

## A critical exposition of the logical roles of proverbs in Igbo (African) language and thought

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### Abstract

Proverbs have embedded logical principles which manifest in the use of words in a particular language, and also reveal the structure of language in a philosophical discourse. This explains why proverbs are conceived, among the Igbo speaking people of West Africa, as the oil with which words are eaten. This implies among other things that; proverbs are used to communicate truth about reality in a given culture. Using the Igbo proverbs as reference point, I argue from the point of view of natural logic that the African who is skillful in the use of proverbs is a master of the logic of the language of his thought and hence, logical in the interpretation of reality in his philosophical place. Employing the method of exposition, critical analysis and deduction, I present strong evidence to show that contemporary African philosophers of language need to investigate the logical principles embedded in African proverbs as part of the ongoing hermeneutical project. This paper is one of such attempts.

**Keywords:** proverbs, logic, language, Igbo reality and African thought

### Introduction

What is the nature and function of proverbs in African language? And what benefits does one stand to gain by the application of the proverbs of the language of his/her thought and discourse? In response to these questions, I argue that proverbs have embedded logical principles that guide the use of words as well as reveal the basic structure of language in thought and discourse (speech). With reference to the use and application of proverbs among the Igbo speaking people of West African region, I argue that proverbs play logical roles in African language and thought. To further substantiate this claim, I argue that an African who is skillful in the use of proverbs in speech and thought (reasoning), is a master of the logic of his/her language and hence better equipped to understand and interpret the ontological nature of his world.

The paper is distinctive in that, it does not perceive proverbs merely as a source of African Philosophy or thought system as C.S. Momoh presupposes nor as merely play a symbolic function in the expression of traditional beliefs as N. K. Dzobo thinks. Momoh avers that African proverbs constitute one important and strategic area where African philosophy can be extracted, (Momoh, *Philosophy in African Proverbs*, 1989, pp 231-253) <sup>[14, 15]</sup>. Dzobo on the other hand, says that proverbs are symbols used in traditional society to express beliefs, values and feelings (Dzobo 1992, pp 94) <sup>[5]</sup>. While recognizing the relevance of these earlier views, I have gone beyond them, and offer similar views to establish the fact that proverbs are by structure inherently logical and hence present themselves as logical principles which guide the (Igbo) African in the use of words in his thought and speech. Logic is here conceived as natural rather than artificial. C. S. Momoh describes natural logic as the critical, discriminating, rational and reasonable discussion and discourse in natural language (Momoh, *the Logic Question* 1989 pp 167-190) <sup>[14, 15]</sup>.

Against this backdrop, I conclude that proverbs are not simply traditional African concern but a serious concern for contemporary African logicians and philosophers of

language. Effort therefore should be geared towards understanding and mastering the logical dynamics of proverbs if African thought and language must continue to be relevant in contemporary times.

Using the methods of exposition, critical analysis and deduction, I begin with the exposition of the nature and relationship between logic, language and thought, then I proceed to clarify the notion of proverbs in which case, I expose its logical nature in articulating thought and speech in African language which further signifies its place and function in African language and philosophy.

### Logic, Language and Thought in African Philosophy

The etymological definition of logic as “speech or thought” having been drawn from the Greek word “logos” suggests that logic is related to language in a special way. Language could be seen as a combination of words, sounds and/or signs for the purpose of communication. Words make up propositions and proposition according to Wittgenstein is a picture of reality (Wittgenstein 1993, pp 19) <sup>[27]</sup>. Language is primarily used to communicate or present realities to others. It is not possible for one to always present the entire reality ostensively, this is because no individual physical or mental space can accommodate all the realities the individual want to talk about at a particular time. What is only possible is to present the ideas of these realities in symbolic form called language. Thus, every proposition is a reality’s representation. Language is a means of communicating something to others, but not all communications in language involve reasoning (Thompson 1996, pp 2) <sup>[23]</sup>. This is why the primary concern of the logician is with the informative use of language. The other functions: directive, evaluative, emotive and so on are of no relevance to the work of the logician, since they cannot be used as a means of conveying evidence.

Thinking is patterned by language and language determines one’s own view of the world (Eko 1999, pp 130). Thinking is a matter of different tongues (Tony, 1974, pp 22) <sup>[24]</sup>. What this means is that thinking or thought is embedded in a

language. In other words, thought is arranged or patterned by language in that, language is the determinant of a person's thought of the world or perception of reality. Argument is thus, one way in which people use language when they are attempting to communicate a thought or to persuade or convince others of the truth of something; that is to say, when they have a particular purpose. In relating logic to language, it must be borne in mind that logic concerns itself with the patterns of thought or reasoning which are so highly generalized that they are not limited to anyone language but to all possible languages. This is to say therefore that as language is the tool of the logician and the vehicle of his thought (Okolo 1993, pp 13) <sup>[20]</sup>, so also is African language the tool of African philosophy and logic and the vehicle of African thought (Enyimba, *The Role of Logic* 2003, pp 51) <sup>[10]</sup>. Logic is interested in the relationship between the expressive and representative functions of language. According to Wittgenstein, "the limit of one's language is the limit of his world" (1995, pp 56). Thus, it follows that the limit of African (world) philosophy is the limit of African language. This further corroborates the assertion that thinking is done in a language (Wittgenstein, 1993 pp 57) <sup>[27]</sup>. In practice, language is always more or less vague, so that what we assert is never quite precise, logic then, tries to deal with this problem in terms of symbolism. Again, Wittgenstein's reasoning becomes significant here. For him, a proposition (language) is a picture of reality, for if I understand a proposition, I know the situation that it represents, and I understand the proposition without having had its sense explained to me (Wittgenstein, 1993 pp 21) <sup>[27]</sup>.

In Kwame Gyekye's view, logic of some sort is behind the thought and action of every people. It constitutes the intellectual sheet anchor of their life in its totality (1992 pp 278). This means that, there is a relationship between logic and the thought pattern of a people. Infact, logic is at the foundation of such thought and attendant action. Logic in African philosophy and language deals with the application of logic to a people's thought pattern, to the world and culture of the African, to his language and objects of his reference. Logic in African philosophy is meaningful in the sense that logic deals with thinking, language or inference and these are usually with reference to one's world and culture.

The concept of thought encapsulates both the philosophical and the unphilosophical (ideas and views such as dreams, illusions, recalling etc) and therefore is ambiguous. However, in this context or as used in this work, it means the manner and process of forming ideas, concepts, and judgments and hence the process of arriving at a conclusion, belief and holding opinion as to the truth or nature of anything whatsoever. Thought here also refers to "the nature of such ideas, concepts, beliefs and opinions whether expressly stated, crystallized in action or implied by it" (Nwala 1985, pp 76) <sup>[16]</sup>. For Ogunmodede, thought is the capacity for self-consciousness, awareness and intellectual knowledge. It is also a capacity to reflect critically on our being and the other entities in the external world or universe (1998, pp 13). He further exposes the relationship between thought and language in the following words:

It is through language that man thinks and reflects on reality. The interdependence and interrelationship between thought and language is so intrinsic that one cannot exist without the other, also one is identical with and can be

transformed into the other in the cognitive act at and process of thinking and perception (Ogunmodede 1998, pp 13).

In fact, it is not always the case that the African explains things by supernatural causation, in most cases things are explained by their place and function in the environment. Thus, the African reasons not with abstract premises but with difficulties he encounters in real life. In other words, his reasoning or thought is a reaction, the result of coming face to face with the facts of life. This is thought. Therefore, thinking is social it occurs in a given cultural milieu" (Okolo 1993, pp xii). Thus, logic, language and thought are co-related in African philosophy as in elsewhere. Logic and language have one thing in common, and that is the fact that they are basic instruments of the faculty of thought through which human beings as self-conscious individuals, maintain, a balance between themselves and their world. It is based on both operations, that man explores the world, gives meaning to it and makes his meaning accessible to others. Logic is also the foundation on which language is built and language is the vehicle through which logic is expressed. Based on its capacity to deal most directly with the art of sound or ordered, coherent and lucid reasoning, and logic binds together and orders even man's innermost subjects and mental discourse. It gives the human mind its character of identifying things and relating them to other things. It enables the mental operation to relate concepts to each other and form meaning (Asouzu, IkwaOgwe 2007, pp 86) <sup>[2]</sup>. Evidently, in the clarification and understanding of nature, the language of each people is employed in the analysis of their experiences (Nze 1998, pp 130; Sydney 1902, pp 6) <sup>[17]</sup>. In what follows I present argument to show how proverbs perform those logical functions, but before then, I analyze the concept of proverbs.

### **The Logical Nature of Proverbs in Igbo (African) Language and Thought**

The word proverb is drawn from the Latin word "proverbium" which implies a simple and concrete saying popularly known and which expresses truth that is based on practical experience of a people. For N. K. Dzobo, proverbs are very popular devices used to state certain general truths about life (1995, pp 95). This is the sense of proverb which a particular Yoruba proverb expresses. Accordingly, a proverb is a horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas. In otherwise, proverbs help us to conceive and understand the essence of things, of human relationships, or events, of life's situations and of the behaviour patterns of people. In an attempt to expose the nature of proverbs, Asira and Ogar opine that proverbs are often borrowed from similar languages and cultures and sometimes come down to the present through more than one language (2012, pp 48). For them, although almost every culture has examples of its own proverbs, the indispensableness of proverbs in discrete human endeavour and disciplines cannot be overlooked.

Paremiology which is the study of proverbs, can be dated back as far as Aristotle. Paremiography on the other hand is the collection of proverbs. According to Asira and Ogar, Wolfing Meder, a prominent American scholar, defines proverb as a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphysical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (2012, pp 45). According to Aristotle, as quoted by D. E. Irabor and cited

by C. S. Momoh, “a proverb is a remnant from old philosophy, preserved amid countless destructions by reason of its brevity and fitness for use” (Philosophy in African Proverbs, 1989, pp 232) <sup>[14, 15]</sup>. It is this quality of brevity and fitness for use that enables proverbs to perform the role of Occam’s razor in language (speech) and thought. Occam’s razor is the Principle which states that hypothetical realities must be kept to a minimum, that the simplest explanation is the best” (Sahakian 1968, Pp 116) <sup>[21]</sup>. In other words, entities are not to be multiplied unnecessarily. This further implies that, whatever that can be said, must be said in as few words as possible.

Thus with proverbs, an information, idea or thought can be expressed in as few words as possible. This is one of the logical roles of proverbs in African language and thought. For instance, the logical nature of proverbs in Igbo African language is made manifest in the way and manner words are used in expressing thoughts and ideas. Chukwuelobe expresses similar thought when he states that, the language of proverb is the nucleus, which is the gathering of the thoughts and wisdom of the Igbo traditional people. This language is deeply philosophical and ethical and is condensed in a few words. The succinct and poetic nature of language of proverb is a synopsis of a certain complex idea. Hence, the complex idea which is summarized in the proverb with a view to retaining its core and content, is recalled at the appropriate moment in the speaking of a language (1995, Pp 26). The point being made here is that the language of proverbs is very precise and direct in the expression of ideas without losing its philosophical rigor and criticality. Obiechina seems to allude to this line of reasoning when he avers that the language of proverbs “forms a mnemonic device in societies in which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory” (1980 Pp 156).

However, in addition to Chukwuelobe’s assertion that proverbs are deeply philosophical and ethical. It is argued in this work that, proverbs are not merely philosophical but are intricately logical in that its language provides a great deal of details and refinement to discourse and adds clarity and order to thought and speech. The structure of Igbo language is made bare through the use of proverbs in searching for truth about reality and in communicating same. Dzobo affirms this fact when he states that “if the connotative meaning of a proverb is grasped, it is found to be a vehicle used... to approach, apprehend and recollect reality... (1992, Pp 95) <sup>[5]</sup>. The import of the above assertion by Dzobo, which lends credence to my argument in this work is that, proverbs are very efficacious in communication, and their correct and persuasive use in speech is always taken as a sign of sound education, critical mindedness, cultural sophistication and wisdom. To further expose the logical nature of proverbs in Igbo language and thought, I shall present argumentatively some of the important uses and functions of proverbs. But before then, it must be noted that my discussion of proverbs as the logic of Igbo-African language and thought is within the context of natural logic. As C. B. Nze rightly observes, “there is logic, natural logic in Igbo language” (1998, Pp 134) <sup>[17]</sup>. For him, this is because when one participates in the social, economic or religious life of the Igbo, one will develop and have a firm conviction that the Igbo people... think and form ideas in their own language.

By natural logic, it is meant that type of logic that is

basically concerned with both the form and the material contents (the semantic meaning) of propositions in arguments expressed in natural languages (Victor 2012, Pp 51) <sup>[26]</sup>. According to this scholar, informal logic is also called material logic or natural logic. By way of clarification, this scholar, affirms that while formal logic is essentially concerned with the syntactic relation, that is, the formal structure or form of valid arguments, informal logic is essentially with the semantic relations that is, the functional meaning and content of arguments (Victor 2012, Pp 51) <sup>[26]</sup>. Earlier in the introduction to this paper, I stated clearly that C. S. Momoh’s conception of logic as natural forms the bedrock of my discussion of proverbs as logic in (Igbo) African language and thought. According to Momoh therefore, it is obvious that discussion of the logic question in African philosophy must consider these two senses, natural logic and artificial logic. It will be argued that the competent individual in any society is logical in the first sense (1989 Pp 167). Continuing, he asserts that logic in this first sense is concerned with clarity of expression, the avoidance of fallacy, vagueness, ambiguity and contradiction in natural language (1989, Pp 174). Momoh’s argument here is that in everyday usage of natural language, we talk of a person as being logical if he is reasonable, sensible, and intelligent; if he can unemotionally and critically evaluate evidence or a situation, if he can avoid contradiction, inconsistency and incoherence, or if he can hold a point of view, argue for and from it, summon counter – examples and answer objections (1998, Pp 174).

One obvious implication of Momoh’s conception of natural logic which I subscribe to in this paper is that, logic is concerned with the clarity of expression and of course thought, the avoidance of fallacies, vagueness, ambiguity and contradictions in natural language. If this is so, then the language of proverbs is fundamentally logical in this sense. In what follows, I shall present proverbs as the logic of Igbo-African language and thought by discussing the important uses and functions of proverbs in language and thought and by making reference to some proverbs from Igbo language and other African languages.

### **Proverbs as the Logic of (Igbo) African Language and Thought**

One of the logical roles of proverbs in Igbo language and thoughts is the fact that it provides itself as available vehicle for the expression of abstract and logical truths. In other words, proverbs are generally used to communicate truths that may be abstract and difficult to grasp. Such a proverb usually dramatizes and configures the bare truth in everyday life and world, and as such stimulates the imagination and challenges the understanding (Dzobo 1992, Pp 95) <sup>[5]</sup>. Lending credence to the above, Fayemi, A. K. establishes a close nexus between logic and language, by using Yoruba language as an example, he shows that there are some elements of formal logical inferential rules and principle embedded in Yoruba proverbial thought. For him, as a matter of universal application, these logical principles are conventionally used in Yoruba cultural milieu to evaluate discourse, reasoning and thought (Fayemi 2010, Pp 1) <sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, the ability of African proverbial language to search for, to ascertain and to express abstract and logical truth is an evidence of the logical nature and role of proverbs in African language and thought.

For instance, the Igbo proverbial statement - “Ndid ka

mma” (patience is the best conduct), expresses the virtue of the abstract idea of patience. A corollary of this in Efik proverb is rendered thus, “Ime edi edu” (which means, patience is good conduct” (Edet 2004, Pp 16) <sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, considering the relationship we had established between logic and language, one can say that logic does not provide a set of rules externally related to language and argument, but is something contained within language (Uduma 2009, Pp 172) <sup>[25]</sup>, and this is found in the proverbial language of the people. For the Igbo-African, the language of proverbs helps to form the logical structure of their thought. Thus, the (Igbo) African society, it’s thought and worldview (reality) is built around its language, and the proverbial language is very instrumental in this regard. C. S. Momoh paints a succinct picture of the role and importance of proverbs in understanding African world view and making sense of their reality. According to him; Computer, libraries and books are also in some respects modern day equivalent of proverbs; through them (proverbs) The traditional African stores his culture, learning, knowledge, science, philosophy (his reasoning pattern) and indeed his entire civilization for easy references and easy retrieval. Traditionally, one can say that what is not in ‘a people’ s proverbs does not exist’, what is not in a people’s proverbs is not real. One can also go on to say that, for the traditional African, what is not proverbializable, what cannot or what is not put in proverbs is not knowledge, for anything to be known it has to be put into proverbs... (Momoh, Philosophy in African Proverbs, 1989 Pp 235) <sup>[14, 15]</sup>.

The point that is noteworthy here is that, it is not only in the traditional African thought that, proverbs occupy the prominent place and perform these fundamental roles in the logical understanding of the African reality, but also in the new era of African philosophy and as part of the ongoing hermeneutical project in contemporary thought. For instance there is a logical relationship entrenched between the elders and youth in Igbo African worldview and this is made evident in the proverbs - “Echi di ime” or Odighi onye mara ihe echi bu”. These proverbs when interpreted implies that, “tomorrow is pregnant” or “no one knows tomorrow”. The logical import of these proverbs is that, there is a need for co-operation between elders and youth and in fact among all layers of humankind in the community since no one can claim to have a sole knowledge of the future and hence, able to pull through life alone

There are many other African proverbs that corroborate this popular logic of existence. Momoh attempts to show some of them from the proverbs of Auchi, Kusun and Yoruba peoples of Africa. Accordingly, in the case where an old person wants to take a young person for granted, Uchi proverb reminds him that “the man who thinks that it was all in his presence that the goat grew into a horse will have his stomach disembodied by the horse’s hoof”. This proverb evokes the logical principle of equanimity between the young and the old in Igbo society. A Kusun proverb that says that “when a fungus has outgrown its usefulness, it dies off to manure the younger ones which have grown in its place” and the Yoruba proverbs that says that the recognition that the wisdom of a young is as viable as that of an elder led to the founding of Ile-Ife in its present site” (Momoh, Philosophy in African Proverbs, 1989, Pp 238-239) <sup>[15]</sup>, reinforce the idea that “the young shall grow”.

N. K. Dzobo’s observation on the usefulness of proverbs in the world view of the Africans is very significant in

understanding the logical roles or nature of proverbs in African language. According to him, proverbs function as general guides to conduct and display of main culture orientations of indigenous African society (1992, Pp 96-98). The implication of Dzobo’s view in the above is that, with proverbial language, the African is able to distinguish good/right behaviour from bad/wrong behaviour. This is very significant in that human behaviour or conduct falls within the scope of what logic concerns itself with. In this sense, logic can be described as the study of the principles used in distinguishing human actions as right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Thus, human conduct can be said to be logical or illogical, right or wrong, sound or unsound. Some of the African proverbs which perform these logical roles of guiding human conduct and expressing societal or human values are presented with their underlying principles (Dzobo 1992, Pp 90 – 97) <sup>[5]</sup>:

There is no quarrel between the eye and sleep (Principle of Tolerance)

1. If you visit the country of frogs and you find them squatting, you must squat too even though you may find it inconvenient (The Principle of making adjustment in life)
2. You do not use your left hand to point the way to your father’s village (The Principle of appreciation and respect)
3. It is one’s deed that are counted, not one’s years (Value of creative/meaningful living)
4. Goodness sees itself; badness walks around (Value of satisfying human needs)
5. There is no wealth where there are no children (Value of Procreation).

It is in line with the idea that proverbial language expresses logical principle among other things in African thought that I have written elsewhere that “African logic deals with the application of logic to the world and custom of the African, to his language and objects of his reference (Enyimba, Nature of Logic in African Philosophy, 2011, Pp 157) <sup>[9]</sup> B. N. Eboh vividly affirms this by stating that “Igbo logic and of course African logic is judicial and applied and discoverable from the analysis of some disputed cases” (1983, Pp xxi). In otherwords, for Eboh, Igbo-African Logic is intrinsic in Igbo-African worldview and can be found among other things in situations of conflict or disputes and the language, manner and ways of settlement.

It is in proverbs that one finds the relationship between logic, language and reality in African place clearly expressed. This is evident when one construes logic to mean that practical science or pattern of thinking or thought as is found in language and everyday discourse and life of a people and which directs the mind in the discovery of truth. On the basis of the above argument, it follows, according to Chimakonam (2001, Pp 149) <sup>[3]</sup> that the word abomination is not just a word, but a logical term in African logic which means “counter logic and which in turn means anything from “invalid” to “incorrect reasoning”.

This is so because whenever the gods or spiritual aspect of African ontology is involved, certain exceptions are permitted or allowed to occur in the operation of some logical rules. This is what Chimakonam (2011, Pp 149) <sup>[3]</sup> means when he avers that, unlike in western logic, the idea of reasoning do not and cannot prevent or interfere with the interest of the gods or the ancestors who constantly meddle

with the affairs of men. Indeed, no African in his right mind dares to offend the gods. My interest in the arguments of Chimakonam above is that, these logical interplays, and intricacies are made possible and very clear through Igbo-African proverbs. They are made bare through the proverbial logic of the African people. Proverbs as stated earlier in this work are essential aspects of Igbo-African language and thought and which provide the logical discourse and accurate use of language in the interpretation of reality.

Even Chimakonam in the work referred to above (Why can't there be African logic? 2011, Pp 141-150), made reference to some Igbo logical proverbs to substantiate his point concerning the nature of African logic. These proverbs are very relevant here:

a. Onye kporo Nwunye Amadioha (god of thunder) n'ehihie, Amadioha ezute ya n'abali (whoever sleeps with Amadioha's wife in the day, shall face his consuming volcano at night).

b. Onyetara amu ebule ji ibi ugwo

(whoever eats the testicle of a ram is indebted to hynia)

Similarly, the logic of the Efik culture can also be found in their language which is flexible and rich in proverbs and has powerful descriptive power. In exposing the nature of logic in Efik language and thought, Francis (1992, Pp 32) <sup>[12]</sup> using some Efik proverbs identifies and analyses some logical fallacies which the Efik people take into cognizance in thought and praxis. According to him, the Efiks have some short formulae for the abusive variety of the fallacy of argumentum-ad-hominum, which is rendered in this form:

Ifuo enyemi ebiet anditoro

(This excreta really resembles the person that excreted it)

The implication here is that if someone is known to be a liar, everything he says is a lie. This is an error in reasoning which is called ad-hominum fallacy. Another logical reasoning which is clearly expressed in Efik proverb and which is commonly known and recognized by the Efiks is the Argumentum advericumdiam. The fallacy which appeals to authority is rendered thus:

Uyo obong edi osono, (the king's voice is the truth and final appeal).

In other words, a king is never wrong. In the Igbo experience, therefore the language of proverb is greatly esteemed such that a speaker who could use effectively and had a good command of proverbs was respected by his fellows and was often a leader in the community (Chukwuelobe 1995, Pp 26) <sup>[4]</sup>. This is why my position in this paper is that, the African who is skillful in the use of proverbs is a master of the logic of his thought and hence logical in the interpretation of his reality. This is especially so, due to the logical principles embedded in proverbs and which are manifest in the use of words in speech and thought among the Africans.

## Conclusion

I have in the foregoing pages exposed the logical nature of African proverbs in order to unearth the principles of logic embedded therein. The result of my investigation shows that there is a close relationship between logic, language and reality in African philosophical place. African logic is flexible, rich in proverbs such that (African) logic is discerned therefrom. African logic is shown to be natural logic in that it is applied, it is judicial, it is practical and aims at solving concrete problem in the African existential

reality. I have shown also that the logical nature of African proverbs is evident in the use of words in language and thought in African world. This paper does not claim to be conclusive in itself, rather as part of the hermeneutical project, African scholars are challenged to further investigate the logical principles embedded in African proverbs.

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