

## Proverbs as Iconic and Indexical Markers of Culture: Exploration of the Proverbs of Four Nigerian Cultures

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### **Abstract**

Language is not only a vehicle of individual thought but of collective thought. One of the ways it performs the latter function is by the use of proverbs which carry the burden of a peoples' beliefs, customs and traditions. As communicative medium therefore, proverbs seem to be iconic and indexical of the cultures that birth them. In this paper, this assertion was investigated through the exploration of the proverbs of four Nigerian cultures to see to what extent proverbs serve to identify and define their users. To do this comparative study, a total of forty (40) proverbs were selected from the four cultures of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Iyie; ten (10) proverbs from each culture were collected and analysed using the frameworks of Hermans (1998) validity claims and Peirce's (1958) sign triad of symbol, icon and

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index. Our approach in this essay was to discuss the proverbs from a linguistic perspective as bearers of definite semiotic/cultural meaning by identifying and discussing the motifs in proverbs across the cultures. The study equally delved into patterns of modality in the proverb texts.

### **Introduction**

Proverbs are pithy sayings which have independent meanings of their own. They could be epigrammatic. Structurally they are sentences but, semantically they are utterances. In French linguistic parlance, they are 'énoncés' or a typology of enunciation. In interpersonal communication, they serve different purposes; for specificity of message between interlocutors and for rhetorical purposes. That was why Lotmans (1990) called them rhetorical texts while Lindfors (1968) called them the lubricant of communication. They could equally be said to be cultural texts applying some universality of meaning and interpretation that arise from or appeal to both the individuals and collective consciousness of the users. The *doxa* or common opinion or message of proverbs often portrays facts, truths or cultural values and assumptions. They are therefore signs from the 'semiosphere' of particular cultures.

The universality of message/meaning of proverbs could be seen as arising from what Habermas (1998) postulated as validity claims i.e. first, that content counts as true for participants in so far as it expresses something intended by the speaker. Second, the utterance or proverb counts as truthful in so far as it contributes to socially recognized expectation e.g. 'a stitch in time saves nine'.

To effectively discuss the topic, some of the key concepts such as culture, iconicity and indexicality need to be glossed to enable

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understanding of the discussions which follow. Tyler (1873), an anthropologist, described culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and other capability and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In its broadest sense, it refers to a range of human activities which are learned, not instinctive and which are transmitted from one generation to another through various learning processes. Posner (2007) in discussing culture from a semiotic point of view defined it as comprising institutions, sociofacts, artifacts and mentifacts of a people. So culture is people bound and cannot exist without society. Peirce (1958), in discussing the formal doctrine of signs used a triad of symbols, icon and index. The symbol represents something to somebody. Iconicity simply means the resemblance of the sign with its expressed reality. The index is a concept of causal relationships of form or output reminding us of a reality i.e. the overt indication of the covert. It is pertinent to note that other great masters in semiotics like Saussure seem to vary from Peirce in degree of relevance of the icon, while Peirce gives great importance to iconicity; Saussure gives more prominence to the arbitrariness of language.

Proverbs are couched in a language or culture. Of this Peirce (1958) said that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself. In other words for him, my language is the sum total of myself. Wittgenstein (1972), confirmed this by saying that the boundaries of one's language are the boundaries of one's world. The interface we can draw from this is that in one way or another, proverbs replicate cultural meanings and reality and are therefore iconic of them. When the Hausa says *karamin sani kunkumi ne* (a little learning is a dangerous thing), such proverbial lore arises from lived experience. As a corollary of the iconic it would be true to say that proverbs are indexical of the culture.

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Our approach to this essay is to discuss the proverbs from a linguistic perspective as bearers of definite semiotic/cultural meaning. The paper will equally delve into patterns of modality in the texts. Before we go on to the main preoccupation of this paper, a look at the direction of previous research on proverbs is requisite in order to contextualize this paper and to justify the effort.

### **Past Research on Proverbs**

The literature on proverb discourse is quite rich. Types, functions and characteristics of proverbs have been extensively discussed (See Finnegan, 1970; Lawal et al., 1997; Alabi, 2000; and Esimaje 2009/2010). In Adedimeji (nd), for example, it is noted that four main types of proverbs can be distinguished: rhetorical, epistemological, didactic and philosophical or analytic, although no clear cut demarcations can be said to exist. And in Esimaje (2009/2010), Adedimeji, and Akinmade, (2009), proverbs were shown to perform such functions as explanation, instruction, persuasion, moral lesson, emphasis, and aesthetics. Many works seemed to concentrate on approaches to proverb meaning without consideration of the role of context. But, a proverb needs to be interpreted at three levels; literal, figurative and contextual, for its complete meaning and understanding. As Bock & Bower (1980:59-61 quoted in Esimaje (2009/2010: 233) explained, most proverbs have at least two levels of meaning; literal and figurative, and the ability to comprehend both levels of meaning is productive.

Bock & Bower (1980: 59-61) examined the approaches to proverbial discourse and stated 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. But as Kinstsch (2007) observes, since many 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, 2007:91). So it is important to note that context, that is, the world views of the participants and their cultures is an important index in the interpretation of proverbs. Ejiolor (1984:20) acknowledged that culture and its owners are inseparable. Therefore, as the reader encounters proverbs, he is taken on an excursion into their society, cultures and peoples. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002:5) makes the role of context much more succinct when he speaks of Igbo proverbs as a documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time and as a way of drawing attention to an event outside of it such that even a non-metaphorical saying is an encapsulation of a course of action or an observation which is a summary of the view of tradition. Nwachukwu-Agbada argues that it is context that validates a proverb as communication.

In none of these attempts is proverbial discourse examined from a semiotic perspective as this one does. It would therefore be interesting to introduce a semiotic dimension to the study of proverbs so as to show how, beyond content analyses, proverbs can be iconic and indexical of the cultures of their owners.

#### **Method: Data Collection and Analyses**

The authors are mother tongue (MT) speakers of two of the languages (Igbo and Iyie) under examination and second language (L2) speakers of the third language – Hausa. Only Yoruba is not spoken by any of the authors. Therefore, the collections of data from the three languages were done partly by extracting the proverbs from documented sources by native

speakers of the languages such as books and partly through the intuitive knowledge of the researchers. The data on Yoruba language were collected through on the spot interview of native speakers of the language who also translated them. For each language a total of ten (10) proverbs were collected and translated. For the analyses, the study loosely adapted the framework of Sebeok (1977) which set out a procedural guide such as selection of categories, selection of units, coding of material and so on. In our case however, due to limitations of this paper, we would categorize, using motif index such as (a) animal (b) vegetable (c) thematic or *doxa* index following more closely after the frameworks of Jurgen Herbamas's (1988) validity claims and Peirce's sign triad of symbol, icon and index, and subsequently the discussion of modality patterns would be done. We are not concerned with quantitative analysis; rather we feel that the ensuing matrix analysis will guide us in seeing the generalities as well as the indexicalities of particular cultures. The data below will clarify these points.

## THE DATA

### Hausa:

1. *Rabon kwado ba ya hauwa sama.*  
(What is meant for the frog is not found in the ceiling or rooftop)
2. *Hankuri shi ne maganin duniya*  
(Patience is the panacea for life problems)
3. *Karamin sani kunkumi ne*  
(A little learning is dangerous)
4. *Rigakafi ya fi maganin ciwo*  
(Preventive medicine is better than the curative one)
5. *Komin nisan jifa kasa za ta dawo.*



(No matter how far upward a thing is thrown it will come down)

6. *Gidar biyu maganin gobara*

(Having two houses is the remedy for fire outbreak)

7. *Albarkacin kaza, kadangare ya sha ruwa a kasko*

(By courtesy of the chicken, the lizard drinks water from a clay pot)

8. *Rashin sani ya fi dare dubu*

(Ignorance is worse than a thousand dark nights)

9. *Babu abin da angulu za ta yi da mushen mota.*

(The carcass of a car is useless to a vulture).

10. *Iya ruwa fidda kai.*

(He who can swim does not drown)

#### **Igbo:**

1. *Onwere ndi chi ojoo n'ubochi ihe isi ike.*

(A man's God may be away on the day of an important fight).

2. *Onye kwochaa aka ya, ya na ndi okenye erie nri.*

(When a child washes his hand he can dine with the elders)

3. *A naghi eri nshiko na nzuzo.*

(One cannot eat a crab in secret).

4. *Onye kpatara nku ndauda nonime na-acho ka ngwere bia ya ugwo.*

(A man who brings ant infested fagots should not complain when visited by lizards)

5. *Onye chi ya tiiri aki e chefula inye chi ya otuto*

(Those whose palmnuts were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble).

6. *Onye nyere okenye nsopuru na enye onwe ya mbulite.*

(A man who respects elders paves the way for his lifting)

7. *Onye dinta anya ukwu na-ala n'iyi.*

(The hunter who is not satisfied with antelopes might be obliged to carry home an elephant and collapse under the weight.)

8. *Okuko ejighi ukwu abuo abo ala.*

(A hen cannot scratch for food with both legs simultaneously).

9. *Awo a dighi agba oso ehihie na nkiti.*

(A frog does not appear in daylight for nothing)

10. *Nkita si na ndi nwere ike amaghi ano odu.*

(The dog says that those fortunate in life often do not know how to take advantage of opportunities).

**Yoruba:**

1. *Enu agba lobii gbo.*

(It is the elder's mouth that determines a ripe kolanut)

2. *Owo omode ko to pepe, tagba ko wo keregbe.*

(The hands of the child do not reach the high shelf, those of an elder man do not enter the ground).

3. *Alaso ala kii joko niso epo.*

(The wearer of white cloth does not seat in palm oil stall).

4. *Okun to ni igba ese nrin irin pele, amborori alaantete to ni itan meji to je ehere.*

(The millipede that has two hundred legs is walking gently, far more should be the cricket that has two legs that are fragile).

5. *Iwa rere lesa eniyan.*

(Good character is an adornment of man)

6. *A kii tehin ago kadie.*

(One man does not collect fowls without knowledge of the cage).





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7. *Aja kii gbagbe oloore owuro.*  
 (The dog does not forget the person who has shown kindness to it when it was young)
  8. *Adire funfun ko ara re lagba*  
 (A white hen does not know its uniqueness.)
  9. *Agbojologun faraa re fosi la*  
 (He who waits for legacy exposes himself to poverty).
  10. *Ajeji owo kan ko gbegba dori.*  
 (A single hand does not lift the calabash to head).

Partly adopted from Olatunji, .O. O. (1994), *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*.

**Ivie:**

1. *Oboh n'apfe ova nwu'elue*  
 (The home native doctor is without honour in his village.)
2. *Ere e kha m'omo, omo me enwe na*  
 (A child burnt by fire flees at the sight of ashes)
3. *Emeni a rho n'akele lo la ukhomi ekpha*  
 (It is what is not meant for the frog is what is in the ceiling).
4. *Elami n'oa z'ughia, ishinegba lo a khuo ikya*  
 (It is God who drives flies from a tail-less goat)
5. *Awa no la waa o va swo ukpose ono mol'oli*  
 (A dog destined to be lost does not hear his master's whistle)
6. *Aka r'ewolo zobo, a rhu'obo ugyia le.*  
 (When you sacrifice a rabbit you let go the tail)
7. *Odanomo o kha guu omo o pfua*  
 (When the prop of the child dies the child loses or dies)
8. *Awoshi n'oa khu omele lo rhu khomi a gbe eche*  
 (It is the dog that chases a lizard that hits its head on a stone).

9. *Osuma lo khi emi viali ivie, le rho pfi evieme ode a*  
 (The sheep said she has the young to clear the morning  
 dew from its path).

10. *Aka me emeni a kha me. A pfi emeni a kha pfi.*  
 (An unexpected action begets an unexpected reaction).

Partly adopted from Duma, G.G (2005), *Ekpita Ivie*. Auch: Catholic press.

### Comparative Matrix Analysis

Linguistically speaking, a proverb's meaning/interpretation does not rely on sentence meaning but on utterance meaning. Thus it is context bound depending on other considerations such as factors of presupposition, implicature and even elements of culturally shared meanings between interlocutors. Thus for examples, the proverbs:

*Hausa: Rabon kwado baya hauwa sama.*

*(What is meant for the frog is not kept in the ceiling).*

*Ivie: Emeni a rho n'akele lo la ukhomi ekpha*

*(It is what is not meant for the frog that is kept in the ceiling).*

Both proverbs as expressed in the two cultures mean the same thing. Both cultures work on presupposed knowledge of where the frog is found and its incapability to get to heights. It takes some implicature for accurate interpretation. The point of variance is the modality of expression – whereas the Ivie proverb relies on direct locution, the Hausa relies on indirect locution.

We wish to postulate, however, that even when expressing the same truths which are deducible from their iconic presentation of life issues; it is the various types of motifs that are indexical of the cultures. We wish, at this juncture, to remind ourselves of what we mean by motif. Motifs have been defined as



the smallest element in tale having power to persist in a tradition (Thompson 1995). Three classes are specified: actors, items in the background of the action such as magic objects, unusual customs and strange beliefs and single incidents. As an examination of the data at our disposal would show shortly, in some cultures such motifs can be isolated. Let us exemplify:

Ivie:

*Ava gb egyi n'olisa gbe egyi na*

(You do not kill the tortoise elsewhere as a sacrificial object but for Olisa (a goddess).

Motif: the tortoise.

Igbo:

*Nnunu n'eweghi nku a naghi efeefe*

(A featherless sparrow does not fly)

Motif: flight (action) or feather (Background instrument).

Hausa:

*Duniya gadan kara*

(Life/world is a bed of guinea corn stalk); impermanence/fragility-life)

Motif: corn stalk

In the cited proverbs, we can isolate two things. First, the objectification of reality by special insight, and second, the objects used in the process. The process is iconic in that it replicates or is an image, diagram or is metaphorical of the insight or message. The objects used are indexical of the culture, e.g. 'Olisa' is indexical of Ivie culture. In some sense the insight could be indexical since it is peculiar to a world view of a particular culture – it is a distinctive feature.

The points made above will be clearer in Tables 1 and 2 following, where we have compared the proverbs from the four cultures using the five motifs of animal, vegetable, human,

custom and abstract, and then in Table 3 where the modality analyses are shown.

*Table 1: Motif Typology*

MOTIF	IGBO	HAUSA	YORUBA	IVIE
Animals (A)	1	1	1	1
Vegetable (B)	1		1	
Human (C)	1		1	1
Custom (D)	1	1	1	1
Abstract (E)	1	1	1	1

As Table one shows, not all five motifs are present in all the languages examined. Whereas Igbo and Hausa utilised all five motifs, Hausa and Ivie did not; Hausa language did not use the vegetable and human motifs while Ivie lacks the vegetable motif. However, this could be due to the size of the data.

*Table 2: Motif Specification*

MOTIF	IGBO	HAUSA	YORUBA	IVIE
A	Crab, antelope, dog, elephant, frog, hen, lizard	Frog, hen. Lizard	Fowl, cricket, dog, hen, millipede.	Goat, dog
B	Palm nut	-	Kola nut	-
C	Man, child, hunter	-	Elder, child.	Child, native, priest.



D	Valor, clean, hands.	Skills	Knowledge, lassitude, sensitivity to fit.	Experience, craft.
E	Providence, Humility.	Patience, Virtue, Learning.	Waiting, legacy.	Experience, fear Action

Although this Table suggests the absence of some motifs in some of the languages, we would rather see this as a tendency rather than an absolute occurrence because of the limitation of our data. However, noteworthy is that each motif has unique significance in the culture that adopts it. So it is the motif that makes the proverbs iconic or indexical of the cultures that produce them. We note, too, the possibility of meaning semblance where motifs share cultural relevance as in some the proverbs.

*Table 3: Modality Patterns in the Proverbs*

CULTURE	MOTIF	MODAL VALUE	FIGURE OF ANALOGY
Hausa	Frog, patience, knowledge, skill	Philosophical truth discourse oriented	Straight and axiomatic (metonymic).
Igbo	Frog, dog, vegetable, hunter	Putative truths	Axiomatic expression (metonymic).
Yoruba	Millipede, cricket	Factitive, convincing syllogistic	Axiomatic, syllogistic

		discourse oriented.	
Ivie	Fire, frog, goat, dog, sheep.	Truth value by indirect location inferential truth.	Metaphorical

In discussing the concept of modality, we are concerned with the speech act itself which we equate with the French concept of 'enunciation', the utterance or 'énoncés' and the message itself. Of these three perspectives, it is easier to see the proverb discourse as the message. The speech act perspective would require the contextual indices of use of the proverbs for interpretations.

One way of looking at the modality concept is whether it is subject oriented or discourse oriented (Palmer 1965). We are concerned with the validity of the message borne out of the degree of certainty or doubt involved. i.e. does the utterance assert the truth or is it a preposition of possible truth or rather putative. In other words what is the validity quotient? In the Hausa proverb, there is no insertion of subject rather it is the discourse that is paramount. The truth value lies in the axiomatic nature of the message – see 'a little learning is a dangerous thing or little learning is darker than night'. These have the aspect of philosophical truths that can be ascertained from empirical observation. The Ivie proverbs derive their truth validity by their pattern of indirect locution. There is the subject or object which is vicariously substitutable with the speaking self or object of reference, e.g. *obo n'apfe o va nwuelue*. (a prophet is without recognition in his home) has direct reference to the speaker



depending on the context of situation whoever is the focus of information. Similarly the proverb (a child burnt by fire runs away when he sees ashes (an index of fire)). The Yoruba proverb bears some transparency in some type of equative context (proverb 2 and 4) illustrate this. There is some down to earth syllogistic thinking in others as in 9 and 8 or 6. In fact, there is some comic reasoning as in 6 one does not reflect the fact without the knowledge of the cage. The Yoruba proverb is transparent. The Igbo proverb has a truth value that is factitive in modal value. There is indirect locution which tends to give ambiguity of reference.

In arriving at some of the observations above, cognizance was taken of the insertion or alienation of the speaking persona in the proverb utterance. The Igbo proverbs show the speaking persona making the pronouncement of committed conviction while the Hausa is rather philosophically detached. The Ivie ones are more a product of empirical observation and in one or two cases give the speech or 'doxa' to the being reported as in *the ship said it brought forth the young to clear its path of early morning dew*. The Ivie proverbs base their validity on observable context deduction, while the Hausa are more philosophical pronouncements. The Yoruba of our reference are in some cases indirect locutions (1 and 6, 8, 9) and have elements of logic and syllogistic considerations (2, 3, and 4).

### **Conclusion**

What we have tried to do shows researchable possibility for proverbial studies. It is not in doubt from our limited exploitation that proverbs are, to a great extent, indexical and iconic markers of culture.

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