

## PROVERBS IN CONTEXT: A STUDY OF JOHN MUNONYE'S *THE ONLY SON*

Alexandra Uzoaku Esimaje

Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Nigeria

[alexandra.esimaje@live.com](mailto:alexandra.esimaje@live.com)

### Abstract

This paper aims to establish the role of context in the determination of meaning and, to reveal the discourse function of proverbial language. The complexity of proverbs derives partly from the mobility of their meanings from people to people, culture to culture and context to context, in portrayal of differing worldviews. In portraying Igbo cosmology, John Munonye employs proverbs as one of the major indexes of communicative meaning. Following the traditional approach to investigating meaning in proverbs, this study examines these proverbs to reveal their layers of meaning and functions in the specific context of *The Only Son*. Proverbs are indexical of the cultures that birth them and culture in the novel is revealed through fictional contexts; the characters and their worldviews. The paper argues that aside the conveyance of cultural meanings, proverbs perform specific discourse functions which strengthen and lend greater significance to communication.

### Introduction

A proverb is a grammatical expression which is unique in form and function. Its nature derives from its diction and uses in ways peculiar to the users and owners. Every language community, especially in Africa, seems to possess a collection of proverbs formed from their vocabularies and reflective of their cultures and worldviews. This is the reason for the complexity identified with the interpretation of proverbs, as association of meanings may vary from people to people, culture to culture and even context to context. As Finnegan (19) says, it is often impossible to grasp the point or attraction of a given proverb without some knowledge of the cultural background and what the thing mentioned means to those who utter it.

Proverbs fall under the category of, first, figurative language, and second metaphorical language which has been widely investigated, although emphasis has been on the rhetorical metaphors, for examples antithesis, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, more than such other types as allegory, parable, synecdoche, and proverbs. A good number of types

have been identified: dead, extended, mixed, absolute, active, complex, compound, dying, epic, implicit, implied, tight, submerged, cognitive, conceptual, root, therapeutic (Richards, 89-115; Sakamoto, 197-208; Ullmann, 212-220). Irrespective of the type, all metaphors entail some comparison; transference of a word from one context into another; a semantic change based on similarity, that is similarity either in form or function between the original concept named by a word and the target concept named by this word. Or as Aristotle in Barnes (1457b) puts it, it is 'the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy'. Whatever the type, metaphors are known to perform three basic functions in language; style, persuasion and understanding of conceptual domains. To do this, three structural elements are required; tenor, the underlying idea or subject; vehicle, the means of conveying the tenor, and ground, the feature common to the tenor and vehicle (Leech, 151; Ullmann, 213; Richards, 96). Metaphorical language has attracted much attention as the literature which follows will show, but, not so much attention has been paid to the specific type of proverbs which this study focuses on. Again, works seem to concentrate on approaches to metaphoric meaning without consideration of the role of context. But, of necessity, a proverb needs to be interpreted at three levels; literal, figurative and contextual, for its complete meaning and understanding. Although this paper focuses on the third level, for the sake of contrast and greater comprehension, reference would be made to the other two levels. But, first, a brief review is requisite to put the present work in perspective.

#### **Proverbial Discourse: A Brief Review**

The study of proverbs as linguistic elements is of interest to both language teachers and linguists. Kathryn & Brewer (59-61) explain that most proverbs have at least two levels of meaning; literal and figurative and the ability to comprehend both levels of meaning is productive. The meaning of an unfamiliar proverb can be constructed through the linguistic input, at the literal level. But at the figurative level, interpretation of an unfamiliar proverb is impossible except it roughly means the same thing as the words it consists of, as in the following proverb 'A child who has run into her father's lap should consider herself safe' (*The Only Son*, 20). The figurative use of language is a creative device which is realized in several forms, of which metaphor is the commonest. As explained earlier, metaphors are made up of three principal terms; tenor,

vehicle and ground. The 'tenor' is the underlying idea or the principle subject of the sentence while 'vehicle' is the saying we use to communicate that idea; the term being used metaphorically. The relationship between them is the 'ground'. The 'ground' is created by the points of similarity between the two. For instance in the following proverbs

- *'the family is Obi'* (TOS, 52) 'the family' is the tenor, 'Obi' is the vehicle while the ground is implied; not stated explicitly; both the 'family' and 'Obi', share characteristic of a good reputation.
- *Their stomachs are like the earth which is always hungry in spite of all it consumes'* TOS, 18. Here, 'their stomachs' is the tenor, the earth is the vehicle and *which is always hungry in spite of all it consumes* is the ground of similarity.
- *Should we pry when we are about to open the packet'* TOS, 49. In this proverb, 'we' is the tenor, 'pry' the vehicle but the ground of similarity is not obvious.

As these examples show, in proverbs, the three elements of tenor, vehicle and ground may not always be complete. In fact, if the 'ground' is absent in a proverb, the relationship between the tenor and vehicle is obscured from the hearer/reader of the proverb and automatically impedes understanding unless a context is provided. Therefore, proverbs may be treated as a type of metaphor which is structurally incomplete, and which requires contextual support for comprehension. We shall see how far this hypothesis will be upheld through the analysis of the proverbs in *The Only Son*.

Moreover, the ability to understand proverbs calls for the investigation of language beyond its literal or surface level. Bock & Bower (59-61) state that linguistic studies concentrated on the literal level for long but this deficiency has been sufficiently remedied in recent researches, judging by the quantity of the linguistic models proposed. Yet none of them is fully satisfactory. They further explain that approaches to figurative language fall into two categories; those who emphasize the continuity between comprehension of metaphoric and literal language, and those who recognize the difference between figurative and literal uses of language. In the first approach, both literal and figurative languages are interpreted relative to their contexts of occurrence. The problem with this approach, however, is that in most cases, there is a clear intuitive difference between figurative and literal language, and this intuition cannot be accounted for by this class of theories. The second approach requires extraordinary measures for metaphor comprehension,

generally proceeding from recognition of semantic anomaly at the literal level. Even though this class of theories is able to account for intuitive difference between literal and figurative language, they have a different problem. This is the fact that since many metaphors and proverbs are not *prima facie* anomalous at the literal level, it is difficult for the models to describe the interpretation of proverbs without conceding that the process is in some way dependant on extra sentential context (Kintsch, 91). This means that both groups of theory cannot be used to interpret the figurative meaning of an unfamiliar proverb, in isolation.

Mathews (413) opines that the use of deviant sentences calls attention to the need for a linguistic theory for metaphor interpretation, arguing that a semantic theory must account for the process of metaphorical invention and such a theory must distinguish metaphor from non metaphor and account for how, in terms of linguistic competence, the speaker understands or interprets metaphor. He further notes that the traditional similarity theory of metaphor is defective because in some cases the point of similarity is not clear. To Richards, then, metaphor interpretation should rely on linguistic competence alone (425). But, as Price (253) argues, metaphor requires concepts of use as well as competence. On the other hand, Leech (148) posits that the concept of metaphor can be explained as a linguistic feature of semantic transference because every language has rules of transference in which one sense of a word can be derived from another, such that 'the figurative sense of F may replace the literal sense L if F is related to L in such-and-such a manner'. However, Sakamoto (198) disagrees because, according to him, the formulation of such a rule is both difficult and takes into account many factors such as a complete knowledge of the two things involved in order to know what sense is transferred. While not proffering a solution to this methodological problem of metaphor content analysis, Sakamoto, rather, advocates a move toward a consideration of metaphor within the context of a language community (199). Nida (127) in his own contribution explains that in metaphor content, there is a diagnostic component which is reinterpreted from a literal to figurative status. But again, the system of reassignment of meaning needs to be clarified. Sakamoto (206) sums the basic approaches to metaphor content as: comparison based on similarity; change/transference of meaning; reinterpretation of meaning; and clash of features owing to rule violation. What seems to be missing in these approaches is the factor of context, because, especially in proverbial language, it is not always clear what is compared to what, what feature is transferred or even what meaning needs reassignment.

Therefore, it is either that cultural knowledge is required or contextual information is needed, for comprehension to take place. This factor of context is further explicated in the section following.

### **Context and Meaning**

In semantic analyses, there are differing views on the place of context in meaning relations. For this reason, some linguists consciously or unconsciously exclude it. There are theoretical and practical difficulties in handling context satisfactorily. It is argued that the meaning of a sentence can be deduced in isolation of its context. And the fact of a sentence being ambiguous or anomalous can be ascertained without knowledge of its context. Furthermore, that as speakers of a language, we must know the meaning of a sentence before we can use it in any meaningful context. In other words, meaning is seen to be independent of context. Palmer (47-49) says that this view is another version of the dualist fallacy of de Saussure's sign theory (107) and Ogden & Richard's semiotic triangle (11). He argues that knowing that two sentences are similar in meaning means that they can be used in similar contexts and that in setting up abstract relationships between sentences without considering what they refer to, is like describing all the equivalencies in a measuring system without indicating what that system really is. Stating meaning equivalencies he says, is not stating meaning and in fact there is no proof that knowing the meaning of a sentence excludes the context in which it is used.

Another argument for the exclusion of context from semantics is that since the world of experience must include the sum of human knowledge, semantics defined in terms of context implies the infinity of its scope. Palmer asserts that this realization caused Bloomfield to despair of any satisfactory treatment of the subject of semantics. The significance of context in meaning relations has been established in some works, and differentiated from linguistic context, as context of situation. These works are credited to Malinowski (301) and Firth (11) both of whom were concerned with stating meaning in terms of the context in which language is used, even though in different ways. Malinowski argued that 'living languages must not be treated as dead ones, torn from their context of situation, but seen as used by people....' He says that, language as used in books is not at all the norm; it represents a far-fetched derivative function of language, for language was not originally a mirror of reflected thought but a mode of action, not a counter sign of thought. Some of Malinowski's ideas and beliefs about language have been contested and modified by modern linguists and researchers. One of such is J.R Firth

who acknowledged his debt to Malinowski but preferred to see context of situation as part of the linguist's apparatus in the same way as are the grammatical categories that he uses. He saw context of situation in the same light as grammar, as means of linguistic description whose purpose was a statement of meaning, as one way through which a linguist handles a language. Although Firth has received his share of criticisms, among other context theorists, it is difficult to see how the meanings of words and sentences can be unrelated to the world of our experience which is their context of use.

Bloomfield (200-27) sums the controversy over context when he defined the meaning of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response it calls forth in the hearer. Simply, he sees meaning as the situation. This may be an extreme view when compared to Firth and Malinowski yet it is reasonable to assert that a relationship exists between the meaning of an utterance and the situation in which it is used. It is on this premise that this paper examines the meaning of the Igbo proverbs used in the fictional expression of John Munonye in *The Only Son*.

It is important to note that context in this study refers to the immediate situation of language use as well as the external context of its use; the world views of the participants and Igbo cultures. Ejiofor (20) acknowledges that culture and its owners are inseparable. Therefore, as the reader encounters these proverbs, he is taken on an excursion into Igbo society, cultures and peoples. This, of necessity, enhances his understanding of the author's message.

We shall, shortly, in the sections that follow, examine the proverbs found in John Munonye's *The Only Son* to determine their meanings and functions as communicative events in the novel. But, first, we shall discuss the method adopted in this study.

### **Method**

This study identified a total of nineteen (19) proverbs in Munonye's *The Only Son*. Each proverb was examined at the three levels of literal, figurative and contextual meanings. At the literal level, the meaning of a proverb is seen at a shallow level through the individual meanings of the words that make up the proverb. At the figurative level, the metaphoric meaning of the proverb is revealed, and here the meanings of the individual words of the proverb do not add up to its total meaning. Here, meaning is seen at the deep level of language. Both the literal and figurative levels can be equated to the denotative and connotative levels

of language. On the other hand, the contextual level, in consonance with the holistic contextual theory of Firth (196), assigns meanings according to the factors of context; the participants, their verbal and non-verbal actions; other relevant objects of the situation; and the effects of the verbal action. It is this view that informs the analysis of the following Igbo proverbs to reveal their meanings in their contexts of use in order to enhance the understanding of the text.

The proverbs are numbered cases 1 to 19, in order of their occurrence, to make for coherence of ideas and to enable a smooth flow of the reader's thought and imagination. In each case, the context is presented first and thereafter, the analysis follows.

### **Analysis**

As stated earlier, our focus is on the effect of context on the meaning of the proverbs. Therefore, we need to show other senses of the proverbs; the literal and figurative, in order to reveal how context influences the real meaning communicated in the situations of the novel. So we proceed by showing simply the surface meaning, the figurative meaning and then the contextual meaning. In the process, it is hoped that both the cultural and situational factors in meaning making will be made apparent as well as the linguistic ones, which all serve to strengthen the communication.

#### **Case 1:**

*Chiaku and Nnanna, her only son had just fled from Umudiobia to Nade her village, after the death of her husband, Okafo. Their flight was necessitated by the disagreement between them and Okafo's brother Amanze, which culminated in a physical combat during which Nnanna shot an arrow into the leg of one of Amanze's wives. On arrival at Nade, they were both received warmly, thus in appreciation, Chiaku invited the 'Umuada' to lunch. As she prepared to receive and satisfy her visitors, her brother said, 'Did you say satisfy? Nobody ever satisfied Umuada, my sister. **Their stomachs are like the earth which is always hungry in spite of all it consumes**' TOS, 18.*

**Literal:** The women's stomachs are like the earth which is never satisfied.

**Figurative:** No matter what you do or give to women, they are hard to please.

**Contextual:** Chiaku cannot satisfy the Umuada, no matter how hard she tries.

By this proverb, Oji, Chiaku's brother was simply advising and cautioning her. He knows that Chiaku cannot satisfy the women, so he warns her against disappointment. The diction of the proverb is remarkable; 'stomach', 'earth' and 'hungry'. The comparison between the 'stomach' and 'earth' is striking. Although both possess the capacity to store things, there is an obvious overstatement here. But it is this hyperbolic feature and the personification of 'earth' that lends this proverb its effectiveness as it attracts attention to itself, while at the same time performing an instructive function.

### Case 2

*On her return to her village in search of safety and settlement, Chiaku's brothers built her a house as part of their rousing welcome of her. As the head of the women delegation gave her speech, she remarked that 'what you (chiaku) must bear in mind is that a child who has run into her father's lap should consider herself safe' TOS,20.*

**Literal:** When a child who is in danger runs to his father, he is safe.

**Figurative:** When one is in trouble, danger or need, one should go to the right place; to someone who is both able and willing to help.

**Contextual:** Chiaku has run to her kinsmen for shelter and safety.

In Igbo culture, brotherliness is a virtue and this proverb is illustrating and teaching that virtue. As far as the people are concerned, Chiaku may have done right or wrong, since she is 'their own' it is duty bound on them to shelter her. The imagery created by the use of 'lap', a part of the human body which is almost always hidden, is noteworthy. The word 'father', also is symbolic because as the head of a family, it behooves every father to shelter, provide and protect his family.

### Case 3

*Nnanna went to join other children who gathered at Ibe's house for the usual twilight games. The games having lasted till late, Nnanna retired to his friend's house rather than go home. At the early hours of the morning his mother discovered to her chagrin that Nnanna was not at home. So she hurried to Oji's house, and urged him to join her to search for her son. As Oji tried to dissuade her from needless anxiety to no avail, he said '**anything that breathes is, by and large, an uncertain possession and one mustn't put ones heart too much in it**' TOS, 27.*

**Literal:** A living thing is an uncertain property; one need not rely on it too much.

**Figurative:** Life is unpredictable; one can be alive today and dead tomorrow.

**Contextual:** Nnanna's life is not in Chiaku's hand; it is beyond her power to keep so she should not live as though her life depends on it.

Oji sends a difficult message with this proverb. How does one tell a widow that there is a possibility of her losing an only son? In ordinary language that would be a very callous thing to say but using a proverb, the effect of the message is cushioned.

#### Cases 4 & 5

Several days after Oji had warned Chiaku about her over protective attitude toward Nnanna, he again reiterates it. He explained to her that the boy has grown enough to fend for himself and should have learnt some trade even before now. Chiaku recalled their stay at Umudiobia and remarked that Amanze, Nnanna's uncle, was a wicked man who could not teach his own children, let alone Nnanna. While she continued with uncomplimentary remarks about Amanze, Oji replied '**yours is an enemy's mouth, out of which comes nothing sweet**', TOS,30. Chiaku, however insisted that Amanze's cruelty is extended even to his own children as he wouldn't let them 'carry his bag for him'. Astonished, Oji exclaimed, 'That's quite surprising, **the child who carries an elder's bag has a very good chance of being a wise man in his life**' TOS,31.

4. '*Yours is an enemy's mouth, out of which comes nothing sweet*'

**Literal:** One does not see anything good in his enemy.

**Figurative:** Enmity is an evil sentiment that hinders one from acknowledging any praise-worthy character in another person.

**Contextual:** Chiaku left Umudiobia because of Amanze and his wives, her sworn enemies. Being bitter with them, she sees and says nothing good about them.

5. '*The child who carries an elder's bag has a very good chance of being a wise man in his life*'

**Literal:** A child who carries an elder's bag learns his ways.

**Figurative:** A child who keeps company with mature and responsible people is bound to learn what will profit him.

**Contextual:** Amanze has prevented his children from learning wisdom by not creating the environment for it.

There are two proverbs in this context. Oji, in the first case uses a proverb to cast doubt on what Chiaku said without being overly harsh. The

proverb serves to teach the societal value of friendliness by its portrayal of the vice of enmity. The second proverb focuses on one culture which the Igbos prize very highly; traditional education through which a man teaches his children the customs of the land, and the acceptable conducts. By so doing, the traditions are passed from generation to generation. Hence mentoring is a basic tool for the sustenance of Igbo culture. Oji is surprised that Amanze denies his children of that, so he wonders what type of children Amanze is raising and how useful they can be to themselves and their society. The proverb is therefore a reprisal of Amanze, not an advice to Chiaku as it would appear in isolation.

### Cases 6 & 7

*Chiaku went over to Oji's house to discuss a matter of great concern to her but Oji preparing for palmwine tapping could not give her audience at the time. However, she insisted that the discussion could not wait, so Oji became curious and inquired what the matter was that could not wait. In reply Chiaku asked 'should we pry when we are about to open the packet' TOS, 49. Oji finally sat down to listen to his sister. In preparation, he made for his snuff box, poured himself a liberal quantity, and put some of it into his nostril. Immediately he sneezed violently, cursing the seller. He has bought a very bad snuff, from Onugo, his sister. At this point Chiaku reminded him that 'he who buys from his kin does not often make a good purchase' TOS, 49.*

6. *'Should we pry when we are about to open the packet?'*

**Literal:** There is no need to pinch a parcel when it is about to be opened.

**Figurative:** Be patient and you will soon get the detailed information.

**Contextual:** Chiaku was telling Oji to exercise patience, and, soon she would tell him why she came. After all, she was there already for that purpose.

7. *'He who buys from his kin does not often make a good purchase'*

**Literal:** When you buy something from someone close to you, you cannot drive a hard bargain.

**Figurative:** When sentiment is involved in business, a lot is taken for granted and both bargaining power and profit may not be fully maximized.

**Contextual:** Oji bought Onugo's snuff, not because it was worth the money but because as a relative, he had to patronize her.

As in the preceding instance, two proverbs co – occur in this context. The first one is strictly didactic; teaching the virtue of patience but the second

is both advisory and didactic. It teaches us to separate sentiment from business. In Igbo culture, both kinship and commerce are highly valued. It is believed that for success in both, they need to be kept apart.

#### Cases 8 & 9

*Slowly, Chiaku broached the subject of her visit to Oji, it was time they began to look for a wife for Nnanna. As they considered girl after girl, Oji reminded her of the necessity to look beyond physical characteristics. He said 'he that goes into marriage without the necessary inquiries, let him be ready to have in his house a scoundrelly chatter box' TOS, 52. Just at that point, there was a knock at the door and Idimogu entered wearing a mournful expression on his face. Upon repeated questioning from Oji and Chiaku, Idimogu sobbing and gnashing his teeth said 'A man should eat his sorrows in his heart' TOS, 52.*

8. *'He that goes into marriage without the necessary inquiries, let him be ready to have in his house a scoundrelly chatter box'*

**Literal:** A man who goes into marriage without the necessary enquiries should be prepared to have a talkative as a wife.

**Figurative:** A man who rushes into marriage should be ready to accept whatever he gets.

**Contextual:** Even though Chiaku's son, Nnanna, is ripe for marriage, care must be taken absolutely, to get him a wife who will be a blessing, not a curse.

This proverb teaches patience and caution. Actually, pre-marital investigation is an age-long Igbo culture. It is believed, among the Igbos, that every man is tied to his root. For instance, a man who suffered from leprosy has brought a stigma upon his lineage forever. With this proverb therefore an Igbo tradition is portrayed.

9. *'A man should eat his sorrows in his heart'*

**Literal:** A man should hide his sorrows in his heart.

**Figurative:** It is expected that a man endures his problems rather than cry out.

**Contextual:** Although Idimogu has met with a misfortune of great magnitude, he is forced to contain his pain as a show of manhood.

The phrase 'eat his sorrow in his heart' is characteristic of confidentiality; rather than 'eat in his mouth, he 'eats in his heart, a part of the human body concealed even from its owner. The writer draws a powerful analogy here.

### Cases 10 & 11

As Chiaku searched for a wife for her son, he continued to grow both physically and psychologically, tending towards independence. The latter aspect of Nnanna's growth irked Chiaku, his mother, as she desired to suckle him in every conceivable way. Therefore when Oji commented positively about Nnanna's development, his mother retorted '**of course he grows, doesn't the tail of a cow grow too? He who doesn't work for his mother is like a cow's tail, he grows downwards towards the earth**' TOS, 64. Oji was amazed at the strong reproach from his sister to her son for the first time and could not conceal his surprise. He mused, looked at Nnanna, and said '**the ground is charred and is charcoal black. And when the rain falls, the ground is soaked. And when the grass is soaked, green grass begins to appear**' TOS, 64.

10. '*He who doesn't work for his mother is like a cow's tail, he grows downwards towards the earth*'

**Literal:** A child who does not work for his mother is growing downwards rather than upwards.

**Figurative:** When a person grows away from his family he ceases to be relevant to his home, he is retrogressing and tending towards destruction.

**Contextual:** Nnanna, who has been his mother's only source of hope, is now developing a tendency towards independence, growing away from his mother. His mother feels a loss and describes his development as retrogressive and destructive of the bond that hitherto existed between mother and son.

This proverb derives its significance from the Igbo semiosis in which height is associated with growth and progression; physical development is therefore an indexical marker of success in the society. In contrast, one who though successful but not relevant to his society is not recognized by it. In fact, his progress is a negative one.

11. '*The ground is charred and is charcoal black. And when the rain falls, the ground is soaked. And when the grass is soaked, green grass begins to appear*'

**Literal:** When grass is burnt, the ground becomes black with charcoal and rainfall soaks the charcoal into the soil as manure, which enables green grass to grow.

**Figurative:** Growth and development in man is a seemingly unnoticed process till it appears.

**Contextual:** Chiaku, who has always been with her son failed to observe his growth and development until it became very apparent.

What is remarkable about this proverb is how Oji paints the picture of Nnanna's growth through puberty to adulthood. It possesses a musical quality, like a chant. The writer achieves this aesthetics through phonological and lexical repetitions. This proverb serves to highlight the Igbo oral literature.

### Cases 12 & 13

*Finally, Oji, Chiaku and Nnanna, in company of others go to Odu's house to ask for the hand of his daughter, Ego, in marriage to Nnanna. Oji being the head of the delegation, after the necessary pleasantries, introduced the subject of their visit thus, 'Odu my friend and age grade, **what a man cannot eat, he must not keep for himself. . . .**' TOS ,69. Thereafter, the initial betrothal rites were performed. At night, Chiaku lay awake reflecting on the cost of the marriage and how she would raise the money. Suddenly, she cautioned herself saying, 'There was no hurry after all, many are the days between acceptance of coconut and marriage outings' TOS, 69.*

12. *'What a man cannot eat, he must not keep for himself.....'*

**Literal:** There is no need to keep for oneself, what one cannot eat.

**Figurative:** It is wickedness to withhold from others what you do not need.

**Contextual:** Odu cannot marry his own daughter, so he should not hinder Nnanna who can and wishes to marry her.

This proverb advises against wickedness and selfishness. It portrays and criticizes the 'dog in the manger attitude' which destroys the very foundations of just and egalitarian society.

13. *'many are the days between acceptance of coconut and marriage outings'*

**Literal:** There is a long period between the acceptance of coconut and the marriage itself.

**Figurative:** Marriage is a process, which takes time to actualize.

**Contextual:** The betrothal rites between Nnanna and Ego had just begun. Other activities that would culminate in the marriage require much preparation and time.

This is one proverb which would lose its meaning completely outside its context. This is because of the symbolic use of 'coconut', which will lead to semantic impairment for people outside this culture. Even among

the Igbos, this culture lacks universality. Therefore, the symbol 'coconut' is indexical of a specific people and culture.

#### Case 14

*Christianity had begun to spread in Nade and this troubled the chief priests and people of Nade because their beliefs and customs were under attack by the new faith. So steps were taken to nip this trend in the bud. This achieved only insignificant success, rather out of curiosity many youths of Nade embraced the much dreaded religion. Ibe, Nnanna's friend was one of them. Little wonder then that Nnanna too, did likewise. Chiaku made frantic efforts to restrain her son from such assembly. Despite the efforts made their fears rather than being allayed, were increasing by the day. Oji lamented that **'this thing is beginning to look like the bad ulcer that thrives on the very medicine you apply to it'** TOS, 75.*

**Literal:** This is looking like a bad wound that spreads as medicine is applied to it.

**Figurative:** The fight against someone can turn out to be in his favour.

**Contextual:** The fight against Christianity in Nade is becoming a lost battle as it is flourishing even from steps taken against it. It is doubtful then, if any charm can prevent Nnanna from joining the church.

This proverb conjures a powerful imagery because of its diction, 'ulcer', 'thrives' and 'medicine'. It is commonly believed that an ulcer is a wound that takes a long time to heal, if it does. So the comparison drawn here is quite picturesque. Again, the proverb presents an irony of the wound thriving on the medicine meant to heal it. This produces an efficacious effect on the hearer.

#### Case 15

*As parents intensified efforts at barring their children from the church, the children devised ways of circumventing them. Nnanna was one of such children until it became an open secret. One day, as he returned from the church gathering, his mother being curious about his continual absence at village activities began to quiz him. Oji overheard her as he was entering and said, **'Our people say that the bulge of pregnancy cannot be hidden for long'** TOS, 85.*

**Literal:** You cannot conceal pregnancy for long.

**Figurative:** No secret lasts forever.

**Contextual:** Nnanna's secret attendances at church activities have finally come to light.

This is one proverb, which possesses semantic affinity among its various levels. There seems to be continuity between its literal and figurative levels. Even contextually, there is the same concurrence of meaning.

#### Case 16

*Chiaku was devastated at the news of her son's membership of the church. She threatened to end the son's life and hers subsequently. Oji tried to restrain her, he advised her to be calm and apply reason to the situation. As he told her, 'a wrestler who rushes furiously meets a terrible fall' TOS, 86.*

**Literal:** A wrestler who is quick to fight always fails in the fight.

**Figurative:** Anyone who does not prepare for battle will lose it.

**Contextual:** Nnanna's conversation to Christianity is a serious battle facing Chiaku and if she fights it without adequate preparation, she is bound to lose.

This proverb, like many before it, selected words that force its effectiveness upon the hearer. The hearer can easily visualize a state of terrible loss. Again, the function of the proverb is advisory.

#### Case 17

*As Chiaku continued to bemoan her fate, she visited Idimogu, Ibe's father. Idimogu tried to calm and appease her. In the bid, he narrated his own experience to Chiaku, adding that in the process of restraining his son, he lost a wife and was almost losing his own life. Chiaku was astonished at the havoc wreaked by the singular act of Ibe's conversion. She shrugged her shoulders in utter disbelief and exclaimed 'a creature greater than the beetle has entered the beetle's abode and the beetle has moved out for it' TOS, 94.*

**Literal:** The beetle has left its abode for a creature stronger than it.

**Figurative:** When one encounters a situation beyond one's ability, the only option is resignation.

**Contextual:** Chiaku did not fully appreciate the enormity of the problem facing her until the discussion with Idimogu. With this new understanding therefore, Chiaku resigned to fate.

In this proverb, the writer in describing the enormity of the problem successfully presented a contrast using a beetle. By so doing he succeeds in painting a picture of the helpless state of Chiaku before this gargantuan creature, symbolic of the problem.

### Case 18

*Chiaku's situation remained intractable, so her loved ones sought a way for her to overcome the pains associated with it. One of such ways was re-marriage. This will not only remove her focus from Nnanna but also give her a new hope. When the plan had fully matured, Chiaku went into marriage with Okere. As expected, the marriage immediately led to the severing of ties between mother and son. As Chiaku struggled to settle into her new home and life, she was faced with fresh huddles but she remained resolute. For her, failure was not an option because she has learnt many lessons in life. Besides, she says 'when a woman trips and falls the second time, you can enumerate all she has inside the basket on her head' TOS, 139.*

**Literal:** When a woman falls two times, you can count all the things she is carrying.

**Figurative:** When one fails a second time, ones worth is readily assessed.

**Contextual:** Chiaku has lived in Umudiobia without success, she ran from it to Nade. Now she has also left Nade to another place. She must ensure that she doesn't flee from there as well; else she would be regarded as the problem.

Indeed, this is a very incisive proverb through which the writer brings to the fore, the subconscious mind of the character. This is illustrative of an active proverb whose function is to induce action in the hearer, in this case, the hearer-speaker. The author achieves this through the use of active verbs such as 'trips', 'falls' and 'enumerate'.

### Case 19

*As Chiaku reflected on the story of her life, she assured herself that indeed life can only trap her again, if she falls for its bait. As it is said 'a trap would snap and catch if the prey should come for the bait the third time' TOS, 139.*

**Literal:** You can be trapped only when you fall prey to bait.

**Figurative:** If you are circumspect, you will escape most of life's avoidable problems.

**Contextual:** Chiaku needs to walk through life circumspectly, especially in her second marriage, to avoid being its victim again.

At the literal level, this proverb conjures powerful images of 'trap setting', 'the bait' and 'the prey' to convey its message. But is life so cruel to be described as a 'trap' seeking a 'prey'? As Umeh (39) remarks, some proverbs invoke images which are based on the observations of human

behaviour in the society. This proverb falls into that category, as the ‘traps’ are symbolic of the evil machinations of men.

Before going on to discuss our findings and to conclude this study, it is important to classify the proverbs according to their subject matters in order to show their structural (Table 1) and semantic (Table 2) frameworks.

### Structure of the Proverbs in *The Only Son*

Using the frameworks proposed by Ullmann (213) and Leech (151), we classified the 19 proverbs in *The Only Son* as shown in Table 1 below, to find out the dominant structure of the proverbial expressions. As seen in the Table, it is not in all cases that the three elements of tenor, vehicle and ground are made explicit in the proverbs. In fact, in the 19 proverbs, as can be seen, it is only in two instances, about 10% cases, that these elements are complete. While in a few instances, the tenor is not explicitly stated in 4 cases; about 20%), in very many instances (15 instances; about 90%) the ground of similarity is not provided. Therefore, the structure of Igbo proverbs seems to be: (tenor) + vehicle + (ground) where tenor and ground are optional because they are sufficiently catered for by context. The implication is that context; cultural or linguistic becomes a necessary desideratum for the comprehensibility of the proverbs. Table 1 below explains and supports this conclusion.

Table 1: Structural framework of Igbo Proverbs in *The Only Son*

PROVERBS/CASES	T	V	G
Their stomachs are like the earth which is always hungry in spite of all it consumes.	*	*	*
A child who has run into her father’s lap should consider herself safe.	*	*	-
Anything that breathes is, by and large, an uncertain possession and one mustn’t put ones heart too much in it.	-	*	-
Yours is an enemy’s mouth, out of which comes nothing sweet.	*	*	-
The child who carries an elder’s bag has a very good chance of being a wise man in his life.	*	*	-
Should we pry when we are about to open the packet.	*	*	-
He who buys from his kin does not often make a good purchase.	*	*	-

He that goes into marriage without the necessary inquiries, let him be ready to have in his house a scoundrelly chatter box.	*	*	-
A man should eat his sorrows in his heart.	*	*	-
He who doesn't work for his mother is like a cow's tail, he grows downwards towards the earth.	*	*	*
The ground is charred and is charcoal black. And when the rain falls, the ground is soaked. And when the grass is soaked, green grass begins to appear.	*	*	-
What a man cannot eat, he must not keep for himself.	*	*	-
Many are the days between acceptance of coconut and marriage outings.	-	*	-
This thing is beginning to look like the bad ulcer that thrives on the very medicine you apply to it.	-	*	*
The bulge of pregnancy cannot be hidden for long.	-	*	*
A wrestler who rushes furiously meets a terrible fall.	*	*	-
A creature greater than the beetle has entered the beetle's abode and the beetle has moved out for it.	*	*	-
When a woman trips and falls the second time, you can enumerate all she has inside the basket on her head.	*	*	-
A trap would snap and catch if the prey should come for the bait the third time.	*	*	-

**Key:** The asterisk (\*) is used to denote presence of a structural element while the dash (-) is used to denote absence of a structural element.

#### **Semantic typologies of Igbo Proverbs in *The Only Son***

We find that the 19 proverbs can fall within the following paradigms which further illustrate their discourse functions. However, there are cases of dual membership where a proverb can belong in two categories. As the table shows, a greater majority of the proverbs fall under paradigm 5 – observations and advice – which imply that proverbs are used mainly to advice, correct or point people in society toward good conduct. In the table below, the semantic groupings of the proverbs in *The Only Son* are shown.

**Table 2: Semantic framework of Proverbs in *The Only Son***

S/N	Paradigms	Examples of Proverb	Total found
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1	General and abstract contents	This thing is beginning to look like the bad ulcer that thrives on the very medicine you apply to it.	2
2	Man and his nature	A creature greater than the beetle has entered the beetle's abode and the beetle has moved out for it.	4
3	The individual and his society	When a woman trips and falls the second time, you can enumerate all she has inside the basket on her head.	4
4	The family	A child who has run into her father's lap should consider herself safe.	2
5	Observations and advice	A trap would snap and catch if the prey should come for the bait the third time.	7

As can be seen from this table, a majority of the proverbs fall under paradigms 5, 4 and 3 with paradigm 5 recording the highest frequency of proverbs. Therefore, in the world of the novel, proverbs were employed mainly for advisory purposes. Although, due to the smallness of the sample size, we cannot say at this stage, that Igbo proverbs are generally based on observations/advice, the individual and his society and man and his nature, we can at least begin to think that proverbs are not formed arbitrarily; rather they are organized according to certain themes and or semantic formats. And in *The Only Son*, as the study has shown, five basic formats are used but again, we cannot claim that only these groupings exist.

### Conclusion

As part of Igbo orature, proverbs are on the pedestal of Igbo communication forms. Among the Igbos, communication in proverbs is superior to any other. This is because it is an art that is acquired through the world of experience. Therefore, it is highly prized and its speaker highly esteemed. Proverbs are symbols of maturity, perhaps of age, but certainly of experience. The use of proverbs in the writing of Igbo fiction in English serves a number of purposes. It enhances the conveyance of messages especially in cases where the English language lacks adequate and perfect equivalencies for the expression of Igbo worldviews. So a single proverb secures a message which otherwise would have been lost

to English expression. Since the thought process of the Igbo, in many cases, is done in his language, the use of proverbs facilitates the revelation of such thoughts and imaginations. In support of this, Igboanusi (55) writes that, the creative medium of Nigerian writers reveal a specific mode of imagination which derives from the Nigerian environment because, they grew up in it, acquired its indigenous languages in which they think. The result is that the English language gives way to Igbo thinking and not Igbo thinking conforming neatly and exactly to the alien language (Shelton, 86).

In light of the social functions of language, language is recognizable as a great force of unity and disunity, peace and war. The use of proverbs enables the positive performance of this function. It is a means of reducing the effect of language on the hearers. This is because of its implicitness, which results in the hearer relating to it only after it has been uttered. Proverbs can be described as the tenor of discourse, which at the semantic level realizes the interpersonal function of language. While proverbs can express the degree of formality and informality of relationships, they also reflect the social role that language is playing in the situation. Shelton (86) aptly describes proverbs as the palm oil with which Achebe's words are eaten; in consonance with Lindfors (3) and in recognition of Achebe's foremost role in the use of proverbs as a distinctive feature of style. In the same vein, Bickerton (34) says that metaphors are the ornaments of rhetorics. This means that proverbs are the lubricants of the wheel of Igbo discourses and carry the weight of a writer's imaginations. Beyond this general function, proverbs perform specific functions in their context of use as demonstrated in *The Only Son*.

As this study has shown, in many cases, the proverbs in *The Only Son* were used to persuade people to act or to refrain from acting in particular ways. This means that they were used to indicate approval and disapproval of certain modes of behavior in society. For instance, in case 2, a proverb is used to approve of an action while in cases 10 and 16, the proverbs convey disapproval of behavior and their accompanying actions.

Further, the study shows that each proverb is a product of a context. This is because, in each case, a proverb is either a comment arising from a situation or it is aimed at a situation. In all the cases, a specific function was performed. Therefore, the study identified proverbs which caution on situations (e.g. cases 1, 3 and 7), those that advise appropriate actions and reactions to situations (e.g. cases 8, 10, and 16), those that disapprove of behaviours (e.g. cases 3, 5 and 10) and those that portray specific Igbo traditions (e.g. cases 17, 18 and 19). Each proverb seems to

belong in one or more of those four categories. This may suggest the existence of functional/ semantic patterns in the use of proverbs as Table 1 above further attests.

In addition, the study reveals that proverbs were used to convey information indirectly, as a way to reduce the impact of messages on the hearers. This is a euphemistic use of language in which serious issues are presented in mild ways. This is demonstrated clearly with case 5 in which a character is told that she could lose her only son. The use of proverb enhanced the transmission of this information without portraying the speaker as dispassionate or insensitive.

Therefore, John Munonye, like many Igbo fiction writers, succeeds in his portraiture of Igbo cosmology, worldviews and cultures through his characters in *The Only Son* as they speak both literally and in proverbs. In each case, a function is performed, the study reveals. While some proverbs serve to caution, some advise, and some are used to emphasize or reiterate a point. In some other cases, the analysis reveals that some form of action is induced in the hearer while some actions are condemned. In addition, specific Igbo traditions were portrayed through the proverbs. The study further shows that while it may be possible to understand a proverb in isolation, a great number of them are context sensitive.

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