

SEXUAL TABOOS AND EUPHEMISMS IN IGBO: AN ANTHROPOLINGUISTIC APPRAISAL

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Abstract: Due to face-threatening effect of taboo words, euphemisms are used to replace them for the sake of politeness. Several studies have been carried out on sexual taboos across cultures, including Igbo, but most have centrally focused on euphemisms for sex organs, with inadequate attention paid to the sex act itself. As a result, this study examines euphemisms about sex or copulation in Igbo with a view to delineating the categories and strategies employed by Igbo to express them. Through Participant and Non-participant Observation, data (11 conversations) were collected, from 22 participants comprising 16 men and 6 women across 6 different settings in Lagos State, Nigeria. The result showed that participants used two major strategies (idiomatic expressions and symbols) and coinage to euphemise the act of sex. Two broad categories of sex found were explicit euphemisms representing the common type, and opaque euphemisms representing the uncommon type. However, both categories are existing words in the language that are imbued with new meanings to achieve the censoring objective. The alternative forms adequately serve the intended purpose because they mask and obscure the tabooed subject and hence save the face of interlocutors.

Key words: Language, Igbo, culture, perception, taboo, euphemism, politeness

1. Introduction

In every society, there are things that people are allowed to say and do, and things they are bound not to say and do. These restrictions and constraints to verbal freedom and acts are formally referred to as taboos. It is instructive to note that, prohibited areas in speech and behavior are not crimes, but rather phenomenon that is sensitive to

a culture that they fear, hold in awe, regard as sacrosanct. For instance, in the Igbo world, women are forbidden to climb trees, or eat the rump of a chicken, and all (men and women) are barred from plucking *udara* fruit from the tree in any guise, until it drops by itself. Not that if a woman climbs a tree or eats the rump of a chicken the woman will die or become sick; not that if a person plucks an *udara* fruit with a stick the person will be plagued by the gods or the tree will stop yielding sweet fruits. These acts are prohibited based on certain ethical and cultural considerations; for instance, Igbo are of the view that, due to women's fragile nature, it does not seem proper for them to engage in the strenuous and often dangerous act of climbing a tree. Barring women from eating the rump of a fowl is traceable to pristine folklore when the act attracted a curse on a certain woman, hence the ban. Again, the Igbo believe that, among other trees, the *udara* tree is the abode of the god of fertility; as a matter of fact, the fruits are regarded as babies hence the proverb *o bughị soosọ udara mụtara nnwa a na-apịwa onu* 'It is not only the *udara* that gave birth to a baby whose mouth is forced open'. Therefore, just as babies are not forced out of a pregnant woman until the traditional nine-month maturation period, it is deemed unethical to pluck the fruit before its maturation period. Beyond the superstition surrounding the prohibition, the taboo is just a way of compelling people to wait for nature's time.

These are taboos based on physical things; other taboos are based on verbal expressions, that is, words and expressions that people are constrained from using at certain times and contexts. Note that, unlike the physical-based taboos that are not negotiable, the verbal-based taboos are negotiable. In other words, while women are strictly not allowed to climb trees at all, people are not completely barred from using prohibited words and expressions. The use of such words is rather restricted to certain contexts and time of the day or period, as the case may be. For instance, in some Igbo communities, natives are free to refer to the long, slithering animal by its name *agwọ* 'snake' during the day, but in night time people are not allowed to refer to it by its name, but by another name whose referent looks like a snake, such as

eriri ‘thread’. Additionally, Igbo and other cultures do not approve of arbitrarily using the names of men’s and women’s private parts in public and even private spaces except in situations and contexts where it will not constitute embarrassment to other people around. In such contexts where it is embarrassing to use the real names of human private parts, other words are used to codify them; these are euphemisms used in place of the real tabooed terms. Out of other forms of verbal taboos, sex is one of the most pronounced due mainly to the idea that it is a private affair. Consequently, it has attracted so much censorship and secrecy across cultures than other tabooed subjects; it may be easier for people to talk about death, body effluvia, and others as highlighted above but not sex. In this study, attention will be focused on euphemisms employed to replace verbal taboos related to sex and sexual activity among the Igbo. This is with a view to estimating the categories, and strategies used in the formation of alternative words and expressions for the subject of sex.

The Igbo as a name represents the language of the people as well as the speakers’ cultural identity. The language is a member of the Igboid group classified in the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson & Blench 2000), spoken in the South-Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria (Emenanjo 2015), West Africa. By numeric, the Igbo language is one of the three major languages spoken in Nigeria where no less than 400 ethno-linguistic groups live. The Igbo language is a multi-dialectal language with a high level of mutual intelligibility; there is a high and a low variety of the dialect commonly referred to as the standard Igbo and non-standard Igbo. Standard Igbo is the high and prestigious variety used in formal settings while the non-standard represents the low variety used in informal settings. Most speakers of Igbo use either the high or low variety depending on the need and the setting. As a people, the Igbo are the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria after Hausa and Yoruba. Geographically, the Igbo live in the South-East and some parts of South-South in Nigeria. In the modern political dispensation delineated by states, they predominantly reside in five states as follows: Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo state; a substantial number of native Igbo

speakers also live in Delta, Rivers state, and Benue. They are literally enclosed by neighbours on all sides; in the east by the Ibibio and Efik, in the north by the Igala and Idoma; in the west by the Edo, and in the south by the Opobo and Kalabari. By religion, the Igbo are originally traditionalists but on account of colonialism became largely Christians, with a minimal and insignificant few as traditionalists and Muslims. Vocationally, the Igbo are traditionally farmers, craftsmen, and itinerant traders; they can be found in large numbers across African states, Europe, and virtually around the world.

2. Concept of taboo and euphemism

In cultures all over the world, there exists taboos regarding varied sensitive subjects or things or acts that individuals and communities are constrained to oblige. The notion of taboo has been variedly defined by linguists. Wardhaugh (2000) attests that taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame (see also Isbuga-Erel 2008). Corroborating this view, Allan & Burridge (2006) conceive of taboo as a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. Dwelling on the reason behind taboos, they elaborated that taboos are proscriptions of behaviour arising out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it is perceived to be a potential cause of discomfort, harm or injury. In the same way, Bussmann (2006: 1173) defines a taboo as "a term that is avoided for religious, political, or sexual reasons and is usually replaced by a euphemism".

Wardhaugh (2000) explained that the implication of linguistic constraints or avoidance is that certain words are not to be used and certain objects are not to be referred to, except in certain situations and by certain or authorized persons or through deliberate circumlocutory configuration of words. Wardhaugh's "certain situations" and "certain persons" is used to state that the ban imposed on tabooed words is both situational and personal. It is situational in the sense that such

words are not expected to be used in public places or during interaction involving other people. In private, people are free to use tabooed words and expressions; there is nothing forbidding a couple from using tabooed words for sex organs in the throes of sexual intercourse. It is also personal in the sense that certain persons, by virtue of age or status may have more right to use tabooed words in public more than others. For instance a parent may use a tabooed word in the presence of their child, but the child dare not use it in the presence of the parent or even siblings. A common denominator in the definitions above is the idea of constraints or prohibition. A certain term used to refer to an object or entity is deemed to be a source of shame or embarrassment and is therefore banned. The ban is used to confer some censorship or shield to the object being referred, as a mark of respect. Hence, such behaviours that are prohibited are seen as shameful, or embarrassing in some way to a community; therefore engaging in tabooed or prohibited act or expression is to deliberately offend other people.

Granted that taboo words are associated with negativity, a positive and important merit of taboos is that they serve as a catalyst to language change (Malmkjær (ed.) 2002; Allan & Burridge 2006). The need to conceal the reference of unsavoury words provides the motivation to use other forms as substitutes; these alternatives are technically termed euphemisms. Euphemisms are therefore indirect expressions or references to that which is forbidden by a culture. In this direction, Cruse (2006: 57) defines euphemism as “an expression that refers to something that people hesitate to mention lest it cause offence, but which lessens the offensiveness by referring indirectly in some way. Similarly, Bussmann (2006: 388) views euphemism as “a pleasant replacement for an objectionable word that has pejorative connotations” and adds that the avoidance of certain words deemed offensive to society’s sensibilities is termed tabooization. Apparently, the major aim behind the use of euphemism is to present a situation, or a person in a more agreeable and polite light, in the form of political correctness. The concept of euphemism stresses the principle of substitution or replacement of one expression with another during interaction among

people belonging to a culture. The original expression is deemed embarrassing or shameful and so warrants the use of an artificial substitute that is less embarrassing or not embarrassing altogether. Consequently, people tend to use sweet, soothing, and socially acceptable terms to replace words and expressions that are not acceptable (Bani Mofarrej & Al-Abed Al-Haq 2015).

Malmkjær (ed.) (2002) states that euphemisms are formed in three major ways: creating or coining new words and expressions, modification of existing words and expressions, and borrowing terms and expressions from other languages. In specific terms, Allan (2018) attests that euphemisms could be formed by several measures including using hyperbole (e.g., hot seat), understatement (e.g., anatomically correct doll), technical jargons (e.g., *faeces* instead of *shit*), synecdoche (e.g., *down there* instead of *genitals*), metonymy (e.g., *tit* instead of *breast*), colloquial terms (e.g., *period* instead of *menstrual cycle*), circumlocution (e.g., *companion animal* instead of *pet*), abbreviation, alphabetism, borrowing, and even, in some cases omission (e.g., the *ladies/gents* instead of *lavatory / toilet*). Additionally, Allan (2018) avers that there are three forms of euphemisms: those used in the streets as jargons; those that mask the taboo word to such an extent that the taboo word is not recognized, and those that are as offensive as the taboo word. Generally, Allan's second form of euphemism is more common than the rest; these are euphemisms that obscure or blur the taboo word completely by taking the attention of the interlocutor away from the real thing; to this extent, euphemisms express and represent the creativity and inventiveness of the community.

On the whole, taboo and euphemism are like two faces of the same coin; one face is positive while the other face is negative. The positive face is a product or consequence of the negative face, and not the other way around. The negative face is the original construct which, however, the culture is not comfortable with, and therefore gives birth to the positive face. During interaction, people intentionally obscure the negative face and present the positive face in order not to cause offence or embarrassment to other interlocutors.

Quite a number of empirical studies have been carried out in the area of taboos involving sex and sexual organs in Igbo. For instance, Omega (2013), Oyeka (2015) and Fakuade et al. (2018), focused on taboos relating to sex in Igbo with similar results. In respect to issues surrounding sex, Omega (2013) examined taboo words and their corresponding euphemisms as it affects sex, adultery, and pregnancy in Igbo. They found the following: *igba naama* 'to operate outside' instead of *akwụnakwuna* 'prostitution'; *inwe onye obia* 'to have a guest' instead of *ihu nsọ* 'menstruation'; *iriju afo* 'to be filled' instead of *idi ime* 'to be pregnant'; *ime apari* 'to engage in a stupid act' instead of *ikwa iko* 'fornication / adultery'; *irahu* 'to sleep with someone' instead of *ira otu* 'to have sex'.

Oyeka (2015) examined taboos and euphemisms in Igbo and found that the Igbo use *nke ihu* 'the front one' instead of *ara* 'breast'; *ife mgbada* 'the thing down there' instead of female genitals; *ikenga* 'a powerful Igbo totem', *mgbadike* 'a stubborn masquerade' instead of *amu* 'penis'. From a gender perspective, they made the claim that the Igbo use powerful euphemisms to represent the male sex organ but do not use the same for the female sex, and relates the disparities to patriarchy.

Fakuade et al. (2018) found three major linguistic taboos in Igbo as follows: morality-related taboos, veneration-related taboos and decorum-related taboos. Out of the three, the morality-related taboos are the ones that relate to sex and sex organs, as follows: *nkeiru* 'the front one' for *ara* 'breast'; *ukwu* 'hip' for *ike* 'buttocks'; *ihe o ji bụrụ nwoke* 'what makes him a man' for *amu* 'penis'; *ihe o ji bụrụ nwaanyị* 'what makes her a woman' for *otu* 'vagina'; *ogodo* 'loin cloth' for *akpa amu* 'scrotum'; *abu* 'feather' for *aji ike* 'pubic hair'; *irida* 'to come down' for *imu nwa* 'child delivery'; *ihu onwa* 'to see the moon' for *nsọ* 'menstruation'; *ahu mgbanye* 'body change' for *idi ime* 'to be pregnant'; *inwe mmekọ* 'to have an affair with someone' for *ira otu* 'to have sex'.

The aforementioned studies involved several forms of taboos in Igbo including sex-related taboos and comprised of mainly euphemisms

used instead of the tabooed words for sex organs. The present study departs from the previous ones and advances research by focusing strictly on verbal referents to the sex act by Igbo in the course of interaction.

3. The approach and the method

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis also known as the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis is used by the two anthropologists, Edward Sapir, and his protégé, Benjamin Whorf to postulate that the language we use, to a large extent, influences the way we perceive the world. The hypothesis holds that the semantic properties of an individual's native language influence thought, and consequently speakers of different languages think in different ways and see the world in different ways (Kay & Kempton 1984; Giesbrecht 2009; Hussein 2012). The ideas of Sapir and Whorf on language are conditioned by their empirical studies on American Indian languages, particularly the Hopi language. The linguistic structures that they found were very different from those of English, French, and German. This observation led Whorf to argue that these varying structures suggest different ways of thinking and these differences lead speakers of Hopi and these European languages to view the world differently. Since thought is expressed via language, it follows that a language with a different structure must pattern thought along its lines, thus influencing perception. According to Sapir (1929: 207; cited in Regier & Xu 2017),

human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving particular problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do

because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

In corroboration, Whorf (1956: 213; cited in Regier & Xu 2017), states that

the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, ... We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

There are two outstanding elements in both postulations. First is that language is not merely a means of communication or interaction between people; rather, language is a medium of thought, and so influences ideas and perceptions of the speakers. Second is that, it is the linguistic system or language habits of the group that impacts organization of ideas in the minds of speakers, and since these systems and habits are not the same, perception is bound to be different across languages.

Anchored on these twin postulations, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis makes two major claims: the first claim is that, the language we speak and think in shapes the way we perceive the world; for example, if speakers of X language have certain words used to describe objects and speakers of Y language lack similar words, then it will be easier for speakers of X language to discuss those things and refer to them than speakers of language Y (Hussein 2012). The second claim, which is presumed stronger than the first is that, the existence of the various language systems signifies that the people who think in these different languages must perceive the world differently; for example, if X language

makes distinctions that Y language does not make, then speakers of X language will more readily perceive the differences in their environment to which such linguistic distinctions draw attention (Hussein 2012). Some of these distinctions may be in the area of naming, kinship terms or other cultural norms. It is assumed that these distinctions may have implications for cognitive and cultural development (Regier & Xu 2007).

Implicit in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the place of culture in the link between language and perception. Sapir realized that there is an intimate, inextricable connection between culture and language, (Hymes 1964). Wardhaugh (2010: 229) notes that, there is a “relationship between the sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it”. Trudgill (1984: 25; cited in Ghounane 2012: 11) states that there are three effects of society on language, as follows: the physical environment, the social environment, and the cultural environment. The physical environment comprises of the objects in the environment that are seen. The social environment constitutes relationships and interactions among people. The cultural environment comprises of community’s belief system, values, customs, etc. According to Trudgill (1984) these environments have effects on the language of the group through which they make sense of their world.

One of the areas to which the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis could be applied is in the explication or analysis of cultural phenomenon. It is a fact that, taboos and euphemisms exist in virtually all human societies, but it is also a fact that, all societies do not have a homogenous conception of what amounts to linguistic taboo, or indirect means of accounting for them. Due to disparities in languages, each language uses its own unique cultural lens to view taboos and their corresponding euphemisms, which is a reflection of their world view. Thus, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is used as guide in this study to show the nuanced ways the Igbo think and perceive of sexual performance.

Data was sourced through participant and non-participant observation, during conversations among Igbo in physical settings. Out of an indeterminate number of conversations either initiated by the researcher

or initiated by others in the course of this inquiry, a total of eleven different conversations were adjudged useful for the study; they involved 22 participants made up of 6 women and 16 men. The disparity in the sex of participants was accountable to the fact that men were freer to discuss issues of sex in my presence than women. The conversations took place in 6 physical settings as follows: staff offices in the university, shops in the market, sitting rooms, restaurant / bar, entrance / balcony of house, and within a car. Precisely, 2 conversations took place in two different staff offices in school, 2 conversations took place in two different shops in the market, 2 conversations took place in two different sitting rooms in the domestic sphere, 2 conversations took place in two different exterior of houses, and 1 conversation took place in a car.

Out of the 11 data elicited, the researcher was involved in 6 as a participant observer while the researcher was not involved in 5 as a non-participant observer. In the case of the participant observation technique, one of the participants subtly introduced the subject of sexual performance in the course of interaction and thus elicited responses from the group involved. In the aspect of non-participant observation, the researcher was not involved but overheard the discussions of the participants concerned about their sexual experiences with the opposite sex. The data were all recorded with the aid of cell phone and field notes. The 6 conversation events involving the researcher were recorded with cell phone, while the 5 events where the researcher was a non-participant observer were recorded with field notes. It must be pointed out that the data recorded with field notes do not represent a perfect rendition of the text; this is due to the suddenness in which the data was encountered and the challenge posed to the memory to account for the actual sequence of the conversation. The reproduced texts represent a modified version of the actual conversation between or among the participants, but most importantly, the euphemisms were accurately captured. In keeping with ethical norms, the researcher sought and received permission from participants to use their conversation as samples in a study.

5. Data and analysis

The data is presented here and analysed. In the first place, it is apt to present an account of the Igbo expression for sex. The word used by Igbo to refer to sex is *irá ọtụ* 'to lick vagina' which is tabooed. The reason for adjudging the expression as taboo is the descriptive nature of the construction. Ideally the morpheme *ra* 'lick' in *irá* 'to lick' mainly refers to the act of licking by the tongue. This is captured in such expressions as *irá oroma* 'to eat / lick orange', *irá mango* 'to lick mango', *irá mgbimgbi* 'to lick pine apple', *irá pọpọ* 'to lick pawpaw', *irá ụtụ* 'to lick cherry'. In Igbo, the morpheme *ra* is associated with eating soft, tender, and juicy fruits as mentioned above, and this is not fortuitous. In this configuration, the tongue is related to the action of the male organ, while fruit is related to the delicate female organ. Technically, the Igbo extends or transfers the term used for the slithering and oscillating movement of the tongue *ra* to the movement of the male organ in the tender, juicy entrails of the female sex. It is a picturesque way of describing the sex act, by aptly depicting the action of the male organ going through the motions in the female genitalia. However, the study found different euphemisms used by Igbo speakers to refer to sex instead of using this lurid, salacious, offensive expression. The data is divided into two with regards to euphemisms; explicit euphemisms and opaque euphemisms. The criteria for contrast is speakers' familiarity or otherwise with the lexemes used in the euphemistic expressions.

5.1 Explicit euphemisms

These are transparent euphemisms that use common terms to refer to sexual activity; though masked, they are familiar expressions about sexual intercourse that could easily be related to the subject matter by native speakers of Igbo. The interpretation of their meaning is internal; that means, the lexical items could be a clue to the meaning. The data is presented below.

Extract 1: *nké ọzọ* ‘the other one / thing’

Office in a University: conversation between two married women WO1 and WO2 in the presence of the Researcher.

1. WO 1: *Nne, nke a Prof na-achọta gi kwa ụbọchị; ọdịkwa mma?*
‘Dear, I can see that Prof comes to your office every day.
Hope all is well.’
2. WO 2 (laughs): *O nwere nke a ma ụma eme.*
‘There is nothing without a cause.’
3. WO 1: *Jistie m biko.*
‘Please gist me.’
4. WO 2: *O nwere ihe ọzọ, O chọrọ ka m nye ya nké ọzọ.*
‘What else; he wants me to give him the other one/thing.’
5. WO 1 (laughs): *Hei! asịkwa nụ m ihe o ji echu office gi ka mmiri.*
‘Wow, no wonder he visits your office like a stream.’
6. WO 2: *Ahụ adighị nwoke ahụ.*
‘That man is sick.’

In this sample, the euphemism used to express the sexual act is *nke ọzọ* ‘the other one / thing’ as seen in line 4 by WO2. Based on WO1’s inquiry about a certain professor’s frequent visit to WO2’s office, WO2 informs WO1 that the reason is simply that the professor wants her to give him “the other one”. The euphemism is represented as *nke ọzọ* ‘the other one’ → ‘sex’.

The phrase *nke ọzọ* is a subtle term used to deflect attention away from the tabooed word and its physical referent. Technically, it is a reference to an abstract, anonymous and even inexistent entity. Semantically, it begs the question, which is *nke a* ‘this one’? If attention is directed at ‘the other one’, there should be an understanding of ‘this one’. Thus, if this one does not exist, the other one does not exist. Semantically too, *nke ọzọ* is a suggestion of distance or remoteness, given the surreptitious and covert nature of sex. While *nke a* ‘this one’ may be within reach and easily accessible, *nke ọzọ* ‘the other one’ may not be as accessible. Notably, in this reference, there is no modicum of idea what this one or the other one stands for, that

is, grammatically. However, the interactants, (WO1, WO2 and the researcher), being native speakers of Igbo, have a shared and mutual understanding that this one is inexistent, while the other one is used to delineate the act of sex. The anonymity of the construct is used to cloud the idea of sex in public to save the face of the interlocutors. This sample falls under the category of omission as exemplified by Allan (2018).

Extract 2: *ikpo okwe* ‘to play okwe (seed) game’

Shop in a market: conversation between a man (MA) and woman (WO) as the Researcher passes by.

1. MA: *Olee ihe sheedi Ngozi ji kpochie, o mere njem?*
‘Why is Ngozi’s shed locked, did she travel?’
2. WO: *Oo i nubeghi ihe mere?*
‘Oh, you have not heard what happened?’
3. MA: *Gini mere?*
‘What happened?’
4. WO: *Nnaa, Ngozi tuuru ime.*
‘My brother, Ngozi became pregnant.’
5. MA: *Ekwuzina a! onye tiri ya aka ojoo?*
‘Do not say! Who laid a bad hand on her?’
6. WO: *Kedu onye ozo n’abughị Ifeanyi?*
‘Who else could it be than Ifeanyi.’
7. MA: *Okwu agwu! Ehekwe m na o bu sooso ahia ka Ifeanyi na-asopulaayi ya; amaghị m na ha na-akpo okwe.*
‘End of story! I thought Ifeanyi was only supplying her goods; I didn’t know there were playing okwe game.’

In this extract, the euphemism used to replace the tabooed word is *ikpo okwe* ‘seed game’ as expressed by MA in line 7. Premised on the question by MA about the absence of a certain Ngozi in her shop, WO informs MA that Ngozi was impregnated by a certain Ifeanyi who used to be her (Ngozi’s) supplier of goods. Then, MA retorted that he thought their relationship was restricted to business and did not know that the

duo were involved in okwe game. The euphemism is represented as *ikpo okwe* 'to play okwe' → 'sex'.

Okwe is a seed from a tree of the same name. In Igbo, the leaf is mainly used as feed for goats and cows. *Okwe* is a small, round, brownish and spotted seed with a hard shelf; within the hard shelf is a soft white smaller seed that is inedible. When the seed matures on the tree, it breaks out from its enclosed case like the bean seed (*ukpaka*) on the tree branches and scatters all over the ground. Children pick them up and use it for a game. The game involves two people only; one person at one end and another person at another end, separated by a space as determined by the two players. Each of the players arrange the seed in a pyramid form whereby three seeds are assembled like a tripod, (leaving no space) and one seed is placed on top of the tripod. This done, each player uses another seed to try and knock down the pyramid of the other, and then take out the seeds one by one or all at once, if they have the dexterity to do so. A notable feature of the game is that, when the first player throws the seed targeted at the pyramid, they give the other person a chance to throw, and they go to and fro in that order until one person wins. In the context of sex, *ikpo okwe* is used as euphemism, because it involves two people playfully giving and receiving, or attacking and being attacked. The erotic thrusting in and out between two heterosexuals in coitus is associated with the reciprocal oscillation or the ebb and flow exchanges reminiscent of okwe game. Thus, the figurative expression is used to shield the real meaning intended.

Extract 3: *ikwà ikó* 'fornication / adultery'; *igbā òkòsò* 'to dance cone'

Sitting room in a home: A woman (WO) is watching a Nollywood movie on TV with the Researcher, until her husband (HU) enters and inquires about the movie. The scene on screen shows a man throwing his wife's clothes out of his house.

1. WO: *Daddy nnọọ.*

'Welcome daddy.'

2. HU: *Ehnnn...Gịnị na-eme ebe a? Gịnị ka nwaanyị a mere?*
‘Yeah...What is happening here? What did this woman do?’
3. WO: *Ọọ nwaanyị iberiibe ya na ọyị ya nwoke na-akwa iko, until one day ama gbaara di ya ọ chọputa.*
‘It is one stupid woman committing adultery with her man friend until one day, information reached her husband and he found out.’
4. HU: *Ha!*
‘What!’
5. WO: *Di ya jidere ha abụọ na hoteelụ ebe ha na-agba okoso.*
‘The husband caught two of them in a hotel where they were dancing cone.’
6. HU: *Chọọchị agbasaa!*
‘Church has dismisses / Game is over.’

In this extract, there are two euphemisms used in the place of the tabooed word for sexual intercourse; they are *ikwa iko* as seen in line 3 by WO and *igba okoso* as seen in line 5 by WO. WO relays the events on a movie on television to HU about a certain character in the movie who was caught in adultery, and specifically that her husband caught her and her man friend in a hotel where they were ‘dancing cone’. The first one is the commonest euphemism used for sex in Igbo. The euphemism is represented as *ikwa iko* ‘to push a friend’ → ‘sex’.

It seems to be the only one used across churches in Igbo land; even in the Igbo Bible, specifically, Galatians 5 verse 19, that is the expression accepted and used in the catalogue of transgressions recorded. Its use and appearance in churches and the holy scriptures respectively underlines the purity and sanctity of the expression that marks its acceptability. A factor that helps in no small way to veil its referent is the first word in the phrase, *ikwa* ‘to push’. The high and low tones on the segments *ikwà* render the meaning of the infinitival phrase as ‘to push’, but this is not the appropriate tones on the word. The word ought to have a high-high tone contour *ikwá* ‘to celebrate’ which renders the meaning as solemnization or commemoration instead

of 'to push' as given by *ikwà*. Given that *iko* means friend(ship), the phrase then means celebration or consummation of friendship, in the same way that *ikwa ozu* means solemnization of the dead. Given the right tones, the meaning of the phrase is less covert in relation to sex. The celebration or consummation of friendship between a man and woman can easily be interpreted in conjugal terms. The fact is that, over time, changes has taken place in the prosodic articulation of the phrase so much that even native speakers are not aware that they are using faulty tones that affect the meaning of the phrase. Incidentally, this nescience has helped to cloud the meaning of the expression which, however tallies with the *raison d'être* for its creation.

The second euphemism is represented as *igba okoso* 'to dance cone' → 'sex' used to replace the word for sex in Igbo. A cone is a geometric three-dimensional shape that tapers smoothly from a flat base to a sharp point. In Igbo, children use the cone as a play thing or toy; its use in play demands that the holder flips or spins the cone between the thumb and the middle finger with such a force that makes the cone spin or whirl once it makes contact with the ground. Thereafter, a player skillfully cuts the rotation with the forefinger or any other finger for the purpose of making the cone turn on its flat base. A player who successfully makes the cone turn on its flat base scores a point. In relation to sex, the pirouetting movement made by the cone is delineated as flirtatious and seductive in appearance, hence its use to conceal the tabooed word. The sensuous 'dance' of the cone is associated with the rhythmic frolic of two lovers in bed. It is not fortuitous that Igbo also refer to sex as *egwu ukwu* 'waist dance'. Both terms are figurative expressions used to refer to sex rather than the tabooed terms.

Extract 4: *ikụ ñkwà* 'to play/beat musical instruments'

Inside a car: conversation between a woman (WO) and the Researcher (RES).

1. WO: *Ụmụ nwaanyị dị egwu, eziokwu. Leenụ nwaanyị di m nyeere aka; she's a widow; ihe na-esiri ya ike. Di m wee kwuorọ ya ugwo ụlọ. Ma amaghị m na nwaanyị bụihe ozo n'obi.*

‘Women are terrible, honestly. Can you imagine a woman my husband assisted; she’s a widow; things were hard for her. So my husband paid her house rent. But I did not know that the woman had other things in her mind.’

2. RES: *Gịnị ka o mere?*

‘What did she do?’

3. WO: *Di m sị na ọ bịara na shọọpụ ya one day, kelechaa ya, maka aka o nyeere ya, wee sị ya na ọ chọkwaa **ikụ nkwa** that she doesn’t mind.*

‘My husband said that she came to his shop one day; thanked him for the assistance he rendered her, then told him that if he wants to play musical instruments, that she doesn’t mind.’

4. RES (laughs): *Di gị sịkwanyị ya gịnị?*

‘And what did your husband tell her?’

5. WO (laughs): *Di m sị ya na onweghi **nkwa ya na-akụ**, ya akụta ọtù.*

‘My husband told her that he’s not playing any musical instrument, to avoid playing instrument he doesn’t know.’

In this extract, the euphemism used in place of the tabooed expression is *ikụ nkwa* ‘to play musical instrument’ as seen in line 3 and 5 by WO. WO is narrating an account to the Researcher about a certain widow who was assisted by her (WO) husband but who came back to thank her husband and in the same breath told her husband that if he wanted to ‘beat/play musical instruments’ that she is ready. On RES’s inquiry about her husband’s reaction, WO states that her husband refused to plat/beat the musical instrument for fear of beating something unplanned or unexpected. The euphemism is represented as *ikụ nkwa* ‘to play musical instruments’ → ‘sex’.

Igbo musical instruments comprise the following: *udu* ‘pot’, *oyọ* ‘cymbal’, *ekwe* ‘gong’, *ogene* ‘gong’, *igba* ‘drum’, *oja* ‘flute’, etc. The idea is that all the instruments must be in symphony before a melodious music is produced. Consequently, *ikụ nkwa* is used, not to underlie a solo effort, but a combination of efforts of different

players thus establishing the contribution of each party, even if unequal, as some instruments require more skill and dexterity than others. Intrinsic in the idea of quota contribution is agreement between both parties, as the Igbo say that *O bu akpaa akpaa e dina* 'It is after negotiation that lovers lie in bed' suggesting that sex is not possible without the agreement and input of a man and woman. Additionally, in a musical performance, all the players play each instrument with adequate intensity to be able to produce the desired effect on the audience. The keyword in this euphemism is intensity; the passion and fervency which players invest in the performance. In terms of the sexual act, *ikw nkwa* is also suggestive of energy and ardor infused in the act by two lovers. That is, the intensity with which musical instruments are played is used to veil the sexual act which is also characterized by the same fervency.

Extract 5: *ikpārā ákwū* 'to pluck palm fruit'

Balcony of a house: conversation between woman (WO) and man (MA) as the Researcher passes by.

1. MA: *Biko kpọọ nnwa be gị ka o kunye m mmiri.*
'Please, call your house boy to bring water for me.'
2. WO: *Ebee ka I hụrụ Emeka? Imakwa na nwatakiri a amụtala ikpara akwū?*
'Where did you see Emeka? Do you know that the small boy has learnt to pluck palm fruit?'
3. MA: *Heeei! Isi ikpara akwū?*
'What! Did you say pluck palm fruit?'
4. WO: *I'm telling you. My neighbor si na m jee ahia, o jee na nke enyi ya nwaanyị bi na street.*
'I'm telling you. My neighbour said that when I go to market, he visits his girl friend that lives in the street.'
5. MA: *Okooo!*
(exclamation of shock)
6. WO: *Honestly, ike Emeka agwula m.*
'Honestly, I'm tired of Emeka.'

In this extract, the euphemism used to replace the tabooed word is *ikpara akwu* 'to pluck palm fruit' as seen in line 2 and 3 by WO and MA. On MA's request for water from the houseboy, WO informs MA that the boy is not reachable, and that, as a matter of fact, he had learnt the art of plucking palm nut. In surprise, MA repeats the phrase and WO confirms the fact by referring to information from her neighbor. The euphemism is represented as *ikpara akwu* 'to pluck palm fruit' → 'sex'.

Palm fruit is a small, oblong fruit that grows in heads or clusters on palm trees. Upon maturity, the colour turns red or pink with a hue of blue at the base of the fruit. It is a major cash crop produced in South East Nigeria. It is from the fruit that palm oil is extracted. The idea of *ikpara akwu* has two implications: plucking and eating. Plucking a palm fruit from the head requires tact and caution to avoid being wounded by the spikes on the palm head. The fruit is edible whether raw, roasted or cooked. It is juicy, and tasty, which explains why it is eaten raw, roasted or cooked. In connection to sex, the ripe fruit is suggestive of a mature woman; sex is perceived as an engagement with a mature woman who has given her consent. The act of ripening implies making oneself available for plucking by an interested party. The tact and care involved in plucking indexes the wooing by the lover, otherwise, the hand of the plucker will bleed. Thus, maturity and tenderness are the dual conditions for (plucking) engaging a woman among the Igbo. Eating the palm fruit is strongly related to the taste; the idea is eating something that is juicy and sweet. The euphemism of eating a sweet fruit is used to conceal the fact that sex is delicious and enjoyable. It is on account of the delightful nature of sex that some Igbo are wont to say, *a na-ahapuru ikpu atashị, o bu atashị ka e meere ikpu?* 'Do you leave vagina for gonorrhea, was vagina meant for gonorrhea?' thus signifying the premium attached to sexual pleasure, and the degree to which a man would sacrifice or risk his own health to satisfy his sexual need. In this euphemism, a real fruit is used to shield a symbolic fruit by virtue of taste. Aside quality, both fruits have one more thing in common with respect to content; they both have seeds as expressed

in the Igbo language. The seed of palm fruit is referred to as *mkpuru aki* ‘palm nut’ while the seed of female organ is referred to as *mkpuru otu* ‘clitoris’. Evidently, there is a strong correspondence between the object used in the euphemism and the sex act. A second reason for using *akwu* ‘palm fruit’ to associate sex is the colour of the ripe fruit and this is not accidental. The reddish or pinkish tinge of the fruit is similar to the hue of the innards of the female genitalia.

Extract 6: *ínwētá ònwé* ‘have oneself/fun’; *nye* ‘give’

Front of a bungalow: conversation between two young men (YM1 and YM2) about a certain promiscuous girl named Ngozi, as the Researcher stands by reading a magazine.

1. YM1: *Nnaa, m na-achọ gị kamgbe; ebee ka i jere?*
‘Brother, I have been looking for you since; where did you go?’
2. YM2: *Gịnị ka i na-achọrọ m; anọ m gị n’aka?*
‘Why are you looking for me? Am I in your hand?’
3. YM1: *Get away you; ọ dika i jeene nwete onwe gị?*
‘You, get away; it seems you have gone to have fun.’
4. YM2 (chuckles): *Ọ dika i ma.*
‘As if you know.’
5. YM1: *Nnaa kee nke na-eme; aghọtazikwaghị m gị these days.*
‘Brother what is happening; I don’t understand you these days.’
6. YM2: *Kee ihe ọzọ i chọrọ i mata?*
‘What else do you want to know?’
7. YM1: *Ama m na ọ bụ na nke Nneka ka i si.*
‘I know you are coming from Nneka’s place.’
8. YM2 (chuckles): *I machakwa ma na-ajụ m.*
‘You know and you are asking me.’
9. YM1: *O nyere gị?*
‘Did she give you?’
10. YM2: *Why? ndee ihe ọ gaghi e ji nye m.*
‘Yes, why would she not give me.’

11. YM1: *M jee, o ga-enye m?*
 'If I go will she give me?'
 12. YM2: *Why? O nwere onye o naghị enye?*
 'Yes, is there anybody she doesn't give?'

In this extract, two different euphemisms were used to substitute the tabooed word; they are *nweta onwe* 'have oneself/fun' as seen in line 3 by YM1, and *nye* 'give' with a null or missing item as seen in lines 9 to 12 by YM1 and YM2. YM1 meets YM2 and wonders where he has been and eventually suspects that YM1 has been to take care of himself. YM2 affirms his suspicion and YM2 further suspects that he went to see a certain Nneka which YM2 equally affirms. Then YM1 asks YM2 if she (Nneka) gave him and he responded in the affirmative, and YM1 wonders if she (Nneka) will give him if he goes, and YM2 also replies in the affirmative. The euphemism is represented as *inweta onwe* 'to enjoy oneself' → 'sex'.

The expression *inweta onwe* is a generic term used to refer to someone who is in good spirits and who is enjoying themselves exemplified by dining, wining, dancing, joking, laughing, smoking, snuffing, relaxing, playing, exercising, sporting, and other forms of social and cultural entertainment. Applying it to sex is unmarked; that is expected due to the fact that sex is a classic form of pleasure. When YM1 dropped the hint in line 3, both of them understood that he was not referring to other types of recreation such as eating, drinking, smoking, or sporting. They both had shared knowledge (implicature) and understanding of the referent. It is noteworthy that the euphemism *inweta onwe* has different meanings with respect to context. If someone is met eating or drinking or sporting, for example, and the expression *inweta onwe* is used, it is apparent that the speaker is referring to the practical act of eating, drinking and sporting in which the target is engaged. Secondly, when it used as a form of greeting, it is obvious that the speaker is only referring to the general welfare of the target person. But when it is subtly hinted at, as in the data above, when the target person is not engaged in any observable entertainment, it usually bears connotations of sex.

The second euphemism used in the data is *nye* ‘give’ and used by both speakers in lines 9–12. It is deliberately used as an intransitive verb that does not require an object to comprehend. The peculiarity of this form is that the core item (the object) is missing and it is the deliberate elision of the object that serves as euphemism. Thus, the euphemism is represented as *O nyere gi* ‘Did he/she give you?’ → ‘sex’.

After YM1 was convinced that YM2 had gone to have sex with Ngozi, in line 9, he inquired if Ngozi gave him *O nyere gi?* ‘did she give you?’ without stating what was given. Ordinarily, YM2 would have raised a question about whatever he was given like *nyere m gini?* ‘Gave me what?’ but he did not ask. Rather, in line 10, YM2 admitted that he was given and also did not mention what was given. Both of them had a shared knowledge or implicative understanding of the null or omitted object, and so it was needless mentioning it. The anonymity of the construct, reminiscent of the idea in sample 1, *nke ọzọ*, is subtly used to censor the tabooed word.

Extract 7: *ílí ívé* ‘to eat something’; *ímē íngbárátụ* ‘to tap little of something’

Entrance to a shop: the Researcher is conversing with a male Shop Owner (SO) when a Man (MA) enters and SO shifts attention to MA.

1. SO: *Haa, onye sị ọwụ ya?*
‘Wow, who says it is him?’
2. MA (hails SO): *Ogbuanụukwu!*
‘Killer of big game!’
3. SO (hails MM): *Nkụ uguru!*
‘Harmattan faggot.’
4. MA: *Ịna-egbu anụ ukwu na-eri anụ ukwu!*
‘You kill big game and eat big meat!’
5. SO: *Nkụ uguru ka ị bụ!*
‘You are harmattan faggot.’
(general laughter)
6. SO: *Nnaa, nke a bụ anya.*
‘Brother, its long time we met.’

7. MA: *Anya na ibe ya...Nnaa ahụ amakazị gị.*
'Long time indeed... Brother, you are looking good.'
8. SO: *Ọọ Chukwu.*
'It is God.'
9. MA: *Ọbughị sọ Chukwu; amaalị m na ị na-eli ive.*
'It is not only God; I know that you are eating something.'
(general laughter)
10. SO: *Nnaa, kee ife mmadụ ga-eme? Mgbe ụfọdụ e jee mee mgbaratụ.*
'Brother, what would a person do? Sometimes you go and take a little something.'
11. MA: *Ọ kwa ya*
'That is so.'
12. SO: *Why? A ga na-eli ive*
'Why? We will continue to eat something.'

In the extract above, the euphemistic expressions used to veil the tabooed word are *ili ive* 'to eat something' as seen in lines 9 and 12 by MA and SO respectively, and *ime mgbaratụ* 'to take little something' as seen in line 10 by SO. Both participants exchanged greetings and MA tells SO that he is looking good and SO cites God as the cause. But, MA suggests that it is not only God, that SO has been 'eating something'; SO confirms the fact and admits that sometimes he goes to take 'a little something' *mgbaratụ*. In the first case, *ili ive* which is a dialectal variant of the standard variety *iri ihe* is a common expression for eating food. Thus, the euphemism is represented as *iri ihe* 'to eat something' → 'sex'

ive is generally understood as food when it is preceded by *ili/iri* 'to eat'. Used separately, *ive* may mean other things other than food such as physical and abstract objects like stick, plate, spoon, wind, idea, wisdom. By virtue of the euphemism, the meaning of *ili ive* is transferred from food to sex. One of the ways Igbo perceives sex as food is reflected in the saying *nri ndị okenye* 'food for adults'. It is necessary to point out that seeing sex or women as food is not a limitation or denigration of women, in the sense that it is not the man only that enjoys

the woman but the man and woman who enjoy each other. Rather, it is actually an endorsement and certification of women for being the channel or agency through which one of man's most significant basic instincts is satisfied. This euphemism is similar to the one seen in extract 6 *nye* 'give' because they both make reference to an anonymous entity; the difference between the two forms is that whereas *ili* 'to eat' includes *ive* 'something' in the construction, *nye* 'give' tactfully omits it, though the idea is inferred. A second idea evident in this euphemism is maturity; one eats food that has been cooked, not one that is in the process of cooking. This is to say that the female involved in the exchange between MA and SO is a mature woman and not an under-aged girl, reminiscent of the ripe fruit in extract 5.

The second euphemistic expression *ime mgbaratụ* used by SO in line 10 is actually a coinage borrowed from a common activity among the Igbo. The euphemism is represented as *gbara tụ* 'pour a little' → *mgbaratụ* 'sex'.

Firstly, *mgbaratụ* comprises of four morphemes: *m* (me) + *gba* ('pour') + *ra* (tense/fact) + *tụ* ('a little') meaning to pour out a little. Evidently, the word is coined from the expression used to describe the process of pouring palm wine from a jug to a horn/cup as the Igbo are wont to do during festive occasions or times of relaxation after the daily toil in the farms. The original construct is *gbaratụ* 'pour a little', which is a verb. Through the process of insertion, the nominal marker *m* is prefixed to the verb thereby deriving the noun *mgbaratụ*. Specifically, what is being poured (*gbara*), as suggested by the expression, is a fluid, palm wine and not water. The verb used to qualify pouring of water in Igbo is *ku*, as exemplified in *kunye m mmiri* 'pour water for me', while the verb used to qualify pouring of wine in Igbo is *gba* as exemplified in *gbanye m mmanya* 'pour wine for me'. Undoubtedly, palm wine is implicated in *mgbaratụ*, more than any other liquid. The reason for the use of this expression to connote sex is the semblance between *mgbaratụ* and sex given the objects used in the process of pouring palm wine into a horn/cup. This process is seen as an intercourse involving the jug symbolized as the man's penis, the palm wine seen as the semen, and

the receptacle / cup symbolized as the “body” of the woman. The man is the producer or giver of semen while the woman is the receiver. It is not accidental that, sometimes when an Igbo wants to describe his sexual performance, he will say *agbara m ka ngwọ taa* ‘I poured like palm wine today’. Secondly, the fact of *-tu* ‘little’ with respect to quantity of palm wine is related to duration of the sex in this expression, understood as hasty and perfunctory.

5.2. Opaque euphemisms

These are obscure expressions that use unfamiliar terms that are not common to refer to sexual activity. Unlike the explicit data, opaque euphemisms cannot be easily related to sex given the attributive lexemes or symbols used in their formation. The interpretation of their meaning is external to the text; that means, the lexical items do not actually lead to the meaning. Rather, decoding is achieved through understanding of other agents that are not mentioned in the text. The data is presented below.

Extract 8: *isè ígú* ‘to pull palm frond’

A one room apartment: conversation between a Young Man (YM) and his friend (FR) in the presence of the Researcher, over a foam MA just bought.

1. FR: *Nnaa, foam nke a bụ egede. Ebee ka i zuru ya?*
‘Brother, this foam is superb. Where did you buy it?’
2. YM: *Azurụ m ya n’ahia ọhuru; n’akụkụ School Road.*
‘I bought it in new market; by the side of School Road.’
3. FR: *O dika ibulatara ya ugbua*
‘It seems you just brought it home.’
4. YM: *No, ụnyahụ ka m bulatara ya mana ugbua ka m na-eseetiya na bed.*
‘No, I brought it home two days ago, but I just set it on the bed now.’
5. FR: *Nnaa, nke a dị mma ise igu*
‘Brother, this one is ideal for pulling palm frond.’

6. YM: *Ọ dika ima*

‘It seems you know.’

(They laugh.)

In this extract, the euphemism used to replace the tabooed word is *ise igu* ‘to pull a palm frond’ as seen in line 5 by FR. In the exchange, FR toasts YM for buying a quality foam, and eventually suggests that the foam will be ideal for “pulling palm frond” and YM confirms the suggestion. The euphemism is represented as *ise igu* ‘to pull palm frond’ → ‘sex’.

The palm frond is the feather-like leaf found at the crown of a palm tree. Before harvesting a ripe palm head, the fronds are cut down to make way for cutting the palm head. Once the fronds are cut, they are pulled away to be used for several purposes including making hats, fences, roof thatch, weaving baskets and others. It also serves as broom, fuel and food for goats. It is a veritable feed for goats, especially. An Igbo proverb says that *onye se igu ka ewu na-eso* ‘The person who pulls the palm frond along is the one followed by goats’. In relation to sex, there seems to be little or no link between pulling a palm frond and sex; but factoring in the goat known in Igbo and other cultures to be sexually perverted or promiscuous, it begins to make sense. The association to sex goes beyond pulling the palm frond; it is the action of the goat following and eating the palm frond that bears the connotation of sex. The goat is symbolized as a man running after a woman or actually eating (having sex) the palm frond symbolized as woman. The passion with which the goat eats the palm frond is camouflaged as sex, and interpreted as the passion with which a man engages a woman in bed. What really makes this euphemism obscure is that the meaning is derived by extension to an object not mentioned in the euphemism. In the euphemism *ise igu, ewu* ‘goat’ is tactically excluded, even though the randy animal is significant and a clue to understanding the sexual inclination of the idiomatic substitute.

Extract 9: *ikpo owa* ‘to call / strike a path’

An eatery / bar: conversation between three young men (YM1, YM2, YM3) about a certain lady named Ijeoma as the Researcher watches.

1. YM1: *That girl wara anya too much, I swear.*
‘That girl is too wild, I swear.’
2. YM2: *Oo Ijeoma ka o bu onye ozọ?*
‘You mean Ijeoma or another person?’
3. MA: *Yes, Ijeoma; o dika i machasighi ya ike*
‘Yes, Ijeoma; it seems you don’t know her very well.’
4. YM2: *Ama m ya mana amaghị m na o wara anya etu ahụ.*
‘I know her but I don’t know she is as wild as that.’
5. YM3: *Imaghị onye o bu; that girl na-akpo owa to hell*
‘You don’t know her; that girl creates a path to hell.’
6. YM2: *Eziokwu?*
‘Is that so?’
7. YM1: *O kwa etu a, from one man to another;otu ubochi okpota oria mọobu onwu.*
‘It is like that, from one man to another; one day she will create a path to disease or death.’

In this extract, the euphemism used to replace the tabooed sexual word is *ikpo owa* ‘to create a path’ as seen in line 5 by YM3. In this interaction, YM1 comments about a certain lady (Ijeoma) who is wild but YM2 states that he doesn’t know her in that wise. Then YM3 declares that YM2 does not know the lady, and that she ‘creates a path’ to hell. The euphemism is represented as *ikpo owa* ‘to create / make a path’ → ‘sex’.

Ants are known for making paths through burrowing the earth, and their path is known as *owa erigheru* ‘ant path/column’. Humans do not necessarily burrow but clear a bush or forest for the purpose of making a road or preparing an area for farming. The process of making a path involves clearing foliages with cutlass, pulling, pushing, thrusting, until the path is made. It is actually an intrusion into a forest. In relation to sex, clearing the bush is subtly interpreted as intercourse between

a person and the bush. Thus, the female genitalia, particularly the pubic hair are seen as a bush path that is cleared or opened by a man through a process of pushing and pulling. The male organ symbolizes the instrument (cutlass) used to facilitate the clearing process. This idea is strengthened by the fact that, the traditional Igbo woman sees the pubic hair as a vital part of what makes her a woman, and evidence of maturity to full womanhood, and so does not cut it, but preserves it for her husband. It is on account of this shared understanding that the Igbo says, *akwara nwere ndidi na-eri anụ gbara afụonụ* ‘A patient vein (penis) eats a bearded meat (vagina)’, which is figurative way of simply saying that a patient man enjoys sex with a mature woman having hairy vagina. This is an obvious indication that it is not expected of a woman to tamper with her pubic hair. On the surface, this euphemism has no clue to sex until a deeper introspection is made, and this explains its opacity. A factor that really obscures its meaning is the use of the word *ikpo*; used on its own *ikpo* means either to call or to strike in Igbo. For example *ikpo mmadu* ‘to call a person’ or *ikpo ntu* ‘to strike a nail’. The morpheme *kpo* has nothing to do with making or creating a path as evident in bush clearing. It is only when it precedes the noun *owa* ‘path/column’ that its sexual inference could be possibly and properly conjectured to mean clearing a bush path (opening the vagina) with a cutlass (penis) in the sex act.

Extract 10: *ipjá oku* ‘to strike plate’

Researcher’s office: conversation between the Researcher (RES) and two men (MA1 and MA2) over the state of the economy.

1. MA1: *Nnaa, obodo bụ igwe.*
‘Brother, the country is hard.’
2. RES: *Ọ ka nyere gị ọnu*
‘You are disposed to talk about it.’
3. MA1: *Ị makwa ekwerem rice ọnu taa, a sị m na ọ bụ twenty eight thousand.*
‘Did you know I prized rice and they told me it is twenty eight thousand.’

4. MA2: *Local ka o bu foreign?*
'Local or foreign?'
5. MA1: *Foreign. O nwekwaranu nke di cheap. Local bu twenty five.*
'Foreign. Is there any one that is cheap. Local is twenty five.'
6. RES: *O nwere ike iru thirty thousand, so jekwa zuo ya ugbua.*
'It may reach thirty thousand; so better go and buy it now.'
7. MA1: *O di egwu... Nnaa, by the way, {to MA2:} kee maka iko m nwaanyi ahụ, nke ike ukwu?*
'It is terrible... Brother, by the way, how about that concubine of mine; the one with big bumbum?'
8. MA2: *Ha! Echekwe m ma o bu mu na gi no ebe a; amaghị m na uche gi di n'ipia oku.*
'Ha! I thought that you and I are here; I did not know that your mind is in ipiaoku.'
9. RES: *Don't mind him.*
10. MA1: *Olee ihe mmadu ga-eme. Ha niile socha.*
'What would someone do. All of them are important.'

The euphemism used to replace the tabooed expression in this extract is *ipia oku* seen in line 8 by MA2. In this discussion, MA1, MA2 and Researcher were chatting about the state of the Nigerian economy until MA2 digresses by asking after a certain woman friend of his who has a big back side. MA2 shows surprise that, he thought MA1 was with him but did not know his mind was in 'striking plate'. The euphemism is represented as *ipia oku* 'to break a plate' → 'sex'.

In traditional Igbo society, *oku* is a breakable earthenware like ceramic used to put food or water and other edible fluids. As a result of its fragile nature, it is handled with great care, otherwise when it falls on a hard surface, it breaks. Breaking *oku* is often accompanied with a kind of mourning; people, particularly the owner are not happy when *oku* breaks. To show the value placed on *oku* by Igbo, an adage says that *mmiri kwafuru mana oku awaghị* 'Water spilt but the plate *oku* did not break'. Thus the receptacle *oku* is esteemed and treasured higher than the content, be it food or water. This is because it is cheaper

to replace the food or water than to replace the receptacle or plate. In the context of the euphemism, and considering the meaning of the qualifier *ipia* 'to strike or flog', *ipia oku* implies deliberately breaking the plate which is highly cherished. In relation to sex, *oku* is symbolized as woman or the female genitalia, which is considered a treasure and *ipia* 'to strike or flog' is the force or energy exerted in the act of copulation. The euphemism implies the intentional and ferocious (man) handling of a woman in the course of sex. In the data above, MA2 may have chosen this euphemism above others due to the passion expressed by MA1 who mooted the idea.

Extract 11: *ichi ézè* 'to crown king'

A restaurant / bar: conversation between two men (MA1 and MA2) drinking beer as one of them MA1 stands adjusting his belt while the Researcher watches.

1. MA1: *Nwoke m, ebee?*
'My man, where?'
2. MA2: *Mba o, apuwabeghi m. Achoro m ije nyuo amiri.*
'No, I'm not going yet. I want to go and pee.'
3. MA1: *A sika m*
'I would have said.'
4. MA2: *A na m ala, echiela m eze?*
'Am I going, have I been crowned king.'
5. MA1: *Eh?*
'What?'
6. MA2: *Kedu ka m ga-esi laa without ichi eze?*
'How can I go without being crowned king?'
(They laugh.)
7. MA1: *O dika i geejiela.*
'It seems that you are saturated.'
8. MA2: *Oo ya ka iji nwayo ekwu?*
'Are you not putting it lightly?'

The euphemistic expression used in this extract is *ichi eze* 'to crown king' seen in lines 4 and 6 by MA2. The word simply means to be

crowned king. In the course of drinking, MA2 stands and MA1 thought he was leaving, but MA 2 told him that he was going to pee, and why would he leave when he has not ‘crowned king’. The euphemism is represented as *ichi eze* ‘to crown a king’ → ‘sex’.

Precisely, *ichi eze* is a terminology used in the draft or checkers game. The draft game is played by two people who sit in opposite direction separated by the draft board made up of dark squares arranged diagonally. Each player has equal number of pieces or seed used to play and the central idea is that a player should utilize his seed to win his opponent’s seeds through intelligent moves. A remarkable feature of the game is when a player succeeds in moving one of his pieces to the last row or the home of the opponent; reaching the home of your opponent means a great feat and that seed is crowned king. As a king, it is differentiated from other pieces by placing another piece on top of it as a crown, and it has the power to move anywhere it deems fit without inhibition unlike other seeds. In relation to sex, *ichi eze* is used to suggest that the ultimate and crowning moment of a man’s relationship with a woman is when his male member plays or fights its way into the humid recesses of a woman’s genitalia. As in a draft game, it is not easy to be crowned king; it comes at a cost or through smart systematic moves from beginning to end. In the same way, having sex with a woman begins gradually with toasting, caressing and other preliminaries until coitus. A peculiar character of this euphemism is that, it can only be understood or used among those who play or are familiar with the draft game and its rules. Even native Igbo speakers who are uninitiated in the game may find it difficult to crack the coded expression, except the context of the expression betrays it.

Incidentally, the opaque euphemisms such as *ipia oku*, *ise igu*, and *ikpo owa* have suffered attrition. Although a full investigation is yet to be conducted to verify this claim, a preliminary inquiry showed that a significant number of Igbo have hardly heard of the expressions nor knew their sexual connotations. This is not surprising as a considerable number of Igbo lexical terms have become petrified over time, as a result of language contact and the more consistent use of equivalent

items in other languages such as English. Nwagbo (2017) examined lexical attrition in Igbo and found that common everyday words such as *ròrò* ‘mean’, *ókòró* ‘trouble’ *únèrè* ‘banana’ and some others have suffered attrition for reasons of lack of use, and the use of the English equivalents. Incidentally, these opaque euphemisms represent stronger euphemisms that veritably serve the purpose of indirectly referring to the sexual act more than the explicit varieties. It is disputable that, the reason for the uncommon use of the opaque euphemisms is that they are not shared among all Igbo dialect groups; while that may be a plausible way of explaining the reality, it still does not explain why they have lost currency in contemporary times. A more constructive way of explaining it is that they were replaced by the simpler explicit variety, or they were originally slangs that somehow did not diffuse into the mainstream lexicon. Whichever way, the fact is that Igbo is rich and ennobled with varied indirect sexual expressions that need to be preserved and maintained as a means of revitalizing the language.

6. Conclusion

The study has focused on two forms of sexual euphemisms in Igbo; the explicit forms are as follows: *nke ọzọ*, *ikpo okwe*, *ikwa iko*, *igba okoso*, *ikụ nkwa*, *ikpara akwụ*, *inweta onwe*, *inye*, *iliive / ihe*, *ime mgbaratụ*. The opaque forms are as follows: *iseigu*, *ikpo ọwa*, *ipia oku*, and *ichi eze*. These are indirect terms used to refer to sex rather than using the tabooed word for sex in Igbo. The strategies used in their construction are idiomatic expressions, symbols and coinage. Idioms are words or group of words with meanings not deducible from the words used or words that express other meanings than the words used in the construct. Symbols are things that represent other things or lexical items that stand for abstract ideas. Coinage is the process of nominalization whereby a phrase or sentence is reduced to a nominal, as seen in *mgbaratụ*. These are existing words in the repertoire of the speakers that are given new meanings in order to veil the actual referent to sex all for the purpose of avoiding offence and embarrassment. An out-

standing feature of both types of euphemisms is the fact that they have surface and underlying meanings; the surface meanings are the literal meanings that on their own have nothing to do with sex while the underlying meanings are those that connote sex. The high number of these euphemisms is a clue to the premium attached by Igbo on avoiding offence in matters of sex. It shows that the Igbo, like many other cultures consider sex a sensitive and delicate subject that should be handled with utmost caution.

The fact that Igbo language is replete with sexual euphemisms of the figurative type is not surprising; the Igbo naturally think and perceive reality through the objects in their environment and culture and consequently navigate ideas indirectly via language, during interaction. Beyond saving face, Igbo use indirect speech in the form of idioms, proverbs and innuendoes to show wisdom and intellectual sagacity. Precisely, through the language, the Igbo think and perceive of sex in line with artifacts peculiar to the culture, which may be strange to other cultures. One of the outcomes is the conception of sex as an activity between the opposite sex, where the stronger sex (male) plays an active role and the weaker sex (female) plays a passive role. In the data provided (explicit and opaque) the man is seen at the centre of the sex act and not the woman. The man is central in striving to be crowned king (*ichi eze*), exerting physical energy (*ipia oku*), clearing the bush (*ikpo owa*), pulling the palm frond (*ise igu*), eating and pouring (*ili ive / ime mgbaratu*), plucking (*ikpara akwu*). The Igbo see sex as mainly man's activity; the man is expected to be dominant and take the initiative, while the woman is expected to be compliant.

A vital outcome of Igbo perception of sex shown in this study is congeniality and maturity; sex is not done by coercion but by mutual consent between two adults. In the Igbo world, the idea of rape is not overt; as a matter of fact, rape is seemingly a modern construct experienced in post-colonial Igbo society. Among taboos and abominations found in Igbo, there is no idea of rape expressed in the language, which suggests that arguably, Igbo never perceived of sexual violation beyond adultery. Igbo has word for adultery *ikwa iko* and prostitution *akwuna-*

kwuna, but no word for rape. It is possible that Igbo never thought that someone can possibly use force to satiate their sexual urge. Additionally, sex is an act engaged in by adults exclusively, meaning that children are discounted. This is against the pervasive cases of pedophiles in contemporary society. and child marriage as seen in some cultures. The reasoning is that, it takes an adult to take a decision about a matter as sensitive as sex or marriage. A situation where an adult takes the decision on behalf of an under-age girl means that the girl is not prepared for sex or marriage, as the case may be, and therefore unacceptable in the Igbo culture. It is for this reason that the Igbo incorporate the custom of *iru mgbede* ‘fattening room’ as one of the processes used to prepare maidens for marriage. The fattening room is not just a place for physical adornment but a veritable setting where maidens are culturally “fattened” and groomed for sex and marriage. On the whole, Igbo employ sexual euphemisms to reveal their thought and idea about sex, using objects in their culture, all which are encoded in the language.

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