Language, and Social Commentary in African Proverb Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines the discursive use of Igbo proverbs and their transformed counterparts, anti-proverbs, as linguistic resources for humour and social commentary within the Igbo socio-cultural context. The work utilises a qualitative analysis of four selected Igbo proverbs and their anti-proverbial extensions, to explores how deliberate subversions of traditional wisdom generate humour while simultaneously critiquing social norms and everyday realities. Anchored in Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH), the study demonstrates that humour in anti-proverbs emerges from script oppositions between culturally established expectations and their pragmatic disruption in contemporary usage. These incongruities function not merely as sources of amusement but as discursive strategies for social reflection on issues such as status, morality, interpersonal relations, and social change. The findings reveal that Igbo proverbs perform dual communicative roles by functioning as both repositories of cultural knowledge and innovative sites of humour-driven social critique. By bringing to the fore the interaction between language, humour, and discourse, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on indigenous African verbal art and highlights the adaptability of proverb discourse in negotiating continuity and change in modern Igbo society.

Keywords: *African proverbs, discourse, humour, Igbo, incongruity, social commentary.*

1. Introduction

Proverbs have long been a cornerstone of Igbo oral traditions, serving as vessels of communal wisdom, ethical instruction, and cultural identity. They encapsulate timeless truths in pithy, memorable phrases, often employed in storytelling, mediation, and everyday communication. In the Igbo socio-cultural context, proverbs are more than mere linguistic artifacts; they are tools for negotiating meaning, asserting authority, and fostering social cohesion. However, as society evolves, so too do its oral traditions. The emergence of anti-proverbs, a playful yet critical transformation of traditional proverbs, has expanded the scope of these sayings, infusing them with humour and enabling sharper critiques of societal norms.

The proverb 'Ọgọ bụ chi onye' (An in-law is one's guardian spirit) exemplifies this phenomenon. Traditionally, this saying underscores the perceived sacredness and respect owed to

13

an in-law in Igbo culture. However, its anti-proverbial extension, '*Ọgọ bụ chi onye abụghị maka onye ọgọ ya na-akwa baro*' (An in-law is one's guardian spirit does not include an in-law who is a wheelbarrow pusher), humourously interrogates this ideal, pointing to socio-economic realities that challenge traditional wisdom. Similarly, the proverb '*Eziokwu bụ ndụ*' (Truth is life) is transformed into '*Eziokwu bụ ndụ bụ maka onye a gwara, o kwere*' (Truth is life - only for those who embrace it), foregrounding the selective uptake of moral values in interaction. In both cases, humour emerges not from the proverb alone, but from the discursive tension between an established script and its pragmatic recontextualisation.

This study examines such transformations from a discourse-pragmatic perspective, focusing on how anti-proverbs generate humour and social evaluation through linguistic manipulation. Anchored in Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH), the analysis accounts for humour as a product of script opposition activated within specific communicative contexts. Although semantic in formulation, SSTH provides a useful framework for explaining how humorous meanings arise in use, particularly in proverb-based discourse where shared expectations are systematically disrupted. The study draws on a purposively selected corpus of four Igbo proverbs and their anti-proverbial extension**s**, chosen for their illustrative potential in demonstrating script opposition and pragmatic incongruity. The analysis prioritises qualitative depth over quantitative generalisation, allowing for detailed examination of how linguistic form, contextual knowledge, and discursive intention interact to produce humour and evaluative meaning.

While humour research spans multiple disciplines—including neuroscience, sociology, linguistics, artificial intelligence, and health sciences—much of the existing scholarship remains centred on Western linguistic and cultural contexts (Przemylaw et al, 2017; Rayz & Veale, 2022). Consequently, indigenous forms of humorous meaning-making, particularly those embedded in African proverbial discourse, remain underexplored within pragmatic studies. In Igbo communicative practice, proverbs are widely employed to regulate social interaction and encode communal values; however, their pragmatic transformation into humour-bearing anti-proverbs has received limited systematic linguistic attention.

This study is significant in its contribution to the understanding of how Igbo oral traditions adapt to changing social realities. By blending humour with critique, anti-proverbs not only reflect cultural continuity but also highlight the resilience and creativity inherent in Igbo expressions of identity and societal engagement.

It is obvious from the extant literature that humour research intersects fields like neuroscience, sociology, linguistics, education, AI, and health sciences, addressing themes ranging from cognitive processes and identity construction to its applications in human-computer interaction and public well-being (Shammi &Stuss, 1999; Klos &Samson, 2004; Attardo, 2020; Li-Chuan et al, 2020; Mey, 2024). Despite extensive interdisciplinary studies on humour, much of the existing scholarship is predominantly rooted in Western contexts, leaving indigenous humour frameworks underexplored. In particular, there is a paucity of research on how proverbs function

14

as frames for humour and tools for social commentary in non-Western societies. In Igbo culture, proverbs are pivotal in conveying wisdom, mediating social interactions, and reinforcing communal values. However, their role in generating humour and providing a medium for critiquing socio-cultural norms, power structures, and evolving societal dynamics remains largely unexamined. This gap is particularly pressing in the context of Igbo land, where humour intertwined with proverbs is integral to addressing socio-political and moral issues, fostering community solidarity, and navigating modern challenges.

The problem addressed in this study, therefore, is the limited understanding of how Igbo proverbs function as discursive frames for humour and social commentary, particularly through pragmatic mechanisms such as script opposition and contextual re-analysis. By examining anti-proverbs as instances of meaning reconfiguration in discourse, this study contributes to the understanding of how proverbial language adapts to social change while retaining communicative relevanceThis research addresses the gap by examining the discursive features of anti-proverbs within the Igbo socio-cultural context. It seeks to uncover how these altered proverbs blend humour with critical commentary, contributing to the dynamic evolution of Igbo oral traditions. The study also interrogates the implications of these transformations for understanding the resilience, adaptability, and subversive potential of Igbo linguistic and cultural practices in a rapidly changing world. Addressing this issue is critical for preserving and adapting indigenous knowledge systems in the face of globalization and cultural shifts.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the discursive features of Igbo proverbs and their transformation into anti-proverbs, focusing on their use as vehicles for humour and social commentary. Through this investigation, the study seeks to highlight the role of language in preserving cultural values while also challenging entrenched norms and expectations. Specifically, the objectives are to examine the discursive features of traditional Igbo proverbs and their transformation into anti-proverbs**;** analyze the use of humour in Igbo anti-proverbs**;** explore the social commentary embedded in Igbo anti-proverbs**;** implications of anti-proverbs in modern Igbo society; and contribute to the broader academic discourse on proverbs, humour, and social critique in African languages. By achieving these objectives, this study aims to deepen the understanding of the evolving role of proverbs and anti-proverbs in Igbo culture, particularly in the way they serve as tools for both preserving and challenging societal norms. Research questions based on these objectives are designed to guide the investigation of Igbo proverbs and anti-proverbs as dynamic discursive tools, shedding light on their social significance and their potential for both humour and critique in modern Igbo society.

2. Overview of Literature

The extant literature on humour across interdisciplinary fields highlights the diverse and evolving approaches to understanding humour in various contexts. Scholars from linguistics, psychology, sociology, communication, and media studies have contributed significant insights into the cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of humour. Research on conversational humour (Haugh

15

et al., 2024) highlights the interactive dynamics of humour in communication, emphasizing the role of context and participant roles in shaping humour. In the realm of satire and parody (Capelotti, 2024), humour is examined as a tool for subverting power structures and critiquing societal norms, while studies on new forms of humour in social media (Laineste & Shilikhina, 2024) explore how digital platforms give rise to unique humourous genres like memes and viral videos that engage audiences interactively. Research on disparagement humour (Saucier et al., 2024) looks at how humour can challenge or reinforce stereotypes, reflecting on its subversive potential, while political humour (Baumgartner, 2024) underscores its role in critiquing political systems and shaping public discourse. Mey (2024) explores the dual nature of humour in social interaction, highlighting how it can both unite and divide groups, and Godioli and Chłopicki (2024) focus on the role of figurative language, such as metaphors and irony, in enhancing the comedic effect of humour. Cognitive approaches to humour (Klos & Samson, 2024) examine the mental processes involved in humour appreciation and production, while Attardo et al. (2024) focus on incongruity theory, suggesting that humour arises from the mismatch between expectations and reality. Evolutionary theories of humour (Greengross & Kozbelt, 2024) explore how humour may have evolved as a mechanism for social bonding, and Heintz (2024) examines how personality traits influence humour preferences, moving beyond the traditional notion of a "sense of humour." Psychological studies (2024) explore how cognition and motivation interact in humour, particularly its role in emotional regulation, while Attardo (2020) provides a sociolinguistic perspective on how humour functions within different social and linguistic contexts, emphasizing its role in identity construction and cultural norms. These studies collectively offer a multi-faceted view of humour, considering its cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions across various settings and media.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has expanded the understanding of humour, particularly in how it intersects with social change, cultural contexts, and psychological processes. In this regard, T*osina Fernández* (2023) explores the use of anti-proverbs and pseudo-proverbs as sources of humour in workplace interactions, examining how these modified proverbs subvert traditional meanings to produce comedic effects and reflect office dynamics. *Yehorova et al.* (2023) investigates humourous wartime tweets, developing a typology of humour used in the context of the Ukraine conflict, highlighting how humour functions to cope with the harsh realities of war while offering social commentary. *Vanderheiden and Mayer* (2024) approach humour from a multi-disciplinary perspective, categorizing humour as a psychological, cultural, and social resource. *Mullan and Béal (2024)* focus on humour as a mechanism for dealing with uncomfortable moments in intercultural interactions. A series of studies by *Warren, Barsky, and McGraw* (2020) empirically explore the impact of cultural tightness and looseness on humour perception. These findings are aligned with McGraw and Warren's earlier work on benign violations, particularly in *McGraw and Warren (2010),* where they explore how immoral or uncomfortable behaviour can be rendered humourous when it is perceived as non-threatening or acceptable. This notion is expanded in *McGraw et al.* (2012), where they investigate how people find humour in distant

16

tragedies and close mishaps, further exploring the boundaries of what is considered a benign violation.

Horn Stokoe (2023) focuses on humour as a form of social resistance, using conversation analysis to explore how humour functions as a tool for challenging authority and power dynamics in everyday interactions. This builds on previous studies on humour's role in resisting oppressive structures, echoing *Sorensen's* (2008, 2017) works on humour as a nonviolent resistance strategy. *Sorensen's* research argues that humour can be a powerful tool for social change, using nonviolent action theory to frame humour as a serious form of resistance to oppression. *Parkhill et al.* (2011) examine humour within communities living with nuclear risk, highlighting its role in managing affect and emotion work. Their study illustrates how humour helps people cope with fear and uncertainty, even in high-stakes situations such as nuclear threats. In the domain of political humour and resistance, *Noderer* (2020) builds on earlier works such as *Hart* (2007) by exploring the potential of political humour as a means of nonviolent resistance. This perspective is further enriched by the works of *Rodrigues de Oliveira Medeiros and Rafael Alcapadipan* (2016), who look at humour and misbehaviour in corporate settings, showing how humour acts as a form of subversion and resistance within hierarchical structures. *Kulkarni* (2017) focuses on internet memes as tools for communicating political satire, illustrating how digital humour, particularly memes, contributes to political discourse and acts as a medium for social commentary. *Halversen & Weeks* (2023) continue this line of thought by examining the role of political meme creators and their audiences, analyzing the consequences of political memes on social media. *Scheel and Gockel* (2022) review the psychosocial benefits of humour, with a particular focus on its role as a coping mechanism in stressful situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They emphasize how humour provides relief in times of crisis, facilitating emotional regulation and social connection. In a similar vein, *Simione & Gnagnarella* (2023) explore how humour coping strategies can mitigate the negative effects of avoidance coping on perceived stress. Their findings suggest that using humour as a coping mechanism can help buffer the stress experienced in difficult situations, offering a pathway for healthier emotional regulation. *Stiwi & Rosendahl* (2022) conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis of laughter-inducing interventions in patients with somatic or mental health issues, demonstrating that humour interventions have positive effects on both physical and mental health. *Schneider et al.* (2018) complement this by providing meta-analytical evidence of the differential associations between habitual humour styles and mental health outcomes, underscoring the importance of humour in promoting psychological well-being. *Abira et al.* (2022) and *Suliaman* (2024) explore the relationship between humour, optimism, and well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown, highlighting the ways humour acted as a coping mechanism during times of uncertainty and stress.

In a related area, *McBride and Ball* (2022) propose a conceptual model on the use of humour by science agencies during crises. They argue that humour can be strategically employed to foster connection, empathy, and compassion among the public, especially in times of uncertainty and fear, helping to improve communication and engagement with public health messages. *Miller*

17

et al. (2021) provide a systematic review of humour-based strategies for addressing public health priorities, particularly in the context of health campaigns. They find that humour can effectively engage audiences, promote health messages, and reduce resistance to public health interventions, offering a more accessible and relatable way to communicate important health information. Together, these studies contribute to an understanding of humour's multifaceted role in social interactions, resistance movements, emotional coping, and health. They highlight the growing recognition of humour as both a serious tool for social change and a vital resource for individual and collective well-being.

Jasheway and Ruch (2021) highlight empirical research on humour training as a potential intervention for enhancing well-being. They suggest that humour training could serve as an effective tool for improving individuals' psychological health by fostering a more positive outlook and increasing emotional resilience. This idea aligns with *Tagaliduo's* (2018) study, which examines the feasibility of humour training in promoting positive humour styles and reducing stress in a subclinical sample, demonstrating that such interventions can be practical for enhancing well-being. *Baisley and Grunberg* (2019) take a further step by introducing an interdisciplinary approach to online humour training. Their work integrates humour theory with practical training strategies, showing how such training can be used to develop humour skills for both personal growth and professional settings, particularly in online environments. In psychological research, *Saulo et al.* (2015) explore the relationships between humourism profiles and psychological well-being, suggesting that certain humour styles are linked to better psychological outcomes. Their research highlights how individual differences in humour preferences can influence emotional resilience and mental health. *Bing-hui et al.* (2019) investigate humour processing deficits in individuals with social anhedonia, shedding light on the psychological mechanisms that hinder the appreciation of humour in certain populations. Their study contributes to the broader understanding of how humour processing can vary across individuals with different mental health conditions, providing insight into the neurological and cognitive underpinnings of humour appreciation. Put together, these studies illustrate the diverse applications of humour across crisis management, health communication, psychological well-being, and social interactions, emphasizing humour's potential as both a coping tool and a strategy for improving individual and collective mental health.

Recent studies on humour processing have explored various aspects of how humour is understood and processed at the neurological level. *Li-Chuan et. al.* (2020) examine how extraverts process jokes, focusing on the event-related potential (ERP) responses in the brain. Their findings suggest that extraverts show different neural responses to humourous stimuli compared to introverts, potentially due to their heightened social engagement and openness to positive emotional experiences. *Przemysław et. al.* (2017) focus on the neural circuits involved in verbal humour comprehension in individuals with schizophrenia. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), they uncover differences in brain activity between individuals with schizophrenia and control groups, suggesting that the typical neural mechanisms involved in humour

18

comprehension might be disrupted in this population. Similarly, *Midori et al.* (2017) investigate the time course and localization of brain activity in humour comprehension through an ERP/sLORETA study. Their research delves into the temporal dynamics of humour processing and identifies specific regions of the brain activated during the appreciation of verbal humour.

The role of humour in identity construction has been a significant focus in recent literature, exploring how it reinforces or challenges social identities in various contexts. *Evans and Riley* (2021) examine humour as a tool for identity construction, utilizing the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) to analyze conversational data. This ties into the broader framework developed by *Archakis and Tsakona* (2005), who analyzed humour's role in identity construction, suggesting that humour is a vehicle through which individuals can either reinforce or resist the dominant social norms and expectations. *Holmes and Marra* (2002) focused on humour as a boundary marker in social interaction, noting its ability to create distinctions between social groups and define in-group and out-group membership. Their work, alongside *Holmes and Schnurr* (2005), explores how humour operates in workplaces, particularly concerning politeness and gender norms. They identify how humour can challenge or reinforce gendered expectations, demonstrating how gender, as an identity marker, influences how humour is used to negotiate power and authority. *Holmes, Stubbe, and Marra* (2003) expand this by analyzing ethnic identity in New Zealand English, showing how humour can be a subtle yet powerful tool for expressing and marking ethnic belonging or exclusion. Further extending this discourse, *Lampropoulou and Archakis* (2015) explore the construction of hegemonic masculinities in Greek narrative performances, revealing how humour can both reflect and perpetuate dominant masculine ideals within social narratives. This focus on masculinity is complemented by *McCann et al.* (2010), who examine homophobic humour and its connection to male identity, uncovering its role in reinforcing emotional and physical violence, thus illustrating how humour can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and social norms.

Research into the neurocognitive mechanisms underlying humour appreciation has advanced significantly, utilizing techniques such as fMRI, EEG, and fNIRS to explore the roles of various brain regions. Shammi and Stuss (1999) provided foundational insights into the role of the right frontal lobe in humour appreciation, showing its importance in processing social and emotional aspects of humour. This early work laid the groundwork for more targeted investigations into the neural pathways involved. Neely et al. (2012) extended this understanding to children, identifying neural correlates of humour detection and appreciation, emphasizing developmental aspects of humour processing. Shibata et al. (2014) explored the integration of cognitive and affective networks in humour comprehension, highlighting the interaction between emotion and reasoning in humour appreciation. Campbell et al. (2015) further clarified the roles of the temporoparietal junction and superior frontal gyrus in humour comprehension, pinpointing these areas as critical hubs for integrating context and producing the emotional response associated with humour. Adamczyk et al. (2017) examined the neural circuits of verbal humour comprehension in individuals with schizophrenia using fMRI, revealing disruptions in typical humour-processing

19

networks. In the same year, Tetsuya (2017) showed that humour appreciation involves synchronized activity in the medial prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, underscoring the importance of memory and emotional regulation.

Chan (2016) and Chan et al. (2018) explored deficits in humour appreciation among gelotophobics (individuals who fear being laughed at) and how different humour styles engage distinct neural pathways, revealing the complexity and variability of humour appreciation mechanisms. Dirk Wildgruber et al. (2020) utilized fMRI to map humour processing in healthy adults, emphasizing how different brain regions are sequentially activated during humour detection and appreciation. Corinna et al. (2020) examined the shared and distinct neurocognitive mechanisms of humour comprehension and creative cognition through EEG alpha activity, revealing overlaps in how these processes engage the brain's cognitive networks. Mayseless and Reiss (2021) employed fNIRS to investigate the neurodevelopmental basis of humour in young children, providing insights into how humour appreciation evolves over time. Xueyan et al. (2022) added evidence about how intelligence dynamically impacts verbal humour processing using ERPs and EROs, showing that humour appreciation engages both cognitive and emotional intelligence in distinct ways. These studies collectively show that humour appreciation is a multifaceted neurocognitive process, relying on a network of brain regions that integrate cognitive, affective, and social functions. The findings illuminate how humour evolves developmentally and varies across individuals and contexts.

Research into the role of humour in human-computer interaction (HCI) has gained momentum, particularly as artificial intelligence (AI) systems become more integrated into everyday life. Early explorations by Morkes et al. (1999) investigated the effects of humour in task-oriented HCI and computer-mediated communication, providing a direct test of the Social Response Theory (SRT). Their findings highlighted humour's potential to create more engaging and user-friendly interactions. Huan and Szafir (2003) extended this line of inquiry by examining the use of humour in computer-mediated learning environments, identifying its positive effects on engagement and information retention. Augello et al. (2008) introduced the Humourist Bot, an early attempt at integrating computational humour into chatbot systems, demonstrating the technical challenges of creating humour that feels natural and contextually appropriate. Hempelmann and Petrenko (2015) took a narrative approach, designing AI capable of humourously reframing user interactions. Their work emphasized the need for context-sensitive algorithms that can adapt to dynamic conversational environments. Rayz (2017) provided a comprehensive framework for computational humour, discussing its applications and limitations in creating human-friendly systems. Zhang et al. (2019) addressed humour generation and interpretation in non-Western contexts by developing a manually annotated Chinese dataset for analyzing humour in jokes. This dataset laid the groundwork for cross-cultural studies in computational humour. Nijholt et al. (2017) presented a short survey of humour applications in HCI, emphasizing its role in enhancing dialogue technologies. Building on this, the HUMIC DIAL Workshop (2021) explored the deliberate design of humour in HCI, focusing on dialogue systems

and conversational AI. Rayz and Veale (2022) revisited the theoretical underpinnings of computational humour, specifically addressing the challenges of programming incongruity resolution and contextual awareness into AI systems. They argued that successful humour in AI requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural and emotional intelligence. These studies collectively underscore the potential of humour in improving human-AI interaction, while also highlighting the technical and theoretical challenges of programming humour into machines. As AI systems continue to evolve, humour may play an increasingly significant role in fostering more natural, engaging, and empathetic interactions.

The extensive body of literature on humour reveals notable gaps concerning the study of culturally specific humour frameworks, particularly in non-Western contexts. While significant strides have been made in understanding the neurocognitive mechanisms, social functions, and linguistic structures of humour, much of this research focuses on Western paradigms and languages, leaving indigenous forms of humour underexplored. Furthermore, though humour has been analyzed as a tool for identity construction, social commentary, and resistance, limited attention has been given to the discursive strategies embedded in proverbs as frames for humour, especially in African socio-cultural settings. Igbo proverbs, rich in metaphor and cultural significance, remain under-researched as humour-generating devices and as vehicles for social critique and commentary. The present research addresses these gaps by investigating and offering insights into how indigenous linguistic forms serve as reservoirs for humour within a specific cultural framework, thereby enriching the global discourse on humour studies with non-Western perspectives.

3. Framework

The analysis of Igbo proverbs and their transformation into anti-proverbs in this study is anchored on Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH). The theory provides a principled linguistic account of humour by explaining how humorous meaning emerges from script opposition, that is, the interaction of two incompatible or partially overlapping mental representations within a single stretch of discourse. SSTH is particularly suited to proverb-based humour, where established interpretive expectations are deliberately disrupted through linguistic manipulation. Within SSTH, a *script* refers to an organised body of background knowledge that speakers draw upon to interpret utterances. Humour arises when an utterance is compatible with two scripts that are in opposition such as *ideal vs. real*, *expected vs. unexpected*, or *normative vs. subversive*, and the listener is required to shift from an initial, default interpretation to an alternative one. This shift produces a moment of pragmatic incongruity that is resolved through contextual understanding, resulting in humorous effect.

In the context of Igbo proverbial discourse, traditional proverbs activate culturally shared scripts associated with moral instruction, social norms, and collective wisdom. Anti-proverbs, however, exploit the recognisability of these scripts by introducing lexical or structural modifications that trigger an opposing script grounded in contemporary social experience. The

21

humorous effect of anti-proverbs therefore lies not in the proverb alone, but in the discursive tension between the conventional script and its pragmatic re-contextualisation.SSTH offers a focused analytical framework for examining this process because it allows for systematic identification of (i) the scripts evoked by the original proverb, (ii) the opposing scripts introduced through anti-proverbial transformation, and (iii) the point at which script opposition becomes pragmatically salient. Although formulated as a semantic theory, SSTH is inherently compatible with discourse pragmatics, as script activation and opposition are realised through contextualised language use rather than abstract meaning alone.

The exclusive adoption of SSTH in this study is methodologically motivated. The research is concerned specifically with how humour is linguistically constructed through meaning incongruity in proverbial discourse, rather than with psychological responses, affective states, or social hierarchies associated with humour. Integrating additional humour theories—such as superiority or relief—would necessitate a broader analytical focus and introduce explanatory variables that fall outside the study's discourse-pragmatic orientation. SSTH therefore provides a sufficient and theoretically coherent framework for analysing anti-proverbs as sites of humorous meaning-making and social evaluation. By using SSTH to analyse selected Igbo proverbs and their anti-proverbial extensions, this study demonstrates how script opposition functions as a pragmatic mechanism through which humour and social commentary are simultaneously achieved in African proverbial discourse.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, discourse-pragmatic approach, focusing on the close textual analysis of selected Igbo proverbs and their anti-proverbial transformations. The methodology is guided by Raskin's (1985) Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH), which provides an analytical framework for examining how humorous meaning arises from script opposition in language use. The study prioritises depth of linguistic interpretation over quantitative generalisation, consistent with qualitative approaches to humour and discourse analysis.The data consist of four Igbo proverbs and their corresponding anti-proverbial forms, purposively selected for their illustrative potential in demonstrating script opposition, pragmatic incongruity, and evaluative meaning-making. The choice of a limited dataset is methodologically motivated: the study aims to conduct fine-grained analysis of meaning construction, rather than to document the full range of Igbo proverbial humour. As such, the selected examples are treated as analytic instances, not as statistically representative samples.

The proverbs were identified through informal consultation with native Igbo speakers, including elders and individuals familiar with proverbial usage, to ensure authenticity and conventionality. These consultations served solely as a source of linguistic data, not as a basis for ethnographic or reception analysis. The study therefore does not examine audience responses or social group interpretations, as doing so would require a different research design involving interviews, surveys, or observational methods, which lie outside the scope of the present analysis.

All proverbs and anti-proverbs are presented in their original Igbo forms, accompanied by English translations. The translations are intended as interpretive aids for non-Igbo-speaking readers and do not replace the original texts in the analysis. Interpretation is grounded in the author's native-speaker competence and pragmatic intuition, with attention to contextual cues that activate competing scripts. While it is acknowledged that translation may involve some loss of nuance, a full bilingual or parallel-text analysis is beyond the methodological focus of this study.

Data analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage involves linguistic and discursive analysis, focusing on the structural and semantic features of the proverbs and their anti-proverbial transformations, as well as the identification of the scripts activated by each form. The second stage applies SSTH to examine how script opposition produces humour and enables social evaluation within discourse. The analysis is concerned with how meaning is pragmatically reconfigured through anti-proverbial transformation, rather than with psychological reactions or sociopolitical outcomes. This methodological approach allows for a systematic examination of how Igbo proverbs function as discursive resources for humour and social commentary. Restricting the analysis to linguistic mechanisms of meaning construction, helps the study to maintains a clear pragmatic focus while contributing to broader discussions on humour and evaluative discourse in African languages.

4. Data Analysis

This section analyses a selected sample of four Igbo proverbs using the analytical principles of the Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSHT). This theory enables us to examine how humour emerges from incongruities and the interplay of cultural scripts within these proverbs. Here, we focus on the following four proverbs: Ogo bụ chi onye; Oji ọfọ ga-ala; A kwàá akwụrụ; and Eziokwu bụ ndụ.

4.1.1 Ọgọ bụ chi onye. *(An in-law is one's guardian spirit.)*
TP: Ọgọ bụ chi onye. *(An in-law is one's guardian spirit.)*
AP: Ọgọ bụ chi onye abụgə mọgə onye ọgọ ya na-akwa baro. *(That an in-law is one's guardian spirit does not include one whose in-law is a wheelbarrow-pusher.)*

In this traditional proverb (TP), two semantic scripts are at play - script (i) the guardian spirit (Chi) and script (ii) familial respect/status. In script (i), the Igbo cultural belief system, 'chi' refers to a personal god or guardian spirit, which plays a protective, guiding role in an individual's life. By likening an in-law to a 'chi,' the proverb implies that in-laws are benevolent figures who provide protection and support, much like a guardian spirit. In script (ii), the proverb conveys the culturally significant role of in-laws, suggesting that they are deserving of honour and respect. This belief also implies that a relationship with an in-law offers spiritual or moral elevation due to their esteemed position within the family structure. The script-switch trigger in anti-proverb (AP) disrupts the idealised image of the in-law by introducing a condition that radically shifts the meaning – 'does not include one whose in-law is a wheelbarrow-pusher' **-** introduces social class

23

and economic status into the conversation, which changes the frame of reference from spiritual and familial respect to practical, economic considerations. This introduces script (iii) – social class/realism. The anti-proverb suggests that the protective or esteemed role of the in-law as a 'chi' only applies to those of higher social standing, highlighting the reality that status and wealth influence respect and treatment in society.

The humour in the anti-proverb arises from the incongruity between two contrasting ideas - expectation of an in-law as a guardian Spirit as against element of surprise of social class distinction. The audience expects that all in-laws, regardless of their social status, should be respected and viewed as protective figures, in line with the traditional proverb. The anti-proverb subverts this expectation by introducing the condition that an in-law who is a 'wheelbarrow-pusher' (symbolising a lower social class or status) does not carry the same respect or protective power. The humour arises from this unexpected twist, which contrasts the idealised view of in-laws with the harsh realities of social class distinctions. The humourous conflict is resolved when the audience recognises that the idealised role of the in-law as a 'chi' or guardian spirit does not apply universally. The anti-proverb makes a social commentary on how economic and social status influence familial relationships, challenging the notion that all in-laws are equally revered or respected. The humour emerges from the overlap between the spiritual/familial script of the traditional proverb and the social realism script introduced by the anti-proverb. The expectation of unconditional respect for an in-law is humourously undermined by the practical consideration that an in-law's social and economic status can diminish their perceived importance. The anti-proverb derives its humour by contrasting the idealised view of an in-law as a protective, guardian figure (the chi) with the real-world impact of social class and economic status. The script-switch from familial reverence to a pragmatic evaluation based on one's social standing introduces a humourous incongruity that challenges traditional cultural values, revealing how economic conditions can affect relationships. The proverb's suggestion of universal respect is undercut by the unexpected and realistic observation that not all in-laws, especially those of lower status, command the same level of reverence.

4.1.2 **Oji ọfọ ga-ala.** *(One who holds 'ofo' – symbol of justice – usually escapes danger lurking on his homeward journey.)*

TP: **Oji ọfọ ga-ala.** *(One who holds 'ofo' – symbol of justice – usually escapes danger lurking on his homeward journey.)*

AP: **Oji ọfọ ga-ala abụghị maka ebe a tụrụ bọmbụ.** *(That one who holds 'ofo' - symbol of justice – usually escapes danger lurking on his homeward journey, is hardly true in war situations where bomb explosions are commonplace.)*

In the traditional proverb (TP), two primary scripts are involved - script (i) 'protection through justice' and script (ii) 'divine intervention/belief'. The 'ofo,' a sacred symbol of justice, is believed to provide protection for the one who holds it. Script (i) deducible from the proverb suggests that as long as a person holds the symbol of justice, they are protected from harm, especially on their journey. In (ii), the proverb implies that divine or spiritual forces will ensure

24

the safety of the righteous or just person, reinforcing traditional beliefs in the power of justice and the sacredness of the 'ofo.' Leveraging the script-switch trigger implicit here, the anti-proverb introduces a contrast by adding a condition that was not present in the original proverb - hardly true in war situations where bomb explosions are commonplace **-** introduces a modern, harsh reality that contradicts the traditional belief in protection through justice. This introduces script (iii) realism/modern warfare. Here, the anti-proverb switches from a spiritual or belief-based scenario to a pragmatic, realistic context, modern warfare, where bomb explosions are unpredictable and indiscriminate, thus rendering the traditional belief in the protective power of the "ofo" ineffective.

The humour in the anti-proverb arises from the incongruity between two dramatically different contexts: expectation (script i – protection by justice). In the traditional context, holding the "ofo" is believed to shield a person from harm, based on spiritual or metaphysical beliefs about justice and protection. The AP comes with the surprise script (iii) denoting reality of warfare to surprise the audience by juxtaposing this traditional belief with the brutal reality of modern war, where no symbol, no matter how sacred, can protect someone from random, deadly explosions (bombs). The humour resolves when the audience acknowledges that the belief in the protective power of "ofo" is impractical in situations of modern warfare. The anti-proverb makes a pointed commentary on the limitations of traditional beliefs when confronted with the chaotic and dangerous nature of contemporary conflict, particularly the indiscriminate violence of bombings. The humour is generated from the overlap between the two scripts, spiritual protection and real-world danger**.** The belief in metaphysical protection, embedded in the traditional proverb, is shown to be out of touch with the violent realities of war, where such protection is irrelevant in the face of explosives. The humourous effect comes from this unexpected shift in perspective. The anti-proverb generates humour by contrasting the traditional belief in the protection of justice symbolised by the "ofo" with the realistic danger posed by war and bomb explosions. The script-switch triggers humour by exposing the inadequacy of ancient beliefs in the face of modern violence. The proverb's expectation of safety through justice is shattered by the unpredictable, uncontrollable threat of war, creating irony and humourous incongruity.

4.1.3 A kwàá akwụrụ. (One is an indefatigable phenomenon)

TP: A kwàá akwụrụ. (One is an indefatigable phenomenon).

AP: A kwaa a kwuru abughi maka onye nwere otu ọkpa. (*This 'indefatigable phenomenon' as a physical attribute, which implies 'unshakeable,' is not applicable to a one-legged person.)*

The Traditional Proverb (TP): *A kwàá akwụrụ* evokes the script of resilience and indefatigability. The metaphor likens a person to something unyielding, such as a tree that stands firm regardless of external forces. The expectation is that this quality is universally applicable to anyone deemed strong or resilient. The Anti-Proverb (AP): *A kwaa a kwuru abughi maka onye nwere otu ọkpa* introduces a conflicting script. It highlights physical limitations (one-leggedness) that negate the metaphorical application of indefatigability. This juxtaposition introduces an unexpected twist by challenging the universality of the proverb. The AP surprises the audience by

undermining the conventional wisdom encapsulated in the TP. The opposition lies in The AP surprises the audience by undermining the conventional wisdom encapsulated in the TP. The opposition lies in two senses **-** resilience vs. fragility **(**TP emphasizes universal resilience, while the AP points out the specific fragility of a one-legged individual) and physical vs. metaphorical strength (TP's metaphorical emphasis on indefatigability clashes with the AP's focus on physical limitations).

There is an overlap between the metaphorical script (indefatigability as a universal attribute) and the literal script (physical capability of a one-legged individual). The switch-trigger occurs when the AP redirects the audience's attention from the broad, metaphorical application of resilience to a narrow, literal critique of the saying's relevance in specific contexts. The anti-proverb humourously undercuts the idealistic message of the original by applying the notion of indefatigability to a specific, exaggerated scenario: someone with one leg. By doing this, it challenges the idea that resilience is an automatic or universal characteristic, suggesting instead that physical or personal limitations can, in fact, prevent someone from being 'indefatigable.' The humour arises from the incongruity between the audience's expectation of a universal truth (indefatigability as a given trait) and the reality presented in the AP (where it is absurd to apply this trait to someone with a physical handicap). The AP humourously exposes the proverb's inapplicability in certain situations, creating laughter through the absurdity of the mismatch. The AP effectively subverts the TP by introducing a scenario where the metaphorical wisdom fails. This switch from metaphor to literal application critiques the rigidity of traditional sayings and their inability to account for specific, real-life nuances. The humour stems from this semantic play, where the original script collapses under the weight of its incongruities.

The AP goes beyond humour to offer a subtle social critique – (i) awareness of diversity (challenges the universality of proverbs, urging a more subtle understanding of resilience and strength); (ii) empathy for the vulnerable **(**underscores the need for inclusivity and realism in societal ideals by highlighting the plight of a one-legged individual); (iii) questioning norms (critiques the overgeneralization in traditional wisdom, encouraging critical thinking rather than blind acceptance of cultural adages). In sum, Raskin's SSTH demonstrates how the humour in this anti-proverb is a product of script opposition, incongruity, and the unexpected shift in meaning. The AP uses humour to not only entertain but also provoke deeper reflection on the limitations of traditional proverbs in addressing the complexity of human experiences.

4.1.4 Eziokwu bụ ndụ. (Truth is life.)

TP: Eziokwu bụ ndụ. (Truth is life.)

AP: Eziokwu bụ ndụ bu onye a gwara o kwere. (Truth is life – holds only for those who appreciate the truth as a matter of principle.)

Here, the analysis proceeds through four basic steps - script comparison, script switch and incongruity, resolution, social critique. TP triggers scripts that address various aspects of truth - truth is universally essential, likened to life itself, which everyone inherently values; this script assumes truth as a constant, absolute virtue that sustains human existence; life is inherently

valuable because it is a fundamental aspect of existence, and by extension, truth's value is universal. AP triggers additional comparative scripts - truth's value is conditional; it is only meaningful to those who accept or recognize its importance; life, like truth, is subjective and depends on individual or cultural acknowledgment of its worth. From the foregoing, the AP contrasts with the TP by shifting the scope of truth's applicability from universal to conditional, creating a conflict between the two sets of scripts. At the level script-switch, the TP sets up the expectation that truth has universal and absolute significance However, the AP abruptly switches to a conditional perspective, where truth's significance is tied to the listener's disposition. The switch is triggered by the phrase *"bu onye a gwara o kwere"* (holds only for those who accept it). This phrase overturns the universal idealism of the TP and introduces the incongruity of truth being subjective. The incongruity lies in the disparity between the idealistic assumption that truth is inherently valuable and the more realistic, pragmatic assertion that its value depends on individual acceptance. This dissonance generates humour by exposing the naïveté of the TP's universal claim.

At the next level, AP resolves the incongruity by redefining the concept of truth - while the TP assumes truth to be universally revered, the AP reframes it as a conditional concept. This resolution aligns with human tendencies to reject uncomfortable or inconvenient truths, making the AP both humourous and relatable. The AP shifts the focus from the idealized notion of truth as an absolute virtue to the practical realities of human interaction and belief systems. The last level entails the social critique whereby the AP suffices as a critique of traditional values and assumptions - relativity of values (the selective nature of human morality, where truth's significance is filtered through personal or societal biases); human fallibility (human tendencies to deny or ignore truths that challenge their perspectives); cultural skepticism (AP's conditioning the value of truth, the AP reflects a cultural reality where truth often struggles against subjective interpretations and situational ethics.

In sum, the TP establishes an idealised script that aligns truth with life, presenting it as an absolute value. The AP humourously deconstructs this idealism, introducing a conditional perspective that reflects the complexities of human behaviour. Using Raskin's SSTH, the analysis demonstrates how script comparison, switch, and resolution create humour by juxtaposing universal and conditional interpretations of truth. Culturally, the AP critiques the overgeneralization of traditional proverbs, presenting a perspective that resonates with real-world experiences. This interplay of humour and critique makes the AP a powerful tool for engaging with and reflecting on societal values. The application of SSHT to these proverbs reveals their layered use of humour to convey social commentary. The humour in these proverbs is rooted in incongruities, exaggerations, anthropomorphisms, and symbolic equivalences, which simultaneously entertain and instruct. They critique societal norms, encourage moral reflection, and reinforce communal values in ways that are both accessible and memorable. Through humour, these proverbs provide culturally resonant frames for addressing issues like respect for relationships, justice, humility, and truthfulness, ensuring their relevance in navigating the complexities of Igbo socio-cultural life.

The analyses of the four proverbs, *Ọgọ bụ chi onye*, *Oji ofo ga-ala*, *A kwaa akwụrụ,* and *Eziokwu bụ ndụ*, give significant insights into how Igbo proverbs serve as vehicles for humour and social commentary. These proverbs, examined through Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSHT), address the research problem and bridge the identified gap in humour studies by emphasising the universal applicability of humour theories to African contexts through the sociocultural specificity of Igbo proverbs. In so doing, it highlights a number of issues such as the integration of proverbs and humour as discursive frames, as well as pedagogical tools. While previous humour studies have focused on cognitive or universal aspects, this research situates humour within the socio-cultural context of Igbo land, showing how cultural values, norms, and experiences shape humour production and appreciation. The proverbs analysed highlight their role as discursive tools that use humour to engage audiences, challenge behaviours, and sustain cultural knowledge. This aligns with the research aim to explore how Igbo proverbs provide humourous yet profound commentary on social realities. By applying SSHT, this study demonstrates the adaptability of these humour theories to African contexts, extending their explanatory power to proverbs as a unique form of oral literature. It also underscores the interdisciplinary nature of humour studies, combining linguistic, cultural, and cognitive perspectives. The findings reveal that humour in Igbo proverbs is not trivial but serves a didactic function, making moral and social lessons more impactful and relatable.

The proverbs' social commentary, reinforced through humour, addresses critical issues such as familial relationships, justice, leadership, and truth. This commentary reflects the collective consciousness of Igbo society and provides a lens for critiquing societal transformations. The analyses reinforce the argument that humour in Igbo proverbs is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon that integrates cultural values and cognitive incongruities. These proverbs not only entertain but also function as powerful tools for social commentary, providing a culturally grounded framework for addressing universal human concerns. This contribution fills the identified research gap and opens avenues for further exploration of humour in African oral traditions. The transformation of proverbs into anti-proverbs reflects the dynamism of Igbo culture, showing how traditional oral forms adapt to address contemporary challenges. These adaptations ensure the continued relevance of proverbs as tools for moral instruction, social critique, and humour. The findings contribute to understanding how African languages and oral traditions encode humour and social critique, enriching the broader discourse on proverbs and humour studies. By applying humour theory like SSHT, this research situates Igbo proverbs within a global academic framework.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that African proverbs, as exemplified by selected Igbo proverb and anti-proverb pairs, function not only as conventionalised expressions of shared knowledge but also as discursive resources for humour and social evaluation. Through anti-proverbial transformation, established proverbial meanings are pragmatically reconfigured, allowing speakers to exploit

28

familiarity while introducing incongruity that generates humorous and evaluative effects. Drawing on Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH), the analysis demonstrates that humour in Igbo anti-proverbs arises from script opposition between inherited normative meanings and pragmatically re-contextualised interpretations. The effectiveness of these forms lies in their ability to activate competing scripts within a single discourse unit, thereby producing humour while simultaneously enabling social commentary. This confirms the applicability of SSTH to proverb-based humour and highlights its usefulness for analysing humorous meaning as a product of linguistic structure and contextual interpretation.

The study further illustrates that anti-proverbs represent an innovative extension of proverbial discourse, revealing how conventional linguistic forms are adapted to accommodate changing communicative needs. Rather than signalling a departure from tradition, these transformations underscore the flexibility of proverbial language as a site of meaning negotiation within contemporary interaction. In this sense, humour operates as a pragmatic mechanism through which evaluation and critique are encoded, without undermining the recognisability of the original proverb. By adopting a qualitative, discourse-pragmatic approach, this study contributes to linguistic scholarship on African languages by foregrounding the mechanisms through which humour and social commentary are constructed in proverbial discourse. While the analysis is limited to a small, purposively selected dataset, it provides a focused account of how script opposition functions in Igbo anti-proverbs and offers a foundation for further research employing broader corpora or complementary methodological approaches.

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