

The Role of the Igbo Reading of Names of Parts of the Body in the Construction of Knowledge

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Introduction

I thank Professor Bonny Mbah, Director, University of Nigeria Centre for Igbo Studies for inviting me to present a lead paper at this conference. This emerged from my discussion with him regarding the role names of parts of the human body play in word-formation in the Igbo language. I chose the title of this paper by myself. I am aware that scholars use the expression ‘body parts’ instead of ‘parts of the body’, but the expression ‘body parts’ has been commodified in Nigeria by bandits, kidnappers, and many uncanny ritualists traffic on ‘body parts.’ The two expressions can be rightly used interchangeably, but I prefer to use the expression ‘parts of the body’. In discussing the paper, I want to take the following procedure: First, I define what I imagine is the Igbo understanding of knowledge. Second, I briefly explore the notion of the human body from which the parts arise. Third, I discuss a few ways in which word-formation drawn from a reflection on parts of the human body takes place. Few studies on the place of ‘body parts’ and their relationship with metaphor and idioms among the Igbo have taken place, but I have not encountered any study that relates the Igbo reading of the parts of the human body to knowledge and knowledge formation / production. My fourth task is to fill this gap. The thrust of my approach is epistemological, rather than linguistic, cognitive or otherwise. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the Igbo human imagination and thirst for meaning and understanding.

Understanding the concept of knowledge among the Igbo

In my Master of Arts project titled: “Igbo Epistemology: An Inquiry”, which was presented to the Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1998, I stated four conditions for understanding epistemology, to wit:

... knowledge involves four things: a knowing subject, the object of knowledge, what the subject knows about the object, i.e., the content of knowledge, and the rules used to establish the presence of what is known by a knowing subject as well as giving it an interpretation (2).

I used the term, *amamihe*, as the equivalent of knowledge. I use it again in this paper, but I refine my understanding of *amamihe* to mean two things. Consequently, with regard to the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, I understand *amamihe*, first as *ihe mmadu ji n’aka*, literally, ‘what one holds in his or her hand, i.e., certainty, and secondly, as *ihe mmadu kwetara na o di, kama ojighi ya n’aka*, i.e., something that one strongly believes that it exists, but the person lacks certainty about the existence of that thing. The person may have been briefed about the state of affairs of a thing, but the person is not sure of the veracity of the state of affairs of that thing as it has been conveyed to him or her. The third type of knowledge may be called revelatory

knowledge, which can arise from a variety of sources and circumstances. These three types here identified may roughly be called ‘certainty’ knowledge, ‘not-certainty’ knowledge, and revelatory knowledge.

Certainty knowledge is that state of affairs in the world about which a knowing subject is sure that at the point of its mention or discourse, the said state of affairs of the world corresponds, or coheres, with the way the knowing subject experiences it, as well as the way in which it can be expressed with a sense of certainty. For example, I am certain that I discussed the theme of this paper with Professor Bonny Mbah; I know that after the discussion I chose the title of this paper; I know that right now, I am presenting this paper, and I am certain that I have an audience; but I can only speculate on the nature of the audience’s reception of my presentation. Another example: I know that Professor Bonny Mbah is presently the current Director, Centre for Igbo Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; I know that he was formerly Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria; I know that he is a native of Orba Udulukenyi; etc. Based on my past knowledge of him and his administrative capacity, I can only gainsay that that he will ‘do well’ in this Centre, but I cannot say that with certainty. One thing about this ‘certainty knowledge’ is that the state of worldly affairs described in the conveying sentence, or statement is verifiable. It is a propositional form of knowledge. In other words, I am certain that the knowledge claims contained therein are true, and cannot be otherwise. The Igbo pose the question: *I jina-aka?* meaning: Are you sure? as a way of ascertaining certainty. If the person is sure, the expected answer is: *ejì m n’aka*; I am sure, I am certain that what I am saying is the case. On the contrary, when a person is not sure of what he or she has asserted, the answer is usually: *ejighi m n’aka, ọ bụ mmadụ gwara m*: I am not sure, somebody told me about it. Note here that ‘*iji n’aka*’ literally means ‘having something in one’s hand. In this case, certainty of knowledge is anchored on / conveyed by ‘aka’, i.e., hand, a part of the human body.

The ‘not-certainty’ type of knowledge, as used here, can be illustrated with the problem of knowledge of the self. Long before Socrates, the Igbo had evolved the statement: *mara onwe gi*; know yourself. Is it possible that one can totally and holistically know oneself? The self is a subject of continual knowing because it is a complex phenomenon. It is akin to the process of knowing a river. One can know the name of a river, know parts of it, but it remains a process of continuous discovery. This type of knowledge can be described as a limited form of knowledge. It is like the act of knowing a town. I am from Lejja, but there is a limit of what I can claim as my knowledge of Lejja. There is also the ‘hear-say’ type of knowledge which one may or may not be certain of. In this instance, the knowing subject relies on an uninvestigated assertion or statement. If somebody asserts that he or she has heard that the University of Nigeria does not treat its staff well, it remains a hearsay until the person to whom this has been told carries out an investigation to ascertain the truth or otherwise of the utterance.

Revealed knowledge exists. In 2019, I was on sabbatical at the Delta State University, Abraka, Delta state. Covid-19 put fear on the minds of persons. I was so disturbed that I had to call one of my brothers for him to consult one of our regular diviners to find out whether the thing could affect any member of the family. Two days later, he called back. His message was very comforting. He was told that my father who died in 2010 spoke through the diviner and said:

“the thing [COVID 19] and another that will come after it will not affect any of you”. This gave me a lot of confidence, at least psychologically. We are now in 2025, sixteen years after, and “the thing” never affected any member of the family. People are given messages in dream states, in visions, and through all forms of divination. Divination requires a great expertise of the diviner for it to be true. It can be said to be true if all data and interpretation are correct. Professor John Anenechukwu Umeh once divined for me when my father was on sick bed in Akulue Memorial hospital, Nsukka. At the end of his extensive divining process, he told me that my father had already gone over to the land of the dead. I asked him if there was anything for me to do to recall him. He answered in the negative, and then added that his crossing over to the land of the dead was final. About four days after that, my father died. Last night, 20th February, 2025, I was told in a dream that a president was about to ‘sing his ‘Nunc dimittis’. I still do not know what the message means. There was no date or time attached to the message. There was no name of a president mentioned. There was no country of the president mentioned. For me to really know what the message means, I will have to consult a knowledgeable diviner. However, I do not need to do that because there is no personal need for me to embark on a mission to obtain the interpretation. Going by the way divination goes, the word ‘president’ might mean ‘president’, or just any leader. ‘Nunc dimittis’ is not an Igbo word, but drawing from its biblical context, it could mean that a leader of significance would die in a near future. Revelation message can also come through the hearing of voices. The important thing is for the individual to pay great attention. I will give one personal example of this. During the race to get a Vice-Chancellor that would succeed Prof. Chinedu Nebo, I was lying down on my bed when I heard a voice: “iye VC ha bu nwa okuko e ji n’aka”. If I paid attention to this voice, I would not have applied for that position. These are personal examples of revealed knowledge. I believe that many people here have had one revealed message or the other. It is instructive that three of the examples I gave here are anchored on the ear and hand as meaning conveyors. I will move on to the issue of language.

The nature of language and thought

Language, especially human language, is a social construct. Every human group invents its own language. This is because every cultural group must have a way of communicating among its members. My concern here is on how and why the Igbo draw from names of parts of the human body to form words that enable meaning and knowledge in Igbo society. Word formation takes place in a variety of ways and from varied sources. This study will not dwell on etymology and morphology; areas of language I am not qualified to discuss. The word-formation corpus I will use here are already part and parcel of the Igbo lexicon. My approach will be to reflect and speculate on how they came to be. For example, I will not bother myself with whether isi ike is isi ike; i.e. stubborn, etc. I will only speculate on how ike is joined to isi to form a new word. Like language itself, word formation is a human construct. It is a process of constructivism and constructionalisation. In this regard, let me quote from Bagasheva’s article on word-formation in Bulgaria. According to him:

Constructionalisation is triggered by the communicative and naming needs of a community of speakers, which motivate neoanalysis. The onomasiological

approach to language (Stekauer 1999), and more specifically the word-formation, acknowledges the active agency of speakers in creating new lexical items. For onomasiologists, the desire of members of a speech community to come up with the most appropriate (with appropriateness measured by the minimax effect, i.e. minimal cognitive effort, maximum communicative effect, operationalisable as degrees of explicitness) name for a conceptualised piece of extralinguistic reality is driving force behind word-formation. When the conceptualisation is novel for the cultural context, borrowing is not a neglected resort. In other cases, all the resources of a language (construction) can be creatively employed for encoding intended conceptualisation. It is in the minds and mouths of speakers that the establishment and use of a new name lie... (6).

This excerpt is from Alexandra Bagasheva's article: "On [N1N2] Constructions and Word-Formation in Bulgarian." It is a fitting anchor to explore the way the Igbo depend on the reading of the parts of body to construct or form lexical items, names, phrases, and expressions. I take note of the following: 'minimal cognitive effort, maximum communicative effect, operationalisable as degrees of explicitness.' The first one, 'minimum cognitive effort' will be particularly very useful in our analysis in this paper. Both 'minimum cognitive effort' and 'maximum communicative effect' are possible probably because the systematicity of every language rests on some cognitive consistency. No linguistic group wants its communicative system to be marred by cognitive dissonance. The principle of minimum cognitive effort ensures that members of a linguistic group do not need to spend enormous time and mental energy deciphering what a lexical item in its language means. On the other hand, maximum communicative effect implies that any lexical expression in a language should yield what, perhaps, may be called denotative and connotative meanings.

Word-formation

Word formation is simply the process of creating new words. According to Alicia Cuper and MalgorzaCuper- Ferringo, "A word formation process is a way to create new terms from existing materials" (16). Pius ten Hacken and Renata Panacova concur with this view. According to them:

Word formation is a system of rules that can produce new words on the basis of existing lexical items. Word formation can be distinguished from syntax. Both take lexical items as their input, but whereas syntax produces sentences to express thoughts, word formation produces words to name concepts. Word formation has an onomasiological function and changes lexicon (4).

This definition simplifies the notion of word formation, itself a very complex phenomenon. A cursory survey of the book *Handbook on Word Formation*, a book of our hundred and ninety-seven pages is enough for non-specialists to know that word formation is not *utaba achin'akaakpo*. Everything has its own account or accounts of origin (history), even if such a history is never fully captured. This would appear to apply to word formation. As Iwana Kruska-Szlenk puts it:

... various objects as well as abstract and relational notions started to be named when the human body and its major parts had already been named and well familiar as concepts. Thus, using body part terms to name other concepts followed the natural path of conceptualising and naming new things after those already existing ones (16)

This is another simplified account of the history of word formation, and I will continue to operate at this simplified level. As a system of rules, word formation could be said to arise from some intuitive and assumed inherent properties/attribution of the words in a language. Ordinarily, the addition to what already exists is usually a marker of growth and development. However, one cannot add a pen as an indication of growth of a library. One can only add a book, or any type of printed document that contains information. With the onset of colonisation and Christianisation in Igboland, adding a name to the ones given at birth by one's parents became a sign of 'development'. At birth, I was named Ugwutikiri Opata. When I 'developed' along Christian religious terms, and passed the baptism examination, I was named Damian. I spent one further year learning catechism for confirmation, and when I passed the exam, I acquired another name, Robert. Progress in counting is through addition to an earlier number. Progress in schools results when one transits from one class to the other. Learning one art and skill after another in a rural setting depicts growth and development. So, it should not be a surprise that word formation arises from adding new ones to existing ones in order to capture what the old ones left alone will not capture. The rule is that what is added will collocate with the one it is being added to. In other words, the words added to existing ones in order to form a new one must collocate with the existing word onto which it is added. This addition must not be a word. It could even be a single letter as in 'takes' from 'take'. It could also be by a process of deletion and replacement, as in 'took' from 'take'. This addition could be in front of an existing word, or at the back of an existing word, granted that a word has a 'back'.

Studies on word formation are in agreement that compounding, coinage, blending, borrowing, clipping, backformation, derivation, conversion and acronyms constitute the major processes of word formation. The words are not listed in any chronological importance. Word formation is part and parcel of every human language. For example, the English language is replete with such terms as headstrong, headcount, headmaster, headlamp, headman, headgear, headstart, headline, etc. I deliberately chose these examples to show that word formation making use of names of parts of the human body is a universal phenomenon.

Word formation in Igbo language

It has already been observed that word formation takes place through processes of compounding, coinages, blending, borrowing, clipping, backformation, derivation, conversion and acronym. Translating these terms into the Igbo language will, on itself, be another essay, especially because translation is like interpretation. Compounding may be relevant here. However, I am not going to use these terms or categories, partly because I may not be able to handle them adequately. My chosen approach is to declare that word formation drawn from names of parts of the human body takes place through the process of addition. I anchor this process of addition on the well - known Igbo axiom: *Ihe kwurū, ihe akwūdebe ya*; sometimes put as *ihe dī, ihe adīkwasi*

ya, meaning: when one thing stands, another stands by it. I have already referred to Iwana Kruska-Szlenk's assertion that "various objects as well as abstract and relational notions started to be named when the human body and its major parts had already been named and well familiar as concepts." For the Igbo, I gainsay that the human body and all its parts had been named before the process of forming new words from them.

Gerald Okey Nweya and Samuel Obinna Ejinwa argue that:

The human body plays a crucial role in the conceptualisation, expression and understanding of an abstract concept or domain. According to Kovecses (2022 p5326), the human body is the best candidate for the source domain as it is clearly defined and easily understood. The body parts such as the head, face, legs, hands, back, heart, bones and shoulders, among others, are usually employed in metaphorical and metonymical, or conceptualisation and thus, the experiential basis of conceptual metaphor is both bodily and cultural (69).

It is not surprising that Nweya and Ejinwa talk about the use of names for parts of the human body to actualise metaphorical and metonymical intents and meaning in the Igbo language; after all, their essay is on "The Eye as a Source of Conceptual Metaphors." The few studies I have seen on this word formation drawing from names of parts of the human body concern themselves with idioms and metaphors. Let me say the Igbo language is highly figurative. Any educated person who did not grow up in a village setting, and who has ever gone to village meetings of the traditional Igbo will find it difficult to understand the speeches made at such meetings. This is because the speeches at traditional Igbo meetings are replete with diffuse figurativeness. On account of this, I had questioned the phenomenon of figurativeness as a defining mark of literature. One hardly finds the use of figurative language in Igbo folktales, but they predominate traditional Igbo discourse. I make this point because the longstanding predominance of figurativeness in Igbo traditional discourse has made what are called metaphors commonplace. It would then appear to me that what scholars call metaphors may indeed be regarded as dead metaphors. I will not argue this point here. I have mentioned it simply for Igbo scholars to reexamine this practice of calling such word formations metaphor.

What the Igbo do to form new words from names of parts of the body is to add properties, or characteristics, abstract ideas, even material entities, for example, adding mmiri to isi to form isimmiri. The addition could, in some cases, be made at the back of a lexical item, ụfụ anya, or at the front, anyaụfụ, for example. This is largely the case whether one is dealing with an idiom, an expression, or a sentence. Examples include: Ọ dī ụfụ anya, Ọ bụ onye ụfụ anya, or Ọ dī anya ụfụ; Ọ bụ onye anya ụfụ. The Igbo use word formations to create new concepts by introducing new words / expressions, lexical items. In other words, word formation is a linguistic act, the use of language to achieve an effect by creating new meanings. Since languages vary according to human groups and cultures, there may be significant cultural differences in word formation across linguistic groups. Of course, linguists are well aware of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on linguistic relativity. After all, there is a popular saying among the Igbo to the effect: Igbo na-asụ n'olu n'olu; i.e., the Igbo use different dialects in their speech acts.

This notwithstanding, it is important to examine why the Igbo, among other linguistic groups, depend on reading parts of the human body to form lexical items? The human person must first exist, then have a body, before humans, including they can rely on different parts of the human body to form words. According to Yuval Harari:

Humans have bodies. During the last century, technology has been distancing us from our bodies ... People estranged from their bodies, senses, and physical environment are likely to feel alienated and disoriented. Pundits often blame such feelings of alienation on the decline of religious and national bonds, but losing touch with your body is probably more important. Humans lived for millions of years without churches and without nation states – they can probably live happily without them in the twenty-first century, too. Yet they cannot live happily if they are disconnected from their bodies. If you don't feel at home in your body, you will never feel at home in the world (Yuval Harari, 105 - 106)

The idea of feeling at home with one's body is important. It is not a physical act, but where one's body is matters a lot. The idea of not feeling at home is conveyed in Igbo as *ahụ na-agba m ghari ghari*; meaning that one is not comfortable where one is. Whatever discomfort that exists in this context is felt in certain reactions in the human body, reactions which could be described as disturbing bodily dispositions. The human body is understood as “*ahụ*” among the Igbo. According to Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu and Peter Chukwuemeka Onianila. ‘*Ahụ*’ is the visible part of man, which is perceptible to the senses. The Igbo take time to preserve the physical body (p. 358).

Undoubtedly, humans have bodies. Contrary to what Yuval Harari suspects, it is the case that humans are paying greater attention to their bodies, even if this has nothing to do with word-formation. The current societal attention to the body by persons in fashion industry, entertainment industry, nutrition and health studies, etc. point to a greater attention to the human body than ever before. Simply put, people are paying a lot of attention to their body: their health status, their patterns of nutrition; their weight, their appearance, etc. It must be noted that the human body is a complex phenomenon. According to Joh Goff, “In phenomenology, the body is understood as experienced and enacted and not just physical matter – a hand *intends* and *does*, it isn't simply physically *is*(its facticity, however, constrains what it can enact and how) (4). In another instance, Grzegorz Wysiński *et al* argue thus, “The body is the only object that a person can experience both ‘from outside,’ i.e., as we encounter other things and people, and ‘from inside,’ feeling, for instance, the accelerated beating of one's own heart” (n.p.) These go to demonstrate that the human body is not just a physical phenomenon only.

The predominant use of the English language among the Igbo has not reduced the influence of word-formation drawn from parts of the human body. This is evidenced in some Igbo expressions: *isi akwụkwọ* from which the Igbo say: *O nwere isi akwụkwọ*; meaning, he or she is brilliant, or brainy. There are also those others such as *ajụ isi ndị ọcha*, white hair, *imi okpo /imi onye ọcha*, white man's nose, etc. These formations arose from the introduction of western education to Igboland. The nature of language is partly responsible for this. As Birgit Renzl puts it:

Language is commonly understood as a tool to describe and report reality. However, this is a limited view of language since language is not only content; it also provides content and a way to re-contextualize content. We do not only describe and report with language but we can create with it ... Therefore, knowledge construction depends on the participants involved and it depends on how they perceive, process, and interpret meaning on the particular situation (44 – 45).

In this context, the examples of word formation shown above support Renzl's assertion that language can also create reality, or at least, report new realities. The Igbo use word formation processes to name new realities in their environment.

Examples of some Igbo word formations drawn from names of parts of the human body

The story begins with the human body, *ahụ*, in Igbo. The commonest traditional prayer said by the Igbo is the plea for *ogologo ndụ na ahụ isi ike*; long life and health, and of course wealth, *ihe e ji eche ndụ*. The human body is an embodiment of many ideas. Late Dr. Achufusi, the owner of Akulue Memorial Hospital, Nsukka, used to complain about understanding the complaints made by some of those that come to him to seek medical attention. One of his major complaints is about people who come and say: *eshi m liile gbara m iwe*; literally 'I feel pain all over my body.' It is not just because of the dialect, but also because it is difficult to imagine someone having pain all over his or her body. This is explainable given the nature of the body. As Simona Stano puts it:

... it should not be forgotten that our body is part of the world in which it exists and incessantly interacts with such a world being a 'social body,' that cannot but communicate with other bodies. Consequently, symptoms, making themselves visible on and through bodily dimension, cannot but be always put into a discourse (138).

It is not only the entire body whose symptoms can be put into discourse. Most sicknesses in Igbo are described by naming the parts of the body where there is trouble. *Isi ọwụwa*, headache; *afọ ọsịsa*, running stomach, *imi nshashịta*, running nose, *òkùkó n'ụkwụ*, swelling in the leg, *obi mgbawa*, throbbing of the heart, etc.

The most important visible part of the human body is 'head', *isi*. This is why the Igbo say: *e bee isi, e bee ndụ*; cut of the head and you have cut off life. I start with *isi*, head, the apex part of the human body to show word formation drawn from it.

Isi: Head

Onye isi : leader, oldest person,

Okpotokpo isi: big /fat head

Isi mgbaka: madness, insanity, disoriented mind

Isi ike: stubborn,

Isi mmụọ/ma: mask head

Isi mmiri: upstream/mouth of the river

Isi oroma: orange head

Isi okpokoro: empty headed

Isi ojọọ: evil

Isi eru aka /ẹka: unbending, disagreeable

Isi kota ebu/evu, o vuru; a metaphoric expression, indicating a self- inflicted trouble or injury.

Ntụkwasị mmadụ isi, leaning on somebody.

One can continue to give examples of similar word formations among the Igbo but it is important to take a critical look at these words, expressions, etc. A sense of intention and disposition, usually attributed to the mind, is evident in some of the new words. akọ na uche are taken to be domiciled in the brain, which on its own is located in the head. In other words, the human head is an embodiment of akọ and uche which are the sources of human thought and rationality. Where the head is, is where the mind is. Going by the Igbo ihe kwurū, ihe akwūdebe ya, the association of reason, thought, and rationality with the human head is not surprising. It is quite understandable that the head, being at the apex of the human body, is rightly associated with leadership, primacy of place, madness, insanity, mental disorientation, evil, stubbornness, hollowness, etc. On the other hand, isi mmụọ and isi okpokoto are purely descriptive: mask placed on human head, and big head. Incidentally, one could also say: okpokoto isi, big head. It is surprising that an inventory of descriptive words formed from the names of parts of the body is less compared to the ones that are abstract extrapolations. This is a pointer to why there is plenty of research on metaphorical formations.

On word formation from anya, eyes

anya ụfụ/ụfụ anya: envious

anya ukwu: greed

ịtụ anya / olile anya: expectation

ịtà anya: procrastination; imagining

ịmụ anya: being awake

ihịọ anya: literally, turning the eyes away from someone speaking to show disagreement

First, the Igbo believe that a hụrū n'anya ka a nūrū na ntị /a hụ n'anya e kwe. This represents a privileging of the empirical and the physical among the Igbo: what they see and what they can touch. I do not want to reduce these terms to empiricism and physicalism, especially in their scientific understanding. The privileging of empiricism does not prevent the Igbo from applying the spiritual and metaphysical in their perception and understanding of reality. It has been shown

that revelation is a source of valid knowledge among the Igbo. Physicalism as a scientific concept refers to the validation of reality as that which can be represented by mathematical equations. Though it has to be noted that physicalism can still be understood in philosophical terms as part of metaphysics, even as it is related to empiricism. The first entry in this list is very interesting. *Ufụ* could be placed before or after *anya*, and the result would be the same. The other listings are not transposable in the same manner. Has the eye any characteristic that makes it amenable as the domain of word formation? Many people claim that they are able to read the eyes of others. Indeed, many people allege that whatever a person is can be found in the eyes of the person. It is the case that the eyes can betray the emotional dispositions of their owners. This is why it is possible for people to say: *Ị hụrụ ụdị anya o lere m?* literally meaning; Do you see the type of eyes he looked me? All this is possible because of the phenomenon of body language. According to Filiz Akkilincas:

The most exciting part of body language is that one can easily learn this talent and solve the majority of its riddles ... One may easily detect a lie or display confidence by resorting to body language while also gaining more insight into people's emotional states based solely on their physicality (36).

Body language is a contributory factor to a reading of the body, and its complex dimensions. Reading the human eyes and human face appear to be easy.

On word formation from *ntị*, ears

ntị ike: hard of hearing

ntị ala: ability to hear things, whispered or spoken in low tone

abagala ntị: large ear

ntị anụ ihe: stubbornness

It is easy to understand why these attributions are ascribed to the ear. It is an organ meant for hearing.

nshapara imi: flat nose

ogologo imi: long nose

isi imi n'ala: thorough investigation; this is a metaphoric expression.

On word formation from *ọnụ*, mouth

ọnụ ụsọ: greed

ọnụ ọjọọ: insulting

ọnụ efu: lies, or meaningless communication

ọnụ agba ama: secretive

On word formation associated with olu, neck

olu ike: harsh voice

olu ụsọ: flattering voice

olu ọma: melodious voice

olu mgbaka mgbaka: irritating / harsh/ discordant voice

On word formation associated with afọ, stomach

afọ ọjọọ: wicked

afọ ọma: kind

afọ ukwu: greed

On the face

mgbarụ ihu: frowning of the face

On ụkwụ, leg

ụkwụ ogologo; long leg

igọ ụkwụ; worship or veneration of the leg.

How parts of the body contribute to the construction of knowledge

Martin Srukupand Michael Dvorahova argue, “The human body is a basic instrument of every human being, there are no human activities that can be imagined without it” (1). Why is this so? Talking, speaking, experiencing, eating, drinking, walking, jogging, contemplating, writing, teaching, conversing, etc., are possible different parts of the body that are engaged in the process. Parts of the body are agents of our intentions. This is possible because of the western notion of dualism of the body and mind. The body is the nearest object of reality that human beings confront, and even interact with. The parts coordinate to make the body work. Indeed, the parts are like syntax in language. The normalcy, absurdity, beauty, ugliness, etc., of the human body as a visual object evoke emotions, impulses, sentiments from both that own the bodies and those that are observers of the bodies. These sensations lead to reflection, thought, and discourse – internal or externalised. This is because bodies offer themselves as texts. The corpus of word formation that constitute this text present themselves to be read and interpreted. Body language is even part of the text. Because texts are constituted by syntax for meaning to emerge, knowledge formation becomes possible.

The first example I want to give is about body language. According to Daniel Coleman;

There is growing evidence that fundamental ethical stances in life stem from underlying emotional capacities. For one, impulse is the medium of emotion, the

seed of all impulse is a feeling bursting to express itself in action. Those who are at the mercy of impulse - who lack self-control – suffer a moral deficiency. The ability to control impulse is the base of will and character. By the same token, the root of altruism lies in empathy, the ability to read emotions in others; lacking a sense of another's needs or despair; there is no caring (xxii).

It is significant that the inability to control one's emotions and impulses yields knowledge of two things: it is a character deficit on the person unable to control his or her emotions; and it reveals the attitude of such a person to the audience. I recall an incidence in 1987 when Maryam Babangida launched her 'Better Life for Rural Women Programme.' After the event, two friends were relaxing in a hotel lobby when a big man joined them. Not long after, General Ibrahim Babaginda's younger brother joined them. In the course of the conversation, the big man said to IBB's younger brother: 'but come to think of it, who else apart from your brother can rule this country now?' When the big man and IBB's younger brother left, one of the two friends they came to chat with said to the other: "if you don't like a person, at least learn hide it. See the way you frowned when Babaginda was praised." Two things are obvious: the big man is possibly a sycophant, and the one who frowned his face depicted an inability to control his feelings.

In word formation derived from names of parts of the human body, there must always be two words that already exist. As words, they have ascribed meanings. Alone, they mean different things. When joined together, a new meaning is forged, a new meaning that represents new knowledge. It is important to note, once again, the new term formed takes place through an additive process, before or after the word chosen on the basis of collocation potential. What is important is that in the final analysis, a new term and a new meaning, and therefore, new knowledges are created. Sometimes, this goes beyond mere creation of knowledge. Some parts of Igbo land, especially the Igbo Ọmabẹ people of Nsukka cultural zone, have the practice of ịgọ ụkwụ; literally worship of the leg. There is no other part of the human body to which this ascription is made. This normally takes place at the Ọnụ Chi of the person. Yet, the Igbo have a proverb: Afọ atụ egwu o jiri vubere ụkwụ ụzọ, literally the stomach did not fear to go before the leg. I do not think that there is a contradiction here. The proverb means, among other possibilities, a sense of focus and determination in taking action. The stomach has no bone structure, yet it is said to lead the feet. The feet support the body frame, including the stomach. The worship of the leg probably stems from the fact that one has to move about in order to survive in life. The leg is the instrument of this movement. The stomach is a vessel, yet without its being fed, the leg will be weak, therefore impeding its movement. The important thing here is that there is a creation of knowledge about two parts of the human body, and how they interact and coordinate for life to function. A reflection on them gives us knowledge of what they really are.

Third, the external parts of the body are perceptible, and empirically verifiable. This type of knowledge has been called *ihe e ji n'aka*, certainty knowledge. The reason is quite obvious. Parts of the human body, especially those that are visible to the human eyes are not disputable. They are all taken for granted, rightly so. According to Lundh Gunnar and Lo Foster, "of all the important contributions phenomenology has made to philosophy, perhaps it is the thematisation

of the role of the body in experience that is the most decisive one (123). This is why Julia Kiverstein says:

The body ... is the primary tool enabling the intelligent use of environmental structure. It acts as the mobile bridge that allows us to exploit the external world in ways that simplify and transform internal problem solving ... The body is thus the go-between that links two different (internal and external) sets to key-information processing resources. Hence, the body's role in such cases is that of a bridging instrument enabling the emergence of new kinds of distributed information-processing organisation (208).

The body as a whole is constituted by its various parts. The following are then taken as given: the body, parts of the body, the environment within which bodies are situated, names given to the body and its parts, and subsequently the human desire to integrate all this in word formation and meaning making. Given this, word formation is the product of the internal processing of the external givens to create new ideas with given names. This is very obvious in the examples I have already given of Igbo word formation drawing from parts of the human body.

Let me once again draw from the notion of *iji ihe n'aka*, certainty, and *ihe kwurū*, *ihe akwūdebe ya*, where one thing stands, another stands by it. I start with the latter. It is about dualism, not in terms of western notions of body and mind, but in terms of the Igbo notion of existence in which nothing stands alone. I have mentioned earlier that in the numerical system, besides nothing, i.e., zero, there is I more in an increasing manner. Beyond counting, there is always something after nothing; for example, an empty vessel is considered empty only because the vessel does not show any material thing observable by mere human eyes. When a traditional Igbo man brings out his *qba mmanya* from his bag, he blows into it before palm wine is poured into it. Why does he do it? When done alone, the person intends to blow out the dirt inside the *qba*, a dirt that is not visible. When done in a group, it additionally means that there is nothing inside the cup for it to be feared. Dirt in this context could mean dust and air contaminated with dust. This suggests that there is a serious epistemological problem in affirming that any vessel is empty. The traditional Igbo, for instance, know that in any communal meeting, the spirits of the ancestors are always present. Some trained or mediated eyes see these spirits, but the ordinary person does not see them. All this is part of the complementary duality that characterizes the Igbo world view. It is this that the Igbo refer to as *ihe kwurū*, *ihe akwūdebe ya*. The thing called 'nothing', not the English mathematical zero, occupies space, a fixed place in a continuum. The enduring lesson is that knowledge depends on some form of dualism, and certainty of knowledge, spiritual knowledge, so to speak, can arise from this dualism.

General Reflections

Werner Heisenberg became a world -famous author, whose legacies still live because of his 'discovery' of the uncertainty principle. Yet, the principle of uncertainty has been with the Igbo for more than a millennium before Heisenberg. From 1967 to 1970, the Igbo lived a life of total uncertainty. They did not need a scientific / mathematical equation to understand that. The war situation in which they suddenly found themselves provided them with an existential equation.

Word formation using parts of the body embodies values that are positive, neutral (descriptively objective, without valorisation), and negative. Parts of the human body offer a vantage standpoint for constructing words that lead to understanding, especially because parts of the human body are the easiest to observe and characterise. In the family, among friends, in groups, in all human social interactions, human beings always see, observe, and communicate among themselves. Meaning making is a complicated process, one reason for which misunderstanding arises among human beings. Many things are taken for granted in this process. Mind, language, human and non-human entities, and their various forms of interaction are taken for granted. An important dictum among the Igbo is the injunction: *Mara onwe gi*, know yourself. This suggests that not all human beings can account for who they are; that knowing oneself is a requirement for people to know self and others in a significant way or manner. In the context of this paper, knowledge of the self can be greatly achieved through mastering the parts of the human body. All in all, the body is like a machine. It needs an engine, a force, a spirit, energy, etc., to make it work. All this is taken into consideration during the process of word formation.

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