

## LINGUISTIC SEXISM: PERSPECTIVES FROM IGBO PROVERBS

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### **Abstract**

*This work aims at investigating linguistic sexism in Igbo as an evidence of a symbiotic relationship that exists between language and culture. One of the apparent instances of linguistic sexism is found in the use of Igbo proverbs. The Igbo proverbs are an embodiment of the Igbo worldview which encourages male domination over the female. This work discusses the Igbo sexist proverbs in two ways. First, it attempts to give a literal and contextual analysis of the Igbo sexist proverbs using the social construct theory. Second, it assesses the attitude of the Igbo natives towards these sexist proverbs using a quantitative approach that cuts across different genders, age groups and social classes. The data for this study are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Our findings show that sexist Igbo proverbs are mostly targeted at the female gender. An analysis of most of the identified sexist proverbs show that their meaning and usage are not based on current physical reality but rather, on a collaborative consensus aimed at perpetuating negative gender stereotypes and promoting the patriarchal culture of the Igbo society. Based on our questionnaire however, a positive shift is observed in the disposition of the younger generation towards the use of the Igbo sexist proverbs, resulting from exposure and enlightenment on the issue of gender equality.*

**Keywords:** Igbo proverbs, Social Construct Theory, Linguistic sexism, Language and culture

### **Introduction**

The interplay between language and culture manifests in diverse ways. Linguistic sexism serves as evidence of the symbiotic relationship that exists between language and culture via the use of sexist proverbs. This work focuses on the study of sexist Igbo proverbs as a

linguistic tool for the gender oppression fuelled by the misogynistic and patriarchal culture of the Igbo society, and how these proverbs in turn, perpetuate the continuity of male dominance in the Igbo society. Igbo is a Benue-Congo language mainly spoken in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. The Igbo communities are found in five Eastern States: Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, and partly in Delta and Rivers states. The Igbo language is rich in proverbs. This is evident not only in everyday conversations, but also in the oral and written literature. The Igbo proverbs succinctly capture the attitude, values, and belief system embodied in the Igbo world view.

Igbo proverbs have been studied by a number of scholars. Some of them include: Emenanjo (1972), Ogbalu (1978), Nwachukwu Agbada (2002), Mmadike ((2014). Ogbalu (1978) offers a documentation of Igbo proverbs in their original form for posterity. Mmadike (2014) discusses the Igbo perception of womanhood via the use of proverbs. The others analyse proverbs from the poetic, oratory, aesthetic and structural point of view. This research differs from the existing literature on Igbo proverbs on two counts. First, it aims at a literal and contextual analysis of select proverbs with sexist undertones. Second, it uses a quantitative approach to ascertain the current disposition of the Igbo society towards the use of the identified sexist proverbs.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2.0 gives an overview of the relevant literature and the theoretical underpinning of this study. Section 3.0 presents a highlight of the methodology used in the research. In §4.0 the qualitative and quantitative data are presented and analysed. This is followed by the summary and conclusion in §5.0.

## **Theoretical Backdrop**

### ***The Concept of Sexism and Linguistic Sexism***

Sexism refers to discrimination or prejudice against a person or group based on their gender. It serves to maintain status and power differences between groups in the society (see Leaper & Brown 2014). According to Johnson (2012) sexism could also be viewed as ideologies and practices that identify and denigrate certain capacities and dispositions as gendered attributes. Linguistic sexism refers to the discriminatory or prejudiced use of language against members of the opposite sex, typically women. The Igbo society and culture is replete with sexist practices which are exhibited in their traditional laws/belief, folklores, music, and proverbs. While some of these practices (such as the disinheritance of females) are apparently sexist, some others (such as the use of certain proverbs) have subtle sexist undertones. Mills (2008) suggests that there are two types of sexism: overt and indirect. Overt sexism is clear and unambiguous while indirect sexism is based on pragmatics and the meaning and interpretation of utterances. She argues that indirect

sexism is extremely common and therefore requires new ways of challenging and analysing its usage in language. Across languages, indirect sexism manifest in a diverse ways (see Xiaolan 2006, Mills 2008). In English for instance, the manifestations of indirect sexism could be found in presuppositions, humour in TV programs, jokes and advertisements. In Igbo, indirect sexism is evident in the use of proverbs.

Although instances of indirect sexism are purported to be common, there seems to be a lack of consensus on what is considered sexist or not. This partly informs our inclusion of a research survey that samples the opinion of respondents on the sexist status of select Igbo proverbs. In this work, we consider the use of some Igbo proverbs as a form of indirect sexism encoded in language and used in cultural communication. Sexist proverbs are of course not peculiar to Igbo. Such proverbs are found in other African languages such as Yoruba (see Balogun 2010).

### **The Igbo Proverbs**

A proverb is part of language that reflects social customs and human psychological ideas of a culture. It enquires into the nature of things, the philosophy of life, family structure, social structure, taboos, politics, and moral values. Dickson & Mbosowo (2014) define proverbs as short popularly known statements which contain wisdom, truth, morals, socio-cultural precepts and heritage of a particular ethnic group. They serve as social charters condemning some practices while recommending others. These statements can be negative, positive or conditional. The negative statements usually assert what things are not or should not be done.

The Igbo language is rich in proverbs. This is evident not only in everyday conversations, but also in Igbo themed oral/folk and written literature. The Igbos regard proverbs as an essential part of their cultural communication. The oratory eloquence of a speaker (especially the elderly) in the use of proverbs is seen to an extent, as a measure of one's wisdom and communicative competence. The Igbo proverbs succinctly capture the attitude, values, and belief system embodied in the Igbo world view. In the Igbo society the use of proverbs is very prominent during village meetings, traditional ceremonies/festivals, marriage rites, and dispute settlement and so on. The elders or educated elites most times use proverbs as rhetoric statement or as a euphemistic way of telling otherwise harsh truths.

One of the basic characteristics of language is that it reflects the culture of its speakers. Language provides man a means of not only expressing himself but also transmitting his cultural heritage from one generation to the next. The ability of humans to transmit culture through the medium of language is frequently exploited, most of the time,

unconsciously by users of language. The Igbo society and culture is deeply patriarchal, encouraging male domination and the relegation of women. This aspect of the Igbo culture is entrenched in Igbo proverbs. In other words, the culture of gender discrimination, particularly against women, is propagated by the use of sexist proverbs which in turn, influences socialization negatively.

### **Theoretical Approach (Social Constructionism)**

The social construct theory was introduced in Berger & Luckman (1966) following the works of thinkers such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead. This theory is based on the premise that certain ideas about physical reality arise from collaborative consensus rather than pure observation of physical reality. Social construct theory comprises of social constructionism and social constructivism. Although these two tend to be used interchangeably, this study adopts constructionism theory which asserts that knowledge and truth are social creation not discovered by the mind; this differs from constructivism which states that “each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes” (Andrew 2012). The choice of social constructionism for this research is equally prompted by the fact that it uncovers ways in which individuals and people participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. To this effect, “social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (Burr 1995). With this theory, this study will investigate how proverbs as forms of language and communication have been constructed in Igbo society to portray a derogatory image of women.

Social constructionism can be linked to the interpretivist paradigm that nurtures the “goal of understanding the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it” (Andrews 2012). In common with an interpretivist philosophical view, constructionism pays attention to the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt 2003). Social constructionism maintains some distinct idea from interpretivism in its assertion that “taken-for-granted realities are cultivated from interactions between and among social agents; furthermore, reality is not some objective truth waiting to be uncovered through positivist scientific inquiry; rather, there can be multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy” (Berger & Luckmann 1966). In general, constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to being created.

In social constructionism term, people work closely together in order to construct an artifact. Berger and Luckmann (1991) view “society as existing both as objective and subjective reality; the former is brought about through the interaction of people with the social world; with this social world, in turn, influencing people resulting in routinization

and habitualization.” By this, a frequently repeated action becomes a pattern and subsequently gets reproduced without much effort as a norm. “In time, the meaning of the habitualization becomes embedded as routines, forming a general store of knowledge and this is institutionalized by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Similarly, Lock & Strong (2010) state that social constructionism embodies the view that meanings and understanding have their beginnings in social interaction, in shared agreements as to what symbolic forms are taken to be.

The social construct theory engages itself with meaning and understanding as a central vital aspect of human activities in coming to terms with reality. From the understanding of social constructionism, objective reality is questionable since reality is a creation of people in their social interactions. Social constructionism pays attention to the artifacts that are generally created through social interactions of a group of people. In other words, people construct social artefacts such as proverbs via social interaction. The social construct theory creates room to question the common knowledge and understanding about women as perpetuated by African proverbs, particularly of the Igbo culture.

In this research, the Igbo proverb is seen as a cultural artefact which could have both connotative and denotative meanings determined by the society and adopted by the inhabitants of that society with respect to how they view or deal with an event or the world. In constructionist terms, knowledge and many aspects of the world are not real; they exist because we give them a reality through agreement. “The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific” (Burr 1995). This implies that human beings construct knowledge and it can never be objective.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The Igbo proverbs studied are sourced from existing oral and written Igbo texts/literature. The primary data are obtained from a quantitative research survey, using a structured questionnaire centred on the usage of the sexist Igbo proverbs. This survey aims at sampling the opinions of a representative set of individuals from a population that cuts across gender, age, and social class. The questionnaire is partly designed using a 5point Likert scale: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), SD (strongly disagree) and D (disagree). The questionnaire is administered 24 respondents which include 12 males (6 elderly males, 6 young males) and 12 females (6 elderly females, 6 young females) from the sample population. The target population for the study comprises of Igbo speaking individuals

between the ages of 20 and above. The sampled opinions of the respondents are based on their perception of the identified sexist proverbs.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

This section is in two parts. In the first part, we outline and analyse select sexist Igbo proverbs, outlining their literal meaning, function and context of use. In the second part, we present findings from a quantitative survey aimed at sampling the opinions of a representative set of individuals the Igbo society on their attitude or disposition toward the meaning and use of sexist proverbs.

### Sexist Igbo Proverbs

In table 1 below, we present ten sexist Igbo proverbs alongside their literal and contextual meanings.

**Table 1**

	<b>Igbo Proverb</b>	<b>Literal Meaning</b>	<b>Function and Context of Use</b>
1)	<b>Nwata nwaanyi zuru tooro onwe ya</b>	<b>A child raised by a woman has no guardian</b>	This proverb is used to reinforce the cultural idea that women are incapable of successfully raising a child OR the indispensability of the male in a family unit.
2)	Ubochi nwaanyi muru nwoke ka o muru onye kariji ya.	The day a woman births a son is the day that she births the one greater than her	This proverb serves to reinforce the idea of gender superiority of males over females for no other reason than having male genitals.
3)	Ma nwaanyi eji umuaka ma o jighi, o gbochighi ya igbu di ya	A woman would kill her husband irrespective of having children with him or not.	This proverb portrays the belief that nothing holds back an evil person from perpetuating his/her evil deeds.  The literal meaning is however, rooted in an old Igbo practice where women are held responsible/accountable for their husbands' death until proven otherwise via demeaning widowhood rites.
4)	Ugwu nwaanyi bu di ya	A woman's honour or prestige is her husband	This proverb serves to reinforce the idea that a woman's honour or prestige is hinged on marriage (having a husband); That a woman is nothing without a husband not minding her achievements

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5)	Agbọhọ mejuru, o tinye ike n'usekwu	After all said and done, a lady must enter the kitchen	This proverb connotes the idea that a woman's achievements culminates in the kitchen. It is used to reinforce rigidity in gender roles; that no matter the achievement or preoccupation of a woman, cooking/domestic chores is her main and sole responsibility.
6)	Nwanyị makalia di ya n'uzo, ihe chere di ya ewere ya	If a woman ahead of her husband, whatever awaits her husband will befall her.	The visual imagery and conceptualisation of this proverb emanates from the culture of subservience expected of women. Igbo women are socialised to follow the lead of a man (husband) but never take the lead. At the connotative level, this proverb is generally used to teach the virtue of patience; one shouldn't run faster than one's shadow.
7)	Nwoke luchaa oḡu nwanỵ enwere akụko	Men fight wars while women tell tales of wars fought.	This proverb portrays women as being gossips and talkative who are only useful at spreading the news of men's achievements. They are presumed to not partake in the struggle to achieving the success.
8)	O buru na nwanỵ asi na ya na nwoke ha, ya nyulie amiri elu.	A woman who claims she is equal to a man should urinate upwards	This proverb propagates the superiority of the male gender on the basis of differences in biological and physical features or capacities. It is also used euphemistically, when a person who is deemed incapable of performing a certain task claims otherwise.
9)	Nwa agboho nokaria na be nne ya, oghoro amosu.	If a lady stays long as a spinster in her father's house, she becomes a witch.	This proverb serves to mount unhealthy pressure on you women to get married. A spinster is seen as evil if she remains unmarried for a long time.
10)	Nwaanyị karịa 'onye mụrụ', a juba ya 'onye ga alụ?'	If a lady outgrows the question 'who is your father?', she is pressured to answer the question 'who is your husband?'	Conveys the idea that a woman is expected to be married at a certain change. At every point, the identity of a female is tied to the male figure in her life.

### **Sexist Igbo Proverbs and the Social Construct Theory**

As earlier stated, this study adopts the social construct theory as a theoretical base to explain how sexist proverbs have created a false and negative reality about women in the Igbo society. Social constructionism holds that social reality is an inter-subjective construction created through communicative interaction. This means that people's perception of reality is shaped and influenced by language use during social interaction and in turn, language use reflects people's perception of reality. Proverbs in the Igbo society are believed to be wise words of the elders or ancestors that serve to entrench values and beliefs that are considered sacrosanct in the Igbo culture. The use of sexist proverbs is one of the many ways by which the Igbo society upholds and propagates their patriarchal values of male domination and female oppression.

A review of the sexist Igbo proverbs in table 1.0 show that their meaning and usage are not based on current physical reality and therefore have no place in today's world. Most of the messages that they proverbs convey are mere assumptions that more often than not, contain no elements of truth. For instance, the proverb illustrated in example (1), portray the idea that women are incapable of independently raising a child. Nothing could be farther from the truth in today's world as we know it. There are numerous stories of successful children raised solely by single mothers within and beyond the Igbo society. Proverbs (4), (9) and (10) are hinged on the premise that marriage defines a woman. Particularly, the proverb exemplified in (4) reinforces the idea that it is only marriage that confers an Igbo woman the respect that she deserves. In reality however, people and particularly, women are, and should be considered respectable and honourable members of the society based on their character, achievements and positive contributions to the society. Again, contrary to the stereotype of male superiority propagated on the basis of biological and physical gender differences as shown in (8), there is no proof that lends support to the idea that sex differentiation confers superiority on a particular gender. If one follows the logic behind this proverb, it could then be argued that pregnancy and childbirth confers on women a superior status as well. Finally, the proverb illustrated in (5) amongst other things, presumes and reinforces rigidity in gender roles. However, current physical reality tells us that gender roles are becoming more flexible than rigid. In recent times, many women are providers in their home while many men are more likely to engage in domestic chores and child care. In other words, many men and women in modern marriages take a more open minded approach around gender roles.

From the foregoing, it appears that the negative gender stereotypes perpetuated by sexist Igbo proverbs are not based on the observation of current physical reality but rather emanate from a collaborative consensus aimed at preserving a patriarchal culture that is



detrimental to women. Since these sexist proverbs have no positive values; they only serve to create a false and negative image of a particular demographic, it follows that the use of these sexist proverbs should be discouraged and considered abominable.

### **A Quantitative Survey**

In this survey, a structured questionnaire is administered to the respondents who are Igbo natives to ascertain their attitude or disposition towards the use of sexist Igbo proverbs. All the respondents have some level of formal education. Four (4) respondents had secondary school certificate, and twenty (20) respondents have already have attained to the level of tertiary education. The respondents use a likert scale to answer the questions administered to them. In the tables below, questions contained in the questionnaire, as well as the tabulated responses of the respondents are presented.

**Table 2**

<b>Igbo proverbs are very useful tools in conversation</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	9	37%
Agreed	15	63%
Strongly disagreed	0	0%
Disagreed	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3**

<b>Igbo proverbs embody the worldview of the Igbo people</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	8	33%
Agreed	16	67%
Strongly disagreed	0	0%

**Table 4**

<b>Nwata nwaanyi zuru tooro onwe ya (A child raised by a woman has no trainer/guardian)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	6	25%
Agreed	6	25%
Strongly disagreed	4	17%
Disagreed	8	33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 5**

<b>Ma nwaanyi eji umuaka ma o jighi, o gbochighi ya igbu di ya (In every circumstance, good or bad, women are seen as evil)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	2	8%
Agreed	5	21%
Strongly disagreed	12	50%
Disagreed	5	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 6**

<b>Ugwu nwaanyi bu di (A woman's honour or prestige is her husband)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	3	13%
Agreed	8	33%
Strongly disagreed	8	33%
Disagreed	5	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 7**

<b>Agbọhọ mejuru, o tinye ike n'usekwu (A woman's achievements culminate in the kitchen)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	0	0%
Agreed	6	25%
Strongly disagreed	14	58%
Disagreed	4	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 8**

<b>Nwanyị makalia di ya n'uzo, ihe chere di ya ewere ya (A woman is should be submissive to her husband)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	6	25%
Agreed	12	50%
Strongly disagreed	6	25%
Disagreed	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 9**

<b>Nwoke lụchaa ọgụ nwaanyi enwere akụkọ (Men fight wars while women tell tales of wars fought)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	3	13%
Agreed	10	41%
Strongly disagreed	7	29%
Disagreed	4	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 10**

<b>Ọ bụrụ na nwaanyi asi na ya na nwoke ha, ya nyulie amiri elu. (A woman cannot equal (or contend with) a man)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	2	8%
Agreed	4	17%
Strongly disagreed	13	54%
Disagreed	5	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 11**

<b>Nwa agboghọ nọkaria na be nne ya, ọ ghọrọ amosu (A woman is considered evil if she remains a spinster for a long time)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	0	0%
Agreed	7	29%
Strongly disagreed	11	46%
Disagreed	6	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 12**

<b>Nwaanyi karịa onye mụrụ, a juba onye ga-alụ. (A woman is expected to be married at a certain age)</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	8	33%
Agreed	15	63%
Strongly disagreed	1	4%
Disagreed	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 13**

<b>Some Igbo proverbs promote negative gender stereotype</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	9	37%
Agreed	12	25%
Strongly disagreed	0	0%
Disagreed	3	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 14**

<b>Igbo proverbs demean women</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	4	17%
Agreed	14	58%
Strongly disagreed	0	0%
Disagreed	6	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 15**

<b>The male-dominant nature of the Igbo society fuels the prevalence of these derogatory proverbs</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agreed	7	29%
Agreed	11	46%
Strongly disagreed	2	8%
Disagreed	4	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 16**

<b>Do you think the usage of sexist Igbo proverbs should be discouraged?</b>		
<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	15	63%
No	9	37%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

All our respondents agree that Igbo proverbs convey the values and beliefs of the Igbo society and culture (see table 3). However, variation is observed in their opinions on Igbo sexist proverbs. About 75% of our respondents agree that the patriarchal nature of the Igbo society fuels the prevalence of these derogatory sexist proverbs (see table 15). From the responses given, it appears that the Igbo natives tend to be more tolerant of mild sexist proverbs (see tables 8, 9, 12) than extreme ones as shown in tables (5, 7, 10, 11 ). Although 75% of our respondents acknowledge that Igbo sexist verbs demean women (see table 14), but only 63% are willing to discourage their usage (see table 16). The 63% are mostly made up of our youthful respondents. Findings from our survey show that more Igbo natives, particularly of the younger demographic, are becoming less willing to normalise or promote the use of demeaning proverbs irrespective of the information or moral values that they convey.

Ochs as cited in Holmes and Meyerholf (2003) state that members of the society are agents of culture than just bearers of culture handed down to them and encoded in grammatical form. This implies that individuals as agents of culture have an active role to play in curbing the use of sexist proverbs by being more sensitive and selective in choosing their forms of expression. Following the above, it is likely that overtime, there could be a more drastic decline in the use and upholding of the Igbo sexist proverbs given the surge in enlightenment, exposure and knowledge available on gender related issues, especially amongst the younger demographic

## Conclusion

This work has investigated linguistic sexism via the study of sexist Igbo proverbs using the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The social construct theory was adopted as the basis for arguing that the use of sexist Igbo proverbs is fuelled by a collaborative consensus of a patriarchal society rather than by facts or current physical reality. It is observed that the use of sexist proverbs is one of the many ways that the Igbo society preserves the patriarchal culture of male superiority and female gender subjugation. However, unlike Mmadike (2014) who opines that it is nearly impossible to change the cultural stereotype associated with the use of sexist proverbs, we propose that Igbo sexist proverbs be seen as cultural resources that are amenable to positive change as the human culture and civilization evolve. Most of the sexist proverbs studied in this work are not only outdated but create a false and negative reality about women in the society and therefore, should be discarded.

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