

POLITENESS AND IMPOLITENESS IN THE USE OF IGBO PROVERBS

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Abstract

Proverbs, being integral to the communication practices of the Igbo people, are aptly described as the palm oil with which words are eaten. The position of proverbs in the communicative practices of the Igbo people has attracted diverse studies with varied orientations, stylistic, semantic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, etc. This study further promotes the strategic position and function of proverbs in Igbo by focusing on their expressional values for politeness and impoliteness in typical interactions in the Igbo language. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Culpeper (2011), the analysis identifies and illustrates how Igbo proverbs are employed to realise politeness and impoliteness strategies as conceptualised in the respective models. The data for this study are drawn from two selected Igbo novels, *Onye kpaa nkụ ahụhụ* and *Enyi mere enyi ya*, as the interactions in the novels represent typical real-time and Igbo-based context interactions. The result shows that Igbo proverbs apply to the strategies as identified by the theories, which are bald-on-record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record (indirect) politeness, bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm, or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. Additionally, it recognises the possibility of categorising Igbo proverbs according to these strategies and the capacity to convey politeness and impoliteness, reflecting their face-saving and face-threatening features in the various discourses highlighted in this study.

Keywords: Face-threatening act, Igbo proverbs, Impoliteness, Politeness, Proverbs.

Introduction

In language use, the application of certain figurative expressions attends to communication in different ways, such as making it easier for writers to communicate intricate ideas effectively, providing readers with insights into cultural contexts, and making statements more impactful and memorable. Linguistically, applying some of these expressions in discourse highlights /indicates one's proficiency in a particular language. Among these figurative expressions are proverbs, which is the thrust of this paper. The use of proverbs in communication transcends mere speech to perform different functions like advising, warning, encouraging, supporting, and condemning, as is also the case with Igbo proverbs.

Being the cornerstone of the cultural heritage of the Igbo people and deeply embedded in their language and social interaction, Igbo proverbs are used to unveil the interplay between politeness and impoliteness. These proverbs are used to highlight the application of different politeness and impoliteness strategies in social relationships and interactions, unveiling those proverbs that address politeness, such that navigate through the speakers' awareness of others' feelings and try so hard to protect and not threaten the listeners' faces. In contrast, impoliteness addresses the harsh acts of violence on the faces of others without any effort to save the listeners' faces or mitigate the threat on those faces.

The use of Igbo proverbs as expressions of politeness and impoliteness strategies is vividly demonstrated in the various discourses presented in the novels *Onye kpaa nkụ ahụhụ* and *Enyi mere enyi ya*. These discourses highlight the unique function and versatility of Igbo proverbs in conveying politeness and impoliteness across different speech settings. By analysing these contexts, the study reveals how Igbo proverbs serve as dynamic tools for managing interpersonal relationships, negotiating power, and navigating social norms within the communicative exchanges portrayed in the novels.

While divergent studies that offer valuable insights into proverbs, politeness, and impoliteness exist (Ajadi and Olagunju 2024; Fayomi and Oboko 2021; Ndiribe 2020; Adekunle and Adebayo 2017; Egenti and Okoye 2016), they do not explore their intersection in Igbo discourse. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the politeness and impoliteness strategies in selected Igbo proverbs from *Onye kpaa nkụ ahụhụ* and *Enyi mere enyi ya*. This paper seeks to uncover how these proverbs function in mitigating face threats, asserting power, or fostering solidarity, thereby illuminating their role in shaping social interactions and cultural norms.

Overview of Proverbs

The term *proverb* originates from the Latin *proverbium*, referring to concise expressions of wisdom and experience. Mieder (2004) defines a proverb as a widely known saying that conveys truth, morals, and traditional beliefs in a memorable form, passed down through generations. Similarly, Kanu (2014) describes proverbs as reflections of communal wisdom, encapsulating cultural values and moral principles.

However, the meaning of proverbs is highly context-dependent. Finnegan (1970) emphasises that cultural context is essential for accurate interpretation, as proverbs may lose their intended meaning when removed from their social setting. Proverbs, deeply rooted in tradition, function as communicative tools across diverse cultures, characterised by distinct, context-driven meanings (Ekpang, Pam, & Ekwok, 2020).

Beyond their cultural specificity, proverbs are a universal oral genre used to transmit wisdom, values, and moral teachings. As Gevorgyan (2009:214) suggests, “Within every society, there exists a verbal cultural heritage, an ‘inventory of lore,’ which transcends generations”. Proverbs are integral components of this “inventory”, originating from ancient times and persisting in contemporary usage across various domains, including everyday conversation, media, literature, and political discourse.

The Place of Proverbs in Igbo Culture

In Igbo culture, proverbs play a crucial role in both thought processes and linguistic expression. Proficiency in their use signifies mastery of the language and positions individuals as custodians of cultural heritage. Skilled users of proverbs possess strong interpretive abilities and effectively convey the core values of Igbo society. This is reflected in the belief that a child fluent in Igbo proverbs has justified the dowry paid on their mother’s head, marking them as a true son of the soil. Proverbs are thus regarded as “the oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, 2006), underscoring their significance in Igbo discourse.

Okorie (2013) likens the value of proverbs to the traditional Igbo person to that of sacred texts for religious leaders or books for scholars. Proverbs encapsulate the social, moral, economic, and epistemological worldviews of the Igbo people, serving as a repository of wisdom. As Fayomi and Oboko (2021:122) assert, Igbo proverbs are not used merely for amusement but serve critical communicative functions such as teaching, softening discourse, enhancing meaning, and reinforcing social norms. Nwoye (1991) further highlights their role in issuing advice, warnings, requests, and critiques, with their inherent indirectness enabling speakers to convey sensitive messages with politeness and diplomacy.

This study argues that proverbs function as dynamic linguistic tools capable of promoting both politeness and impoliteness. Their effective use requires skill, allowing speakers to navigate social interactions, adapt meaning to various contexts, and strategically employ proverbs to reinforce or mitigate communicative intent.

Studies on Igbo Proverbs, Politeness and Impoliteness

This section reviews scholarly contributions to Igbo proverbs, politeness and impoliteness across various dimensions.

Egenti and Okoye (2016) analysed the role of Igbo proverbs in conflict resolution, applying the speech act theory to determine their illocutionary and perlocutionary effects. They conclude that while not all Igbo proverbs serve this function, those advocating peace and reconciliation facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding.

Adekunle and Adebayo (2017) examined linguistic politeness in eight Nigerian Independence Day speeches (1960–2011) using Leech’s Politeness Maxims and Brown and Levinson’s theory of face. Their analysis revealed that speechwriters employed various maxims such as tact, Pollyanna, modesty, and approbation to promote unity, optimism, humility, and praise. The study concludes that while these politeness strategies create an impression of friendliness and gratitude, they primarily serve the political interests of the leaders rather than those of the audience.

Ndiribe (2020) explored the pragmatic analysis of Igbo proverbs through the lens of knowledge construction, emphasising the generation of discourse-specific insights over mere semantic content. The study involved six participants who interpreted selected proverbs based on personal discretion. Findings revealed that meaning is shaped by context, as a single proverb may yield multiple interpretations. The study concludes that knowledge construction serves as a vital tool for uncovering the deeper pragmatic meanings embedded in proverbs.

Fayomi and Oboko (2021) examined the pragma-sociolinguistic nature of selected Igbo proverbs to explore their societal functions and pragmatic force as didactic tools. Twenty proverbs related to respect and honour were analysed using Lawal's (2012) six-level context framework. These levels include cosmological, sociological, social, psychological, situational, and linguistic contexts. The study found that the Igbo people place a high value on respect and honour, which are both earned and reciprocated, leading to the conclusion that proverbs serve as tools for transmitting moral values to younger generations in Igbo culture.

Chidoka (2021) explored the miscellany of Igbo proverbs and their role in cultural pedagogy, emphasising the need to preserve their meanings, values, and philosophy across generations. The study compares the competence of older and younger Igbo speakers in proverb usage. Findings suggest that proverbs should be cultivated as a refined art and upheld as indicators of eloquence and cultural literacy. Igbo proverbs reflect traditional knowledge and ancestral wisdom. The paper argues that these expressions serve as tools for transmitting values such as encouragement, cooperation, and justice. It concludes that the Igbo philosophy is rich with life lessons and embodies a deep reservoir of indigenous knowledge.

Ajadi and Olagunju (2024) explored the pragmatic and linguistic aspects of politeness and impoliteness in Nigerian open letters. The study focused on letters addressed to Presidents Obasanjo and Jonathan during the Fourth Republic. Three letters by Wole Soyinka, Umar Danjuma, and Olusegun Obasanjo were analyzed using purposive sampling and qualitative methods. Leech's pragmalinguistic framework was applied, revealing that irony and repeated lexemes were used for face-threatening acts. Words like "never" and "repeat" conveyed impoliteness through presupposed misalignment with maxims. The results indicate that understanding political context is essential for interpreting linguistic constructions of politeness and impoliteness.

While these studies provide valuable insights into proverbs, politeness, and impoliteness, they do not explore their intersection in Igbo discourse. This study aims to fill this gap by categorising proverbs from *Onye kpa a nkụ ahụhụ* and *Enyi mere enyi ya* under politeness and impoliteness strategies. Thus, this uncovers the pragmatic strategies employed in Igbo proverbs for mitigating face threats, asserting power, or fostering solidarity, thereby illuminating their role in shaping social interactions and cultural norms.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness theory as its theoretical framework. The politeness theory as propounded by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson borders on the Face Threatening Act (Hereafter, FTA) with a major concern about what is intended to be done by verbal or non-verbal communication because "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65). The concept of face as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) describe face as the image people want to keep up in public or an

individual's self-respect. In terms of politeness, it means wanting approval from others. This idea of face has two parts: positive face, which is wanting to be liked, and negative face, which is wanting independence and avoiding being imposed upon.

FTA is classified according to the kind of threat a face receives, positive or negative, and whether the threat concerns the hearer or speaker's face. For instance, when requests are made, we threaten the negative face of the hearer; when we criticise, the threat falls on the positive face of the hearer; and when gratitude is expressed, the negative face of the speaker becomes threatened.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory outlines four politeness strategies, which are:

1. Bald-on-record
2. Positive politeness
3. Negative politeness
4. Off-record (indirect)

Bald-on-record: This strategy involves direct, unambiguous communication without attempts to mitigate face threats. According to Brown and Levinson (1987:69), this approach is used when clarity and urgency are prioritised, particularly in situations requiring immediate action, familiarity between speakers, or minimal risk of offending the listener. It ensures efficiency by omitting politeness markers. Examples:

- 1a. "Be careful!" (Urgency)
- b. "Your bag is open" (Listener's benefit)
- c. "Drink up!"
- d. "Hurry up!"

This strategy is typically employed when straightforwardness is necessary, reinforcing its role in effective and direct communication.

Positive politeness: Positive politeness minimises threats to the listener's positive face by fostering familiarity and reducing discomfort in social interactions. It is commonly used among friends or in settings where people share a certain level of closeness. The strategy helps maintain social harmony by using techniques such as combining criticism with compliments, finding common ground, and incorporating humour. Examples:

- 2a. "Your skirt is gorgeous, and it's a perfect match with your top, but I'm not sure the hairstyle suits, though" (Balancing criticism with compliments).
- b. "You have missed your way again; it seems you forgot the direction I gave you earlier. Never mind, I sometimes forget my way to my new house" (Finding common ground).

Negative politeness: Negative politeness aims to minimise imposition on the listener's negative face, which reflects their desire for autonomy and freedom from constraint. It is used when a speech act may embarrass or impose on the listener, requiring strategies that soften the request and show deference. Examples

3a. Minimising imposition (“Could you repark my car for me? It is only a few poles and will not take long.”)

- b. Apologising (“I’m sorry, but could you help me with my bag?”)
- c. Using questions instead of commands (“I don’t suppose you know how to iron clothes, do you?”)

This strategy serves as a remedial measure (Brown & Levinson, 1978) to maintain social harmony while ensuring that requests or actions do not come across as overly forceful or intrusive.

Off-record (indirect) politeness: This strategy involves significant indirectness, allowing the speaker to imply rather than explicitly state a face-threatening act (FTA). This strategy shifts the responsibility of interpretation to the listener, reducing the imposition on them. Examples:

- 4a. “Are there more apples anywhere else?” (Implying a request without stating it directly).
- b. “Would you like to join us for dinner sometime?” (A non-imposing invitation).

By avoiding direct requests, off-record strategies help preserve the listener’s self-image and dignity in communication. However, when these politeness strategies are ignored, implicit instances of impoliteness may arise. While Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory focuses on FTAs, it does not address impoliteness. To fill this gap, Culpeper’s (2011) impoliteness model is incorporated, which examines communicative behaviors intended to cause offence and social disruption. Culpeper (2011) introduced five impoliteness strategies, which are an expansion of his previous work, building on the foundation laid by the politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987). They are.

- a. Bald-on-record impoliteness
- b. Positive impoliteness
- c. Negative impoliteness
- d. Sarcasm or mock politeness
- e. Withhold politeness

Bald-on-record impoliteness: This strategy involves direct and unmitigated expressions of impoliteness, where the Face-Threatening Act (FTA) is delivered bluntly and unambiguously, without any attempt to soften the impact. The speaker deliberately threatens the listener’s face by making harsh or offensive remarks. Examples:

- 5a. “You are not intelligent.”
- b. “Your idea is terrible.”

Positive impoliteness: The positive impoliteness strategy deliberately undermines the addressee’s positive face, which encompasses the desire for admiration, respect, and acceptance. The utterances or actions associated with this strategy aim to lower the listener’s status, impose dominance, and demonstrate superiority. Examples:

- 6a. Monopolizing a conversation to assert dominance.
- b. Mocking or ridiculing someone in front of others.
- c. Deliberately ignoring someone’s presence.

Negative impoliteness: In this strategy, the addressee's negative face wants, which relate to the desire for freedom from imposition and autonomy, are damaged or threatened. Examples:

7a. Invading someone's personal space or belongings without permission.

b. Putting the addressee's indebtedness on record.

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness: The execution of the Face-Threatening Act (FTA) relies on implicature to convey negative sentiments or criticism indirectly. While the speaker appears polite on the surface, the underlying message expresses impoliteness subtly, making the tone less overtly aggressive than bald-on-record impoliteness. Examples:

8a. "Wow, great job cleaning the room," (said while looking at a messy bed).

b. "Wow, thanks for letting me know about the meeting at the last minute. That is quite helpful" (sarcastically expressing frustration).

Withholding politeness: This strategy entails a conscious decision to refrain from utilizing polite language or behaviour in social interactions, particularly in situations where such politeness would normally be anticipated. Example.

The absence of politeness markers like "please" and "thank you."

9a. "Give me my bag." – deliberately omitting 'please' while making a request.

b. Not saying 'thanks' after receiving a present.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine how Igbo proverbs convey politeness and impoliteness in literary discourse. It applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness theory, respectively, to analyse proverbs in two Igbo novels: *Onye kpaa nkụ ahụhụ* (Nwadike, 1989) and *Enyi mere enyi ya* (Nwokoye & Nnyigide, 2021). These novels were chosen for their rich use of proverbs and their depiction of diverse social interactions. Data for this study consists of discourses featuring Igbo proverbs selected from the two Igbo novels mentioned above.

The study categorises the selected proverbs under the highlighted politeness and impoliteness strategies, which are bald-on-record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record politeness, bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm/mock politeness, and withheld politeness.

The novels present different social contexts that influence proverb usage. *Onye kpaa nkụ ahụhụ* explores themes of premarital relationships, betrayal, unwanted pregnancy, and the consequences of broken promises, as seen in the scenario where Ikechukwu abandons Amaka after impregnating her, leading to her curse haunting him. Conversely, *Enyi mere enyi ya* portrays deception, jealousy, and betrayal. Narrating the tale of two lovers, Echezona and Adaku, who are set to marry. However, Ulooma, Adaku's friend, attempts to sabotage Adaku's relationship but faces the consequences. Through these narratives, the study analyses how Igbo proverbs function as politeness and impoliteness strategies, reflecting the social dynamics and communicative norms in Igbo culture depicted in the novel.

Data Presentation and Discussion

This section presents Igbo proverbs from the novels *Onye kpara nkụ ahụhụ* and *Enyi mere enyi ya* as primary data. The proverbs are contained in excerpts from the novels. These proverbs are analyzed using the four politeness strategies and five impoliteness strategies as categorized within the politeness and impoliteness theories of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Culpeper (2011), respectively. Annotations for the Igbo proverbs and discourse are provided, and each excerpt is introduced with a discourse context to facilitate comprehension.

Politeness strategies

A. Bald-on-record

10. **Discourse context 1:** Amaka is saddled with the shame of an unwanted pregnancy.

Proverb: *Onye kpara nkụ ahụhụ ga-atụ anya na ngwere ga-abịara ya ọrụ*

Discourse participants: Amaka and Ukachi (Amaka's mother)

Amaka: *kedụ ka m ga-esi die ihe ihere nke a?* L7-8
(How do I bear this shame?)

Ukachi: *Onye kpara nkụ ahụhụ ga-atụ anya na ngwere ga-abịara ya ọrụ* L10-12

(He who has fetched ant-infested firewood should expect the lizard)

Aga m echekwa gị dị ka ezigbo nne. L 28-29

(I will protect you like a good mother)

Mana ghọta aghọta na ụkpala mụta oke ufe, o fenye n'ọnyị nnụnyị L 30-32 (But know that the grasshopper that learns to fly too high ends in the mouth of a bird).
(Nwadike, 1999: 15)

Ukachi, Amaka's mother, employs the Igbo proverb in lines 10–12 to address Amaka's pregnancy outside marriage. Using a bald-on-record politeness strategy, she delivers the message without softening it, emphasising the seriousness of the situation and the consequences of Amaka's actions. By invoking this proverb, Ukachi communicates the urgency and gravity of the message clearly and unambiguously, reflecting the cultural role of proverbs in imparting life lessons. Similarly, the proverb in lines 30–32 is used as an admonition, reinforcing Amaka's need to take responsibility for her choices. This direct approach ensures the full impact of the message without minimising the face-threatening act.

B. Positive politeness

11. **Discourse context 2:** Ngozi shows empathy/concern towards her friend's condition.

Proverbs: (i) *Awọ anaghi agba ọsọ ehihie n'efu.*
(ii) *Anya bewe imi ebewekwa.*

Discourse participants: Ngozi and Nnenna

Nnenna: *Ngọọ, enyi ọma m, ihe ọ makwa kwurū?* L 28, 12-13
(Ngọọ, my good friend, is everything ok?)

Ngozi: Nneoma, *Awọ anaghi agba ọsọ ehihie n'efu.* L 14-15
 (Nneoma, there is no smoke without fire)
 Onọdụ gị na-echu m ụra: ndi ala anyi tụtụ ilu si: L 16-17
 (Your condition gives me sleepless nights: our people say that:)
Anyà bewe imi ebewekwa L18-19
 (When the eyes cry, the nose cries too). (Nwadike, 1999: 22-23)

Ngozi uses the Igbo proverb in line 15 to subtly indicate that something is wrong while shielding her friend Nnenna from embarrassment. This serves a dual purpose: protecting Nnenna's face and avoiding discomfort for herself while addressing a sensitive issue.

By employing a positive politeness strategy using proverbs in lines 18–19, Ngozi expresses support and solidarity, effectively mitigating potential embarrassment while showing concern for Nnenna's predicament. This approach allows Ngozi to address the issue delicately and without discomfort.

C. Negative politeness

12. Discourse context 3: The Decision to deny the pregnancy as advised.

Proverb: *Ụka a kpara akpa, isi ka e ji ekwe ya.*

Discourse participants: Amaka and Ikechukwu

Amaka: I ga-abịa ka gị na nna m ha kpazie maka alụm dị na nwunye anyị. L23-24
 (You will come and discuss the marriage rites with my father)

Ikechukwu: Alụm gini? lụgbuokwa onwe gị na di. L25-26
 (Marry what? To hell with you and marriage)

Amaka: Echere m na ndị ụlọ anyị tụtụ n'ilu si: *Ụka a kpara akpa, isi ka e ji ekwe ya* (L27-30)
 (I thought our people had this saying that an agreement takes only a nod to seal it)
 (Nwadike, 1999:7)

The negative politeness strategy aims at minimizing imposition on the listener and respecting their personal space. In this context, Amaka applies the proverb in lines 27-30 to soften her request to Ikechukwu about meeting with her father regarding their previously agreed-upon marriage plans. By using this proverb, Amaka downplays the request, making it sound less burdensome while subtly reminding Ikechukwu of their earlier agreement. This approach ensures that she respects his personal space and avoids imposing on him directly.

D. Off-record (indirect)

13. Discourse context 4: Seeking a way forward concerning Ngozi's pregnancy.

Proverbs (i) *Iji ehihie chọwanụ ewu ojii.*

(ii) *Di nta gbagburu anụ ga-eburu anụ o gbagburu.*

Discourse participants: Ikechukwu and Amaka

Ikechukwu: "Olee ihe a ga-eme ugbo a?" L 1
 (What does one do now?)

Amaka: *Iji ehie chowanu ewu ojii* L2
(To make hay while the sun shines)

Ikechukwu: *N'uzo di aña?* L3
(In what way?)

Amaka: *Di nta gbagburu anu ga-eburu anu o gbagburu.* L4-5
(The hunter that killed a game must take home his spoils of the hunt)

Ikechukwu: *Oo kwa olulu?* L6
(That's marriage?)

Amaka: *Ya nu* L7
(Exactly). (Nwadike, 1999:3)

In traditional Igbo culture, it is uncommon for a woman to propose marriage directly. Given her pregnancy, Amaka employs an off-record politeness strategy by using Igbo proverbs to indirectly express her desire for a formal marriage with Ikechukwu. This approach helps her avoid confrontation or pressure, thereby maintaining relationship dynamics and minimising face threats.

Amaka's strategy proves effective, as Ikechukwu correctly infers her intention in discourse context 2, line 6, without her stating it explicitly. This demonstrates the pragmatic power of Igbo proverbs, enabling her to navigate the delicate topic of a marriage proposal, ensuring that her message is conveyed and understood subtly yet effectively.

Impoliteness strategies

E. Bald-on record impoliteness

14. Discourse context 5: Ulooma explicitly threatens Adaku's life because of her desire to be the one getting married to Echezona instead of Adaku.

Proverb: *ihe di oke mma dikwazi ogini mma.*

Discourse participants: Adaku and Ulooma

Adaku: *Isi gini?* L 11
(What did you say?)
Kedu mgbe nke a bidoro? L 12
(When did this start?)
O bu kwa gi ka m na-akoro akuko udi ihunanya di n'etiti mu na Echezona
(It was you I talked to about the love between Echezona and I) L13-15
Akokwaara m gi nkwa o kwere m maka olulu L 16-17
(I also told you he promised to marry me.)

Ulooma: *Anu mpama!* L 18
(Fool!)
I maghi na ihe di oke mma dikwazi ogini mma L 19-20
(Don't you know that what is good for the goose is equally good for the gander)
Mbo nile m gbara ka o hu m n'anya lara n'iyi n'ihig. L 21-22
(All my efforts to make him love me are in vain because of you)

Ya mere m ji kpebie iwezuga gi n'uzo L 23-24

(That is why I decided to take you out of the way)

(Nwokoye and Nnyigide, 2021:28).

Ulooma issues a direct threat to Adaku, disregarding politeness and using blunt language to express her displeasure. She sees Adaku as an obstacle to her love for Echezona, and this results in an intentional threat to Adaku's face, with no attempt to mitigate the impact of her statement. Using the bald-on-record impoliteness strategy, Ulooma reinforces her threat with the Igbo proverb in lines 19-20, emphasising her willingness to eliminate Adaku to achieve her goal.

F. Positive impoliteness

15. **Discourse context 6:** Ikechukwu warns Amaka against accusing him of being responsible for her pregnancy.

Proverbs (i) *E jighi ihe e ji agba na nti agba n'anya.*

(ii) *Onye kpara nkụ ahụhụ ka ngwere na-abịara orụ.*

Discourse participants: Ikechukwu and Amaka

Ikechukwu: Gini jikoro mu na gi na afọ ime? Oo kwa *ebe onye sara ahụ ka o na-aga achọ awurụ ya?* biko, o burukwa gi egwu, kwusi ya maka na, *ihe e ji agba na nti e jighi ya agba n'anya.* L 15-21

(What business do I have with your pregnancy? Shouldn't you look for your clothes where you had your bath? Please, if it's a joke, stop it, because what is meant for the ears cannot be used on the eyes). (P,8).

Amaka: Ihe o soro gi mewe m, ihe m ma bu na *Onye kpara nkụ ahụhụ ka ngwere na-abịara orụ.* L6-9

(No matter what you do to me, I know he who brings ant-infested firewood has invited the lizard). (Nwadike, 1999:8-9)

Ikechukwu explicitly rejects Amaka's claims by denying any involvement in her pregnancy (line 15), employing a positive impoliteness strategy which aims at damaging the listener's positive face (self-image). Using the Igbo proverb in lines 16-17 (page 8), he undermines her desire for acceptance. In response (lines 8-9, page 9), Amaka acknowledges the rejection and asserts that Ikechukwu must face the consequences of his actions. This exchange highlights the tension and the strategic use of language in conveying interpersonal conflicts.

G. Negative impoliteness

16. **Discourse context 7:** Adaku receives a threat and confrontation from Ulooma and her cohort, undermining her authority and instilling fear in her.

Proverb: *Anyị ga-ahụ nti gi*

Discourse Participants: Ulooma, Adaku, and Otu nwoke.

Ulooma: Mechie onu! Onye bu enyi gi? L 7-8

(Shut up! Who is your friend?)

I che na o bu egwu onwa ka anyi na-ete ebe a? L 9-10

(Do you think we are here for the moonlight dance?)

Adakū: Ụlọoma, aghotaghị m ihe ị na-ekwu L 13
(Ụlọoma, I don't understand what you're saying)
Ọ bụ m ka ị na-agwa ka ọ bụ nwoke ọjọọ a nọ ebe a? L 15-16
(Are you talking to me, or this bad man here?)

Otu nwoke: (Were iwe maa ya ụra – Slaps her in anger). L 17
I si emebiri gi? L 18
(Are you mad?)
Anyị ga-ahụ ntị gi tata L 20
(Your eyes will see your ears today). (Nwokoye and Nnyigide, 2021: 27)

One can't see their ears without a mirror or an external device; the proverb in line 20 metaphorically underscores the severity of the threat Adakū faces, highlighting the intimidation and danger confronting her. This discourse employs a negative impoliteness strategy, attacking Adakū's negative face, her desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. The speakers use intimidation and threats to undermine her sense of security, creating a frightening and oppressive atmosphere that reinforces the coercive nature of the interaction.

H. Sarcasm or mock politeness

17. **Discourse Context 8:** Amaka tells Ikechukwu about her pregnancy.

Proverbs: (i) *I kpara nkwa aka, o were kwuonyị*

(ii) *Agwọ nọ nákirika*

Discourse participants: Ikechukwu and Amaka

Ikechukwu: “kedụ ka o siri mee?” L18
(How did it happen?)

Amaka: “I na- ajum ko ọ siri mee?” L20
(Are you asking me how it happened?)
I kpara nkwa aka, o were kwuonyị. L 23-24
(You hit the music, and it sang)
Ọọ kwa agwara m gi agwa na agwọ nọ nákirika mgbe ahụ, ị sị m don't mind
(I told you there was fire on the mountain then, and you told me not to mind) L25-27

(Nwadike, 1999: 2)

Amaka employs sarcasm to mock the listener while expressing contempt. By using sarcasm or mock politeness strategy, she delivers a face-threatening message indirectly, avoiding direct responsibility for the impoliteness. In response to Ikechukwu's awkward and irrelevant question in line 18, Amaka skillfully uses the Igbo proverb in lines 23-24 to express her disdain and mockery. This approach

allows her to insult Ikechukwu subtly while maintaining plausible deniability, ensuring the intended impact is still felt.

I. Withholding politeness

18. Discourse context 9: Disagreement between Amaka and her son Chikwado

Discourse participants: Amaka and Chikwado

Amaka: Ike o o! Ike! Ike nne ya oo! L 19-21

Chikwado: Nne. L 22
(Mother)

Amaka: Bịa o L 23
(Come o)

Chikwado: Nne, Oọ gịni ka i na- akporo m? L 24-25
(Mother, why are you calling me?)

Amaka: Bịa ka i rie nri, nnaa L 26
(Come and eat, dear)

Chikwado: Riwe nri gi. Bidozie taa gawa, ririwe nri gi. L27-29
(Eat your food. From today onwards, continue eating your food)
Agaghi m edetukwa ihe o bula I siri onu ma i bughị ụzọ kọrọ m onye bụ nna m.
(I will not taste anything you cook if you tell me about my father) L 30-33

Amaka: Nnaa, o ruole n'ụdị ahụ? L 33-34
(My dear, has it gotten to that?)

Chikwado: Ihe o bula nwere oge, *Ukwa ruo oge ya o daa.* L 35-37
(There is time for everything). (Nwadike, 1989: 50-51)

Chikwado's refusal to express gratitude for his mother's offer of food serves as a strategic expression of his resolve and defiance against his mother for withholding information about his father. This withholding of politeness is effectively conveyed through his intentional refrain from utilising the polite language of "thank you", which is the usual and polite act after receiving food as anticipated by his mother. By omitting politeness, he deliberately signals his frustration while expressing his determination to obtain the information he seeks using the proverbs in lines 36-37.

Summary and Conclusion

The importance of proverbs to the Igbo people cannot be overemphasised, as they significantly contribute to the rich tapestry of Igbo culture. Serving as an indirect yet powerful means of communication, their non-compositional nature allows speakers to convey thoughts and emotions through connotations. This study examines how Igbo proverbs express politeness and impoliteness by analysing instances of proverb use in different discourses within these two novels: *Onye Kpaa Nkụ Ahụhụ* and *Enyi Mere Enyi Ya*.

The proverbs are categorised under the different politeness and impoliteness strategies, which include bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm/mock politeness, and withholding politeness. This classification highlights the pragmatic functions of proverbs in achieving diverse communicative goals.

The study demonstrates that the contrast between politeness and impoliteness highlights the complexities of social relationships, revealing how Igbo proverbs, as versatile linguistic tools, manage harmony and conflict through their categorisation. Their adaptability allows them to uphold social decorum while also provoking thought. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of proverbs in human communication, offering insights for future research in cross-cultural contexts.

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