assuming that all the lions and lionesses in the zoo are given names). If this is the case, we cannot talk of syntactic or semantic deviance at the level of the sentence. In the same way, the aphoristic saying: "Events, not men, shape the course of history" may not necessarily have figurative implication in all contexts. An adequate treatment of these figurative utterances can only be given at the level of utterance in their overall context because "metaphorical utterances are identifiable only if some knowledge possessed by speakers which is decidedly not knowledge of relationships among linguistic symbols can be taken into account" (Loewenberg, 1975:331). That is to say, extralinguistic and extra-sentential contexts are crucial in their treatment. If this is taken into consideration, then the question of falsity of figurative expressions can be handled because they may not be considered false in all contexts. We detect figurative expressions not because of their literal falsities but because of the tension between the literal reading and the context. Their falsities vanish upon recognition that a figurative application of a term is normally quite different from the literal application.

Another treatment of figurative utterances as a semantic rather than a pragmatic problem was undertaken by Black (1954-55). He propounded three theories whose central tenets are construed as semantic theories of metaphor. The theories are: the Comparison Theory, the Substitution Theory, and the Interaction Theory.

The Comparison Theory claims that metaphors are similes with deleted predications of similarity. In other words, the meaning of a metaphor is a literal set of relevant similarities picked out by the context of utterance. For example, John is a lion is semantically equivalent to John is like a lion, with respect to the particular quality that is being described.

The Substitution Theory considers metaphorical expressions as nothing but indirect ways of conveying some intended literal meaning. Our example, John is a lion, is nothing but an indirect way of saying John is fearless (or fierce). There is a lot of similarity between this and the Comparison Theory, so I shall not differentiate between them here.

The Interaction Theory considers metaphors as special linguistic expressions where the metaphorical expression inter-acts with and changes the meaning of the literal expression. In John is a lion, the meaning of John interacts with and changes the meaning of lion, thus bringing out the metaphorical meaning. The interaction is at the level of properties and relations that are commonly believed to be true of an object, even if they do not actually apply.

The Comparison Theory has attracted a large following, and at present there exist many scholarly works that treat metaphors as mere stylistic devices that are reducible to literal statements without loss of cognitive content. For example, Henle (1978) argues that metaphors are not only based on similarities, but they may also induce similarities. I shall not go into the details of the arguments in favor of or against the Comparative view here. What I shall do is to test these theories with some existing frameworks and see how plausible they are.

Let us apply the semantic feature analysis as utilized by, for example, Katz and Fodor (1963), or Lyons' componential analysis (1968:470 ff.) in testing the Interaction Theory. In this type of semantic analysis the meanings of lexical items are specified by a set of features, each of which is an irreducible semantic prime drawn from a large but restricted set, the members of the set being sufficient jointly to define all the complex senses of the lexical items. For example, in: John is a lion, the noun, John, might have the following semantic features associated with it which jointly define its sense: [ANIMATE, HUMAN, TWO LEGS, MALE]. The features for the noun lion may include: [ANIMATE, NON-HUMAN, FOUR LEGS, MALE FIERCE], and so on. Also the verb IS might be represented as a set of features related in particular ways. Then, additional rules would be needed to interpret the sentence: John is a lion. Essentially what the rules will do is to map features from one lexical item on to another. For example, the feature [+ fierce] would be mapped onto John to give the reading John is fierce.

Of course there are problems with this type of analysis. The feature mapping process does not really capture the metaphorical force of such expressions. John is fierce is really not a good paraphrase of John

is a lion because it is too limited and determinate to be able to bring out the force of the metaphorical expression. It seems that the important part of this force involves knowledge of the factual properties of the referents and hence knowledge of the world in general rather than the defining characteristics of the words. So far this extra-linguistic knowledge is still beyond the scope of semantic theory.

The Comparative view claims that metaphors are derived from explicit similes, so that the semantics of metaphors is the same as that of similes. Thus, John is a lion is another way of saying John is like a lion. Supporters of this theory might claim that these two sentences share the same underlying syntactic structure and as a result share the same semantic structure as well. The problem with this interpretation is that not all metaphors are easily derivable from similes. Take for example the utterances:

- (a) The ex-champion was a casualty of his previous fight.
- (b) The ex-champion was like a casualty of his previous fight.

Here, to derive the related simile, we shall need to reconstruct much more than the deleted like in (a). It is not clear to me how this could be done without destroying the claim that both share the same semantic representations.

Treatment of figurative utterances as illocutionary analogues of figurative speech acts has been undertaken by Cohen (1975). He utilizes Austin's (1962) distinction between acts done in saying something (illocutionary acts) and acts done by saying something (perlocutionary acts). For example, my saying: I promise to marry you not only involves the illocution of making a promise, but also several other perlocutions, such as your accepting my promise, my making you happy, my expressing my love, and so on. Cohen argues that speech acts cannot be performed unless the appropriate perlocution associated with each act is possible in the given context. "For an illocution to occur, it must appear possible that its associated perlocution occur" (Cohen, 1975:187). For example, in saying I promise to marry you, I cannot perform the illocutionary act of

promising if the situation is such that I cannot keep the promise in question; if I am too young, or I am married (in societies where polygamy is illegal). If both of us know that I cannot marry you, and also both know that we both know this, then I would not be making any promise of marrying you. In such situations the act of promising will not go through. Cohen suggests that the same conflict might be at work with figurative utterances. Here, there is a conflict between the literal meaning and the context in which the figurative utterance occurs. Such a conflict gives rise to a novel meaning, and this is why the meanings of figurative utterances are not easily deduced from the literal meanings of the words composing them. If odd combinations within a sentence can give rise to new meanings, then it can equally be possible that odd combinations within a speech act can give rise to new meanings as well.

Cohen's observations are interesting, but a lot of things still need to be done. There still remains to be explained how language users are able to recognize and process this conflict. The importance of Cohen's work lies in the fact that it confirms what other scholars have suggested: a proper treatment of figurative utterance should focus attention upon the relation of an utterance to the total speech situation in which it occurs. To be able to do this we would require more than mere linguistic knowledge. For example, we would have to know how our comprehension of the figurative utterance involves our knowledge of the speaker, the total speech situation, and the world around us. Perhaps our better understanding of how context influences our interpretation of figurative utterances might make their identification easier and clearer.

Searle (1979) continues the speech act approach by trying to formulate how metaphors work in terms of the speech act distinction between word or sentence meaning (i.e., what the word or sentence means literally) and a speaker's utterance meaning (i.e., what the speaker means by uttering words or sentences with literal meanings). In terms of this distinction, he tries to state the principles relating literal sentence meaning to metaphorical utterance meaning. In other words, how can a speaker utter a sentence such as: X is Y (with a literal sentence meaning) but in fact mean: X is Z. What Searle has done is try to give the nature of specific principles that would help in explaining what he calls the three basic steps involved in understanding a

metaphor: how the hearer knows to look for a metaphorical interpretation in the first place; how he computes the possible meanings of the utterance; and what principles restrict the range of the possible meanings so as to enable him to get at the precise meaning of the metaphor. He offers several principles, the third of which is: "Things which are P are often said or believed to be R, even though both speaker and hearer may know that R is false of P" (Searle, 1979:108).

The imprecise nature of Searle's work simply goes to show that a proper treatment of figurative utterances has not been found. The general agreement that seems to have emerged from all these works is not an agreement on any one theory, but rather the kind of work that still remains to be done. In fact Davidson (1978) takes an easy stand by denying the existence of a metaphorical meaning in addition to the metaphor's literal meaning. He states that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (p.32). He further explains that in metaphor we use an expression with its literal meaning to direct the hearer's attention, to lead the hearer to see or grasp something or to suggest insights. For him, metaphor is not a semantic issue but a pragmatic one; thus the question of metaphor is simply the question how we can use sentences with literal meaning to "intimate" things or to "lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed" (p.41).

Davidson's conclusions have generated a lot of controversy, and in spite of several challenging replies, (cf., e.g., Black, 1979; Goodman, 1979) no agreement on the analysis of figurative utterances has been reached. Instead, we seem to have arrived back where we started. For the mean- time one thing seems to be established; that is the importance of extra-linguistic and extra-sentential factors in the explication of figurative utterances. These factors range from the speaker's point of view, the beliefs and cultural attitudes and values on which the figures of speech draw, to the context of their use. Scholars are now directing attention to psychology and cognition to see how insights from these disciplines may throw light on the analysis of figurative utterances.

3. Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions in Igbo

3.1. Proverbs

The use of proverbs is one aspect of Ibo traditional life that has survived through the years. Although it is possible to distinguish the 'traditional' proverbs from the 'modern' ones, the importance and application of proverbs in Igbo discourses have not diminished. The 'traditional' proverbs differ from the 'modern' in that the pictures projected in them involve objects and concepts that show some link with the past. The 'modern' proverbs contain concepts and objects that point to innovations that have entered the language through borrowing. For example, in the proverb:

"Ogbenye na-alọ nlo osikapa, kedu ngazi?"

(The poor that dreams of a rice dish, where is the spoon [to eat it with]?)

osikapa 'rice and ngazi 'spoon' refer to new diet and eating habits respectively which are not traditional but borrowed from other cultures. But in the proverb:

"Ebe nwata kpatara ejila bu ebe o na-akpa uri"

(The place where the child picked up snails is where he frequents)

ejila 'snail' is a delicacy that is traditional to the people. Thus we see that the use of 'traditional' and 'modern' concepts side-by-side has not in any way affected the texture and effectiveness of the proverbs or limited their application and importance.

Appreciation of Igbo proverbs, as with proverbs in general, starts with appropriate determination of what they mean. Three levels of meaning of Igbo proverbs can be isolated: the literal meaning, the philosophical meaning, and the contextual meaning. Although some proverbs may not require all these three levels for their interpretation, a majority of them do. I shall try to differentiate these levels with this story example:

George enlisted in the army in spite of his parents' repeated objections. At one of the regular military exercises,

another trainee accidentally discharged his gun, and George's left leg was shattered. The doctors were obliged to amputate his left leg. He was discharged from the army and returned home. His father told him:

"Nwa ekwe ekwe na-ekwe n'uta ekwere."

- Literal meaning: A stubborn person concedes only when tied up with a string.
- Philosophical meaning: One who ignores advice bears the consequences of his actions.
- Contextual meaning: Now that you have done your wish, you should be satisfied with the result.

At the literal level, the important thing is to visualize the picture being projected in the proverb, and to understand the meanings of the words used. The Ibos use animals, human beings, trees, and other familiar objects to project this picture. For example, the monkey is proverbially ugly, and yet performs impossible feats; the tortois is noted for its craftiness; a he-goat for its wit; and a mad man for his ability to engender laughter. If one, therefore, is making a comment on impossibility or ugliness, the monkey could be used as a projection. The proverb:

"Enwe si na ọ foduru nwa ntinti ma iku a ruo ya mma"

(The monkey believes his bushy eye-lashes nearly cost him his beauty)

can be used in a situation where an inexperienced hunter comes back home to say that but for the shape of his gun, he would have killed a lion. Literally, the proverb says that the monkey believes his bushy eye-lashes nearly cost him his beauty. That is to say, the ugly monkey believes he is beautiful in spite of his horrible brows. Of course, his ugliness is not attributable only to his brows; he is still ugly his brows notwithstanding. Here, the monkey's eye-lashes are contrasted with the shape of the hunter's gun, while the monkey's belief that he is beautiful is contrasted with the inexperienced hunter's imagination that he could have killed a lion if his gun was of a different shape.

Just as it is impossible for the monkey to be regarded as beautiful in spite of his eye-lashes, it is unbelievable that a non-professional hunter could kill a lion, no matter the shape of his gun.

Take another example. An ugly fat woman goes in for a beauty contest. She loses the contest and comes back to say that her disqualification was because of the way her hair was done. The above proverb could be used in such a situation. Blaming her loss on her hair is immaterial and not the main reason for her disqualification; she would have lost the contest anyway, unless it was an ugliness contest.

The literal level of interpretation represents the cultural and historical experiences of the people. Therefore, to understand this level, one has to understand the human and natural phenomena that exist in Igboland, and the way in which they could be combined and manipulated in a proverb.

The philosophical level of meaning represents the level of beliefs and ideas. The projection drawn at the literal level has to be related to the beliefs and the people's knowledge of the world around them. Interpretation of proverbs at this level is more difficult, and sometimes people ask the speaker what he means in a particular context. Adults have an advantage at this level because their years of exposure to traditional history and wisdom help them in making better inferences. Related to this philosophical meaning is the fact that it is usually difficult to explain a proverb in the abstract because a proverb could have a wide range of interpretations out of context. Making inferences from proverbs out of context has been responsible for the poor analysis of Igbo proverbs by non-native speakers. Shelton (1971) ran into such problems. Take for example the interpretation he gives to this proverb:

"Enwe si na mma zuru ya aru"

Literally, the proverb does not mean "The monkey said that beauty nourished his body" as Shelton translates it, but that the monkey said that he is beautiful all over; i.e., that beauty covers his body (see also Echeruo, 1971, for further remarks). The inference Shelton makes from this mistranslation is that as the monkey believes that maturation accounts for his adulthood and beauty, so do the Ibos. This is wrong.

His problem was that he made inferences exclusive of context and without adequate knowledge of the people's beliefs and ideas. Also he is wrong in linking this inference specifically with his argument on cultural relativism. The truth about the proverb is that the monkey's vanity in considering himself beautiful (when in fact he is not) is deliberate and self-protective. Although he is naturally ugly, he is not fain to admit it or to hate himself because of it. He projects his own ego and is proud of himself. This proverb can fit into a situation where one does not allow his limitations to overwhelm him; he is still proud of himself no matter what. In essence, this proverb emphasizes that inherent physical limitations should not discourage anyone because one could transform those disadvantages into advantages. Thus, as the monkey takes pride in himself in spite of his ugliness, individuals with comparable natural disadvantages should still be proud of themselves.

To further illustrate the fact that interpretation of a proverb at the philosophical level entails more than the literal meaning, let us consider another proverb:

"Egbe belu ugo belu, nke si ibe ya ebela,
nku kwakapụ ya."

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

This proverb emphasizes the people's belief in peace and harmony as essential for the overall well-being of the people, and that every man should be his brother's keeper. It is further related to the communal setting and the idea of collective responsibility, both at the basis of the people's traditional life. Frequently used in traditional prayers, the proverb encourages mutual co-existence and assistance. Let me illustrate this use. In Ibo families, it is the eldest son who rightfully inherits the family's property. The other sons can only have some share of the property at the discretion and generosity of the eldest son. In a situation where the eldest son wants everything to himself, this proverb could be used with the meaning: live and let live. Thus, although the eldest son has the full rights to all the property, he should accommodate his other brothers.

It is not the case that one cannot get at the philosophy of an Ibo proverb without reference to context. Anyone who is acquainted with the proverbs can do this successfully most of the time. But for the less fluent users and non-natives, it would be difficult to make appropriate philosophical inferences out of context.

Context provides the best cue for a good and easy interpretation of an Igbo proverb. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to elicit proverbs from fluent speakers out of context, for they believe that only situations can give rise to proverbs. In other words, as the English saying goes: no event, no history.

Appreciation of proverbs at the contextual level lies in the recognition of the fact that a particular proverb can have different interpretations in different contexts. If one, therefore, tries to interpret such a proverb exclusive of context, ambiguity can arise. But if considered with reference to a particular context, disambiguation becomes easy, for the context gives a clue to the meaning intended by the speaker. For example, the same proverb can in one context be used to reinforce ideas by invoking traditional wisdom to strengthen a particular statement, and in another context be used to make a comment, praise, blame, encourage, or even to stress a particular aspect of behavior. Take for example the proverb:

"Enwe si na ya anaghi arapu ma isi ebighi"

Literally, the proverb says that the monkey never abandons his prey until its head (the prey's) is off. This proverb stresses the traditional belief in 'fighting to the last man.' The Ibos do not believe in abandoning a project half-way, and the idea of finishing up well what one has started is therefore considered important. Adults could use this proverb in reiterating this belief or in advising youngsters on perseverance; and it can equally be used by one who is trying to justify, for example, having stayed late into the night cultivating his plot of land. In all these instances, it is only the context that can provide a clue as to the meaning, the person to whom it is directed, and to what purpose.

The contextual level is essential for all genres of folklore, but it is absolutely indispensable for

proverbs. A discussion of a proverb without mention of what purpose evokes it is like studying literary allusions without knowing to what the allusions allude. Proverbs, as examples of a fixed-phrase genre of folklore, must be considered in the original native language and in their contexts if their effectiveness in discourse is to be fully appreciated.

3.2. Idiomatic Expressions

Apart from the use of proverbs, there are also other means of expressing thoughts effectively in the Igbo language. One other common means is the use of idioms (under this I am including metaphors, similes, and what Egudu (1975:174) calls "positive-negative" expressions). These idiomatic expressions also add beauty and effectiveness to the language and cover the same areas of observed life as the proverbs, drawing from these areas images of intense picturesqueness which add flavor and depth to larger sentence structures.

Igbo idiomatic expressions differ from the proverbs in two major respects. They are expressions that are used only within sentences and cannot stand alone as proverbs. Thus, while proverbs are full sentences, idioms are not. I have already noted that proverbs have three levels of interpretation; literal, philosophical and contextual; and these three levels are sometimes crucial to the overall meaning of the proverb. Idioms, on the other hand, require interpretation only at the literal level, and the meanings of the lexical items making up an idiom are enough to determine the meaning of the idiom. There is almost a one-to-one correspondence between the situation or emotion being described and the connotations of idiomatic imagery. For example, the idiom:

"n'otu ntabi anya"

(in the twinkling of an eye)

is an idiom used to describe the suddenness of something. All that one really needs to do to appreciate the idiom is to apply the imagery portrayed in the idiom to the given situation.

Just as proverbs could be ambiguous exclusive of contexts, idioms are meaningless when used in inappropriate contexts. For example, the idiom:

"o di ndu onwu ka mma"

(existence that is worse than death)

is used to describe a very hopeless situation. One who hits a jackpot in a sweepstakes cannot say that he is 'o di ndu onwu ka mma' since such a win betters his lot rather than putting him in a hopeless situation. Thus, although idioms in the language use common and simple established imagery, their force and effectiveness are realized only in appropriate contexts. They are in fact easier to handle than the proverbs because of the straight-forward nature of their interpretation and the commonness of the objects used as imagery. The meanings of idioms are more fixed than the meanings of proverbs, and no matter the context, the meaning of an idiom will come out the same if it is rightly used. Take for example:

"o buladi akwa ngwere"

(not even the cry of a lizard)

This idiom means 'absolute silence.' It derives its meaning from the fact that it is rather difficult to hear and recognize the cry of a lizard, and it can appropriately be used in situations where absolute silence is being emphasized; its meaning does not change with context.

Idioms, like proverbs, can be used to stress different aspects of life. To make a comment on impossibility, for example, the idiom:

"anya anyi ihu nti anyi"

(our eyes seeing our ears)

is frequently used. It is naturally difficult for somebody to see his ears. In traditional Ibo society, each clan elects a chief. All the chiefs in a town jointly elect a king. Take a situation where the government arbitrarily imposes a foreign king on them, instead of appointing a king from among the ruling chiefs. These chiefs could resist the government appointment and prefer to suffer the consequences rather than 'let their eyes see their ears.'

Some idioms are advisory in nature (e.g., anya iru ala, meaning 'be careful' (literally, 'one's eyes

reaching the ground)), others make a comment on character (e.g., ita akwa ndu, literally 'to eat raw eggs,' but meaning 'wicked' or 'difficult,' used mainly to refer to women), while others like ogu nne na nwa (literally 'fight between mother and child') are used in contexts where restraint is needed.

Metaphors feature prominently in Igbo discourses, and like other figurative utterances, are a fundamental creative activity of the language that transcends everyday literal understanding. The use of a metaphor consists in giving one thing a name that belongs to something else, and the choice of a particular metaphor depends on which aspects of the thing described one wishes to highlight. The metaphoric transfer is located at the level of words rather than sentences, but their basic semantic unit is larger than the word.

Although proper comprehension of some metaphors involves awareness of similarities between the two objects being compared, in many cases there are really no two objects being compared. Consider the metaphor:

"o bu agu"

(he is a lion)

This might be understood to mean 'he is brave,' or 'he is like a lion' (in being brave), or even used as a mark of excellence, 'he is a great man.' What I am trying to say is that in Igbo metaphors do not necessarily have to depend on actual properties of existing objects, but rather on relations at the level of meanings or beliefs about objects. He is a lion may be true if it is taken to mean 'he is fierce, brave, prone to violence, etc.' if based on the belief that 'he' is similar to lions in these respects. But if taken to mean 'he is great' it could be false that lions are regarded as being great. Here, the metaphor is true, but the statement on similarity upon which it is based is false.

Some of the Igbo metaphors fall under what Egudu (1975:174) calls 'positive-negative' expressions. These are idioms commonly used in "praising somebody by attributing to him a literally unfavorable quality or commending a situation by describing it in terms of a sad event" (ibid.174). These idioms are based on a contrast with the situation actually being described or expressed. For example, the idiom: o mara mma nke ojoo

(he/she is beautiful to the point of ugliness) is a very strong way of commending one's beauty or handsomeness (i.e., (s)he is wonderfully handsome/beautiful). The opposite of mma 'beautiful' is ojoo 'ugliness/badness,' and literally, one cannot be 'beautiful' and 'ugly' at the same time. The use of the negative epithet intensifies or emphasizes the virtue or quality being praised rather than limiting it, and this is where the beauty of the expression lies.

This use of a negative attribute to intensify a positive one can also be found in Nigerian Pidgin. For example, the Nigerian Pidgin expression:

"dis sup swit bad bad"

is used with the meaning 'this soup is very tasty.' Sweet contrasts with bad in taste, but the bad meant here simply intensifies sweet, thus bringing out the meaning 'very tasty.' The only difference is that in Pidgin the negative attribute is reduplicated while it is not in Igbo.

4. Conclusion

Proverbs and idioms are as important in Igbo discourses as the users of the language themselves. Their use in everyday communication is a part of the people's way of life. Apart from their being witty and didactic, they are essential tools of thought and communication, drawing from the entire range of natural phenomena for their effectiveness. In every serious Igbo discourse they are used as channels through which the people's thoughts and ideas are communicated and strengthened. Not only do they enjoy traditionally handed-down currency, but the fact that their successful interpretation relies heavily on extra-linguistic factors sets them apart as something exceptional.

We see from the above discussion that apart from the literal meanings of the words composing a particular proverb or idiom, there are also two other important factors that are crucial in their interpretation - discourse and pragmatics. These modes of speech reveal the cultural attitudes and the system of values of the society in which they exist. Whether they are put in the mouths of human beings or animals, they are statements of facts which draw upon the cultural attitudes and values of the society for their potency. Thus

several extra-linguistic considerations such as the beliefs of the users, the way they view the world around them, their cultural attitudes and values, and the natural phenomena that exist in the society from which the projections are drawn, all contribute in a proper interpretation of a proverb or idiom. To understand and use a proverb or idiom appropriately involves not only knowing the language of the proverb or idiom, but also knowing the users of the proverb or idiom and their cultural tradition; factors which are only understood through pragmatic considerations. Therefore, any linguistic theory that will be able to include these aesthetic modes of speech must incorporate these extra-linguistic factors.

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