

## IGBO ABUSIVE EXPRESSIONS: A SEMANTIC APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

*There are many hate speeches and other abusive words especially on the social media and in the contemporary human society. It is the preponderant usage of abusive expression that necessitated the need to investigate the meaning of some Igbo abusive them particularly. Although the meanings of some of these abusive expressions are explicit, others are implicit; it is this degree of relativity in meaning that gives room to the distortion of meaning, thereby creating problems or verbal wars among users of the language. This study, Igbo Abusive Expressions: A Semantic Approach, examines the semantic entailment of some Igbo abusive expressions in order to reduce the negative influence of such expressions. The motivation for the study stems from the aggression people show when abusive expressions are directed at them. The data for this research were sourced from both primary, secondary sources as well as elements from spontaneous speeches of some Igbo speakers where abusive words were used. Such interjected speeches were translated and analyzed for better understanding. Whorf's theory of Semantic Relativity, the Contextual Theory of Meaning popularized by Firth and the Theory of Entailment form the theoretical framework and analytical procedure of the data. From the data analysis, the study has as its findings the meanings of abusive expressions are relative, contextual and associative. The study also submits that Igbo abusive expressions are drawn from characteristics of animals, diseases, negative character traits, supernatural beings among others and have some positive functions apart from causing emotional pain. The research therefore recommends that parents and care-givers should be mindful of the psychological trauma their abusive language have on their victims. And finally, less hate speech and abusive language should be used in our society for the inhibitive socio-psychological implications they have on the abused populace.*

### **Introduction**

Language is a unique characteristic of human beings who are able to understand, interpret and make versatile use of it. It has been defined as human vocal noise or its graphic representation, arbitrarily agreed upon by a speech community for the purpose of communication. Amadi, Anyanwu and Izugba (2001) also see it as a complex and arbitrary system of vocal sounds. It is an important tool that has fueled man's activities and livelihood. It has proved to be a pertinent systematic and reliable aspect of man's living. Language plays so many roles in ensuring the continued survival, integration and progress of the human race. The ability of man to communicate all his ideas, emotions and needs explicitly through the use of words, signs, gestures and symbols is an added contribution of language to the human society. The use of language depends on the environment and man has the power to use it the way he likes to express his wants and needs. One of such uses of language among others is to abuse people.

Furthermore, language is unarguably the most important attribute of human beings and an important factor for social consciousness. According to Adeyanju (1988:15), "Language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for speaking or writing". This means that it is a system for the expression of thought, feelings, emotions, actions etc. either in writing or verbally. The ability of man to use language for communication, interaction or co-operation is a unique characteristic that puts man above other animals.

Language is not used in isolation but in a society, among people with similar interests. Such people have common experiences and societal life which they express with a particular language that binds them together. Languages are affected by the society in which they are used or they reflect the culture of the society or the environment in which they are used. Language determines how a particular society looks at the world. It influences the thought pattern of a society and the way that society perceives and interprets things in the world. As individuals, we have different ways of speaking or approaching issues depending on our levels of education, training, social status, economic background, cultural background, age, gender etc. Hudson (1996:6) maintains that significant differences can be noticed in the use of language even within one language community. According to him, social contexts, geographical origins, ethnicity, and nationality are some societal factors that determine language in its contextual environment. In essence, these factors and others already mentioned like social, economic and religious backgrounds of the people in a community also determine the meaning given to expressions in such communities. This is to say that where a

language is located, the educational background of users, their religion or what they believe, including their social dispositions can impact the language a great deal.

This study focuses on Igbo abusive expressions, the language of the Ibo nation popularly known as *Ndi-Igbo*, the third majority ethnic group in Nigeria and they occupy the eastern part of the country. They include people from Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi states. There are also pockets of Igbo people in Delta, Benue and River states, the likes of Aniocha and Ikwere people. Small Igbo communities are also found in parts of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. According to history, the first printed Igbo words were in “The Brothers in The Caribbean” a book published by the *Mission of the Evangelical* in 1777. The Igbo language is today used creatively to accommodate figurative usage, idioms, proverbs and other syntactic and semantic coinages, one of such is the abusive expressions and their meanings or semantic entailments.

So, semantics is an aspect of language which is very important to this research, it is a branch of linguistics that has to do with meaning in language. Nwala (2015:9) defines semantics as ‘the study of meaning and interpretation which promotes communication.’ This means that semantics not only refers to meaning but also the interpretation of meaning, all in the bid to promote communication. According to Yule (1996:114), semantics is ‘the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences.’ The focus here is on the meaning of every aspect of language: morphemes, words phrases, sentences and longer discourse in language. Meaning is not fixed but changes to suit the context of usage and meaning intended by the user. There are many types of meaning ranging from sentence meaning, figurative meaning, lexical meaning, implied meaning and so on. Giving language a semantic approach is appreciating it through understanding the sense, value or meaning intended by the expression or piece of language. This research is a semantic approach to abusive expressions in Igbo.

### **Abusive Expressions**

Abusive or offensive language is commonly defined as hurtful, derogatory or abusive utterances made by one person to another. They are a set of negative polar expressions and according to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, abusive words are harsh, insulting language, language that condemns or vilifies usually unjustly, intemperately and angrily. It then means that the use of remarks intended to demean, humiliate, mock, insult, or belittle can be viewed as abusive. These may or may not be based on the actual or perceiver race, color, religion, sex, national

origin, sexual orientation or gender identity of an individual. They are rather characterized by wrong or improper use of words- harsh, violent, profane, or derogatory language. They are known to demean the dignity of an individual. Abusive expressions are used to mistreat people physically and emotionally and are injurious, extremely rude and insulting. Abusive words are usually used when one is offended and it can be in form of cheap stare, singing a song idly, throwing cheap hints, invading another person's personal space, passing hurtful comments or mimicking usually in the ear of the abused.

There are a lot of words which are sometimes taken to be abusive even though no abuse is actually intended. For instance, some Scots and Welsh take offence at being called 'English'. Some Igbos are offended when called *Nyamiri* which means *Nyem miri* (give me water) by an Hausa person or when an Igbo person calls an Hausa man *onye awusa* which means Hausa man, he feels offended. This is because the tone may suggest an abuse but ordinarily it is not an abuse. All one needs to do when people pick offences at such expression is to back them up rapidly with apologies.

These expressions can be seen from a positive point of view. Sometimes agemates or peers crack jokes, jest and use some vulgar expressions at one another. They laugh over the words and take them as nothing but entertainment. At other times abuses can help control behavior especially the type parents use on their children, the fear of which keeps the young people out of bad behavior or bad company.

Abusive expressions used in Igbo language for different effects especially for insulting and inflicting pain emotionally will be the focus of this study. In recent times, insults and abusive terms have been on the increase in Nigeria especially on the social media. They are what is generally known as hateful speeches used by politicians and citizens. Today, attempts are being made at legislating a law to reduce the use of these hate expressions.

### **Earlier Works on Abusive Expressions**

Many people have surveyed abusive language from different perspectives. Iroka (2013:48) in her research on "Sociolinguistics profiling of the use of abusive language in Nigeria: A Print Media Perspective" looked into the way abusive language is used by media practitioners. She found out that different issues like government's nonchalant attitude towards the safety of lives and properties of citizens attract abusive comments. According to her, the offensive language used

was intended to cause harm to the feelings and reputation of government officials as a way of showing the citizens' grievances.

Yalwa (1991:69) in his paper "Socio-cultural and Linguistic Implications of Abusive Expressions in Hausa" also noted that abusive expressions are intended to hurt or injure the feelings of someone and are therefore prohibited both by social etiquette and religion. He listed categories of people who get involved in the abusive act – Husbands and wives – they sometimes abuse each other when there is a misunderstanding between them; Parents and Children – Parents sometimes use abusive language on their children when they do something bad. According to Yalwa, the abuse is meant to correct the child's behavior and make him/her conform to the norms accepted by the society. He also identified other individuals who use abusive expressions to include co -wives, children, peers and teacher – student. He noted that casual / non-serious abuse is also used among the Hausas as compliments given to those who perform an amazing or incredible act. Finn (2013:22) agrees that some offensive words are compliments under certain circumstances (Fucking awesome).

Olumuyiwa (2015:297) in her research noted that insults are words, statements or actions used with the intention to be rude or scornful to express one's emotion or hatred, aggression and anger to people. Her research shows that foul language has different linguistic forms like simple and complex noun phrases and sentences which may be declarative, interrogative, negative, conditional or affirmative: Her findings are in agreement with Jackson (1958) in Jay (2000:33) that abusive expressions or foul languages or swear words, no matter the name, apart from causing harm emotionally have some positive values. In her research, she posited that beyond offending, hurting and arousing the anger of the addressees. there are other intentions of using insults and they include:

- (i) to prove a superior skill in a verbal duel
- (ii) to correct misdeeds in the addressee especially when they are subordinates.
- (iii) to flatter and show admiration towards the addressee e.g. a housewife calling her Sister -in -law "a miserly sister -in -law"
- (iv) to describe the interlocutor (in the negative) e.g. "Someone with curved legs" and "Stupid person with bad mouth"

### **Typology of Abusive Expressions**

Many types of abusive expressions have been identified by different writers, some of which are discussed under the following sub-heading:

### **Direct and Indirect Abuse**

According to Waseem et al (2016:79) abusive words can be synthesized in two-fold typology that considers whether (i) the abuse is directed at a specific target and (ii) It could also be directed to a group of individuals. They opined that abusive language can either be directed at a specific individual or entity or it can be used towards a generalized order e.g. people with a certain ethnicity or sexual orientation.

### **Explicit and Implicit Abuse**

Another way of categorizing abusive language is articulated by Barthes (1957:79). He stated that abusive language can be implicit or explicit. He said explicit abusive expressions are those which are unambiguous in their potentials to be abusive like language that contains racial or homophobic slurs. They are denotative in nature. Implicit abusive language on the other hand is implied or connotative in nature. It does not immediately suggest abuse but it is obscured by the use of ambiguous terms like sarcasm.

### **Defamation**

Defamation is also another type of abusive expression; it is the oral or written communication of a false statement about another person or group that unjustly harms their reputation. It is also called libel, slander or traducement. It is regarded as a crime in some countries. A true statement can be regarded or considered defamation. *Oxford Dictionary* defines defamation as a speech or act damaging one's reputation orally or in written form. For a statement to be considered defamation, a claim must generally be false and must have been made to someone other than the person defamed. Spoken defamation is known as slander while other media such as printed words or image is called libel.

According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 'Defamation is the act of communicating false statements that injure the reputation of that person'.

### **Name-calling**

Name calling, another abusive typology, is the use of offensive names specially to win an argument or to induce rejection or condemnation (as of a person or project) without objective consideration of the facts. It is the use of abusive words or nasty

names to insult or humiliate another person or group and it is usually a verbal abuse. Name calling can involve mentioning physical traits. Crystal (1987:267) said the subject matter of name-calling ranges from subtle form to intellectual sarcasm and humor to the crudest possible attacks on a person's courage, sexual prowess or relatives.

Jay (2000) posits that name - calling provides information on how the speaker views him/her in relation to others. According to him, it can reach an extreme where participants engage in acts of verbal duel or ritualistic insult which produces both psychological and cultural effects. Jackson (1958:181) in Jay (2000) agreed with the researcher that abusive expressions serve some positive use.

### **Hate Speech**

Hate speech is any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are. In other words, any speech which unleashes harm to another person on the basis of religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexual orientation, color, descent, political inclination or other identity factors can rightly be classified as hate speech. Cambridge Dictionary defines hate speech as "a public speech that encourages violence towards a person or group based on something race, religion or sex or sexual orientation

### **HD and CV Type of Abuse**

Kennedy, B. et al (2017) identified two types of abusive language according to the extent to which it is dehumanizing, attacking human dignity, derogating and inciting violence. They called one of the types assaults on 'human dignity' (HD) and the other 'they call for violence' (CV) which are words that incite violence. According to them, HD intends to cause harm and it is supported by legal codes in Germany which illegalize such speeches. Gagliardone, et al (2015) said such expressions are regarded as illegal "not only" because of their likelihood to lead to harm but also for their intrinsic content.

### **Relationship between Abusive Expressions and other Linguistic Terms**

Abusive language is related to other linguistic terms, for example, vulgarism, taboo words, swear words e.tc. Abusive language like taboo has negative consequences and are usually emotional. Culpeper (2019 ;2) said people have negative attitudes towards the use of taboo as underpinned by societal thinking. He said "the language is taboo when it conflicts with what people expect in a

particular context, or what they desire or think should be the case. An expression is taboo only because society sees it as impolite. Also, taboo has negative consequences and are usually emotional.

The use of taboo language as an abuse illustrates the weight impolite words may have on an individual's emotions, they are offensive. It is necessary to point out that all taboos are not abusive and it is not all abusive expressions that are taboos. The relationship between them is their consequent effect on the individual: the ability to hurt. Akmajian et al (2007:119) defined taboo as (words or phrases) that are to be avoided entirely, or at least avoided in mixed or polite company;

Vulgarism can also be related to abuses; in our different communities, there are things that are held sacrosanct. Some body parts like breast, penis, vagina, etc. for instance, are not mentioned freely in some communities. They are sacred, when they are used openly in some expression, they become vulgar words. *Meriam – Webster Dictionary* defines 'Vulgarism as a word or expression originated or used chiefly by illiterate people. *Dictionary.com Thesaurus* defines it as "a word or phrase used only in common colloquial and especially in coarse crude or obscene speech". Anderson and Trudgill (1990) identified four types of vulgarism usage as follows: abusive (intended to harm the hearer), expletive (used to express emotions but not directed towards others), humorous (looks like abusive swearing but has the opposite function) and auxiliary (swearing as a way of speaking, often or always non-emphatic). These two are used to cause emotional pain and to cast aspersion on the abused. Abusive words/ expressions are culture based, they have existed in all times and in all cultures. Abusive expressions are used in the same way everywhere. According to Berry (1969:176) abusive language is a cross-cultural and universal phenomenon, the difference that exists is usually culturally based. For instance, the referents or terms used for abusive expressions in different cultures are of various kinds such as diseases (Typhoid-Sufferer), intimate body parts (Asshole) immoral behavior, religion, low level of education, feces, (Shit), animals, devil, male sexual inadequacies, dirtiness, genitals and relationships. The words used to express abuse differ from culture to culture. So, abusive language can be said to be both 'etic' (cross Cultural) and 'emic' (a culture specific element).

Brouwer and Schenk (1983) have it that abusive language is to an extent a male habit and Hofstede (1980) added that it depends on the masculinity or femineity of a certain culture. The more masculine a society, the more abusive language is expected to be a male habit and vice versa.

### **Different Reactions to Abusive Expressions**



People respond in different ways when abused, while some become aggressive, others laugh it off. There are still people who coil in and become emotional especially when their ego is hurt. Van Oudenhoven et al (2008:177) believe that women usually receive fewer insults than men except in Germany and Croatia where women receive more insults than men. They also posit that women attribute more offensiveness to almost all terms of abuse than men. In Nigeria, Women receive more abusive expressions because it is believed that the society is 'a man's world'.

### Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

The data used for this research include primary and secondary data. Primary data used for this research include the ones gotten from some Igbo people. Abusive expressions come spontaneously in speech. One does not plan to use them but they come up as people interact with one another

TABLE A: Animal Related Abusive Expressions

S/no	Igbo Abusive Expressions	English Meaning	
I.	Ewu	Goat	It entails the person is stupid
Ii	Oke	Rat	Entails a thief
Iii	Nkita	Dog	Entails a promiscuous person. Entails a deceptive person
Iv	Agwo	Snake	
V	Ezi	Pig	Entails a dirty person or a very fat person

The above are some Igbo expressions related to animals. Animals and their traits are used in Igbo land to abuse individuals who exhibit such traits. A pig is known for its dirtiness so a person who is always dirty or maintains a dirty environment is called 'ezi' (meaning Pig). This meaning is implied because it is only a person who understands the import of the expression that will know that he/ she has been insulted.

TABLE B: Disease Related Abusive Expressions

B	Igbo Abusive Expressions	English Meaning	Entailment
i.	Onye ekpenta	Leper	A person who cannot associate with others / an Outcast
ii	Onye ara	A mad person	Entails a person who is out of his senses
iii	Onye afo nasaa	A person suffering from diarrhea.	When a person maltreats another and he wishes him dead, he says let him purge or stool until he dies

The above disease related Igbo abusive expressions are usually directed at an offender. The stigma associated with certain diseases make them dreadful. This is why they are used to abuse people. Leprosy, incurable rashes and swollen stomach were dreaded as HIV/AIDS and Corona Virus or Covid-19 are today because there was no cure for them. Some of these diseases were taboos in the Igbo communities that when they were contracted, the victims were ostracized from the communities. Some victims had to live in the evil forest until they died.

Diseases occur as a result of the malfunctioning of the body and they are associated with decay, fear of death and loss of face depending on the type of illness. Diseases keep one uncomfortable and no one would like to suffer from any disease no matter how mild it is. Van Oudenhoven (2008) agrees that disease-related abuse terms are deeply touching for example “Cancer Sufferer’ they said is a frequently used abuse term in Dutch, possibly because it refers both to the disease and to ‘grouching’.

**TABLE C: General Abusive Expressions Associated with Character**

C	Igbo abusive expression	English Meaning and Entailment	Typology
I	Onye iberibe	Stupid person	Direct abuse
ii	Ofeke	A good for nothing person	Direct abuse

Iii	Onye aka ntutu	A thief	Indirect abuse (euphemism)
Iv	Onye Oshi	A thief	Direct abuse
V	Ogbanje	A child that dies and reincarnates/ a deceptive person	Direct/ indirect abuse
Vi	Onye aruruala	Wicked person	Direct abuse
Vii	Onye aghugho	A deceptive person	Direct abuse

'Character', according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, is the particular combination of qualities that make someone a particular type of person'. This is to say that the character a person displays shows who that person really is. The character of a person can be positive or negative and it is the negative character traits that people display that are used to abuse them.

**TABLE D: Non-verbal Abusive Expressions**

S/NO	Expressions	Entailment
1.	Winking the eye at someone	Entails disdain
2.	Opening the mouth and extending the tongue sometimes adding the touching of the fore-fangs on the cheeks	Means it serves one right. It entails that the person has been warned but he / she remained adamant until it went wrong
3.	Opening the palm towards a person and spreading out the fingers	Means may evil follow the person. It entails that the evil planned by the person should rebound on the person.
4.	Using the fore-finger to point at the head	Means one is out of his mind. It entails that the persons actions are out of the ordinary (usually negative)
5.	Opening the dents (teeth) at someone	It is a sign of mockery or ridicule. It entails that one's plan has failed.

In Igboland, someone can abuse another without using words and it will be much more effective than the use of words in bringing out the meaning intended. Let's discuss the few non-verbal abuses on Table D

- i. *i gbabiri nmadu anya* - This means blinking eyes at someone.

It entails disdain or a show of contempt. The action is used to show complete or partial disrespect and it is used to scorn someone or what he/she said or did.

- ii. *i mere nmadu ntọ ọ (nmee)* - this involves opening the mouth and extending the tongue, sometimes it includes the touching of the cheeks with the fore-fingers.

This means 'it serves one right' and it entails that the person had been warned but he/she remained adamant until the situation went wrong. The inability of the addressee to give in to reason at the right time gives the user of this non-verbal expression the impetus to rub-in the disappointment the addressee feels.

- iii. *i wuru nmadu aka (waka)* - refers to opening a raised hand at someone and spreading the fingers in addition.

This is used to mean 'may the evil intended bounce back at the sender'. It entails that the person intended something bad but by the abusive act, he or she has warded off the evil plan or intention back to the sender.

- iv. *i ru aka n'isi( isi Ọ dikwa gi nma)* This means pointing the fore-finger to one's head.

It is intended to ask a question to find out if one is out of his or her senses. It entails that the person's action is out of the ordinary (usually negative). When used, it is a mild abuse that helps one to get back on track during a communication the act has no regard or respect for the abused. In English one could say 'lick my arse'. This expression is also vulgar.

## E. Ironic Abusive Expressions

Some abusive expressions may appear complimentary but entail abuse when analyzed by the hearer. Irony is an expression that means the opposite of what is said. It refers to a situation or an expression in which the speaker is saying the opposite of what is obvious. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 'it is the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning'. Irony is usually situational because the interlocutor grasps the meaning better when the situation is understood. Some abusive expressions may appear complimentary but entail abuse when analyzed by the listener. For instance, a person who does not like full afro hair-do could say:

Example: A person who does not like full afro hairdo could say:

I. *Ntutu nka amaka, O di ka isi nwanyi ajadu.*

This hair is fine, it is like the unkempt hair of a widow.

This expression is ironic because one expected a compliment since the hairdo is fine but linking it to the unkempt hair of a widow is abusive. In Igbo culture the widow cuts her hair at her husband's demise and is not allowed to take care of it as it grows again, this is a sign of her bereavement and mourning.

II. A well made-up face with red lipstick applied is supposed to be appealing. But an ironic abuse in Igbo would say:  
*Onu ya n'eke ka oku* (Her lips are blazing like fire)

This entails that the lips are not as beautiful as had been expected.

**Table F: Abusive Expressions Related to Body Parts**

S/N	IGBO EXPRESSION	ENGLISH MEANING
i	Amu nnagi	Your father's penis
ii	Ọtụ nnegi	Your mother's vagina
iii	Ara daraada	Flat breasts

i. *Amụ nna gi* means your father's penis

a. Obi: *keduihe ị na - achọ ?*

- Emeka: *Amu nna gi.*
- b. Obi: What are you looking for?
- Emeka: Your father's penis
- ii. *Ọtu nne gi* means your mother's vagina
- a. Obi: *Kedu ihe ị naracha otua?*
- Emeke: *Ọtu nne gi.*
- b. Obi: What are you licking like that?
- Emeka: Your mother's vagina

Parts of the human body regarded as 'private parts' are the ones usually used as terms of abuse. They are used with the tone of vulgarity to entail disgust. They are used as retaliatory outbursts like the examples given under Table F. The sanctity with which the private parts are held in Igboland reveals the vulgarity rate when any of such parts are used in a crude way as in the examples. Sometimes euphemisms are used to refer to these body parts. For instance, '*Umu nna gi*' (your ancestors) '*dike gi*' (your strength) are used to refer to the penis to avoid direct mention of this body part.

**Table G: Igbo Abusive Expressions related to Family Members**

S/N	IGBO EXPRESSIONS	ENGLISH MEANING
i	Nne gi	Your mother
ii	Nna gi	Your father
iii	Nnenne gi	Your mother's mother
iv	Nnenna gi	Your father's mother

- I. *Nne gi* means your mother
- a. Obi: *Lee otu isi gi ha*
- Emeka: *Nne gi*

- b. Obi: See how big your head is.  
 Emeka: Your mother.
- II. *Nna gi* means your father
- a. Obi: *Gị nị ka ị na emeebe a?*  
 Emeka: *A na m eme nna gi.*
- b. Obi: what are you doing here?  
 Emeka: I am doing your father

The family member plus the possessive pronouns for second- and third-persons singular become abusive in certain circumstances. These abusive expressions are used as outbursts to retaliate when one has been offended and he/she does not know how else to react.

**Table H: Igbo Abusive Expressions Related to Spirit Beings**

S/N	IGBO EXPRESSION	ENGLISH MEANING
I	Ekwensu	Satan
II	Nmọ ọ - Qjọ	Evil spirit
III	Mama - ị wọ ta	Mermaid spirit

- I. *Ekwensu* means Satan
- a. *Kedu ihe ekwensu a na-emeebe a?*  
 b. What is this Satan doing here?
- Ekwensu* as an abusive expression that entails evil and wickedness. Satan is an epitome of evil, therefore everything bad is believed to be initiated and done by him. When one becomes known for evil acts, he may be abused as 'Ekwensu'.
- II. *Nmọ ọ - Qjọ* refers to evil spirit
- a. *Obi bụ nmọ ọ -Qjọ , ekwekwala ka o dufuogi*

b. Obi is an evil spirit don't let him mislead you

This expression has a negative entailment which includes deceit, wickedness and other forms of evil. This abuse like 'ekwensu' has evil entailments

III. *Mama -i wọ ta* refers to the marine spirit or mermaid spirit which is depicted as having the physical or bodily form of a beautiful woman with a fish like tail.

a. *Agbọ nma bu mama-i wọ ta*

b. Agbonma is a mermaid

This is a direct abuse used metaphorically and it entails deception and seduction. This means that the beauty the mermaid is associated with is deceptive and seductive that is having the charm to lure a man to love a mere shadow because he cannot bring her home as a wife.

## Findings

Abusive expressions are those words: verbal and written, and actions that are hurtful, able to cause pain to an individual. Jay (2000) defines offensive language as those languages that are calculated to wound the feelings, arouse anger or resentment or disgust in the mind of a reasonable person. They are words that are harsh, derogatory and insulting to an individual or a group. They include speech, gestures, conduct, writing or display. (Jideofor, 2012). Firstly, abuses can take different forms. Different people have different ways of classifying abusive expressions into types. Seddon (2017:5) classified verbal abuses as withholding, countering, discounting, disguised jokes and blocking and diverting. Bathes (1957: 113) stated that they can be implicit or explicit. Finn (2017) categorized offensive/swear words into five types: Supernatural abuse, Bodily effluvia and organs; disease, death and infirmity; sexuality and disfavored people and group. Other typology of abusive expression from the study includes hate speech, defamation, name -calling, swear word and some taboo words. Van Oudehoven et al (2008) classified them under the following referents: animals, diseases, spirit beings, body parts etc.

The findings corroborate those abusive expressions are relative, contextual and associative. Sometimes, they are used figuratively when the user applies metaphors and similes in phrasing the abuse. There are also abusive expressions



that are ironic. Finn (2017) confirms that abusive expression can be aggressively used in communication depending on the understanding or exposure of the people involved. He also agreed that some abusive expressions are used politely.

From the study, it is obvious that abusive expressions serve different functions in communication. Abusive expressions are mostly hurtful, they are used to demean a person or group, cause emotional pain and even make one loose self-esteem. A speaker can use it to cool down and relieve pent up frustration (Pinker, 2007) They can also be used in the right context to tease in a friendly manner, or joke, relieve social tension during stressful moments, emphasize important points and as a tool to gain grounds among peers (Finn 2017) They are also used for correction, character remolding, behavior control and discipline especially of children and other subordinates according to Yalwa (1991). Finally, Anderson and Trudgill (1990) pointed out that some of such expressions can be used to express emotions or create humor depending on who or what it is directed at.

Lastly, abusive expressions have implications on the person abused depending on the understanding or exposure of the persons involved. Some people see abuse in expressions that never intended to abuse but generally, they have negative implications like emotional hurt, arousal of anger, resentment and disgust. The pride, honor or reputation of the abused is usually disparaged or denigrated. Humor and other positive effects of abusive expressions can also be implied.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored Igbo abusive expressions from a semantic point of view. The central Igbo which is a blend of the different variations or dialects of Igbo spoken across the eastern part of Nigeria provided the expressions used as data in this paper. Every society uses language for various speech acts, the meaning of which depends on the speech act, the people performing it and their level of understanding of the language used. So, the study aimed at investigating the meaning of abusive expressions, what they entail and the functions they serve in the community.

To be able to do this, data was collected from some Igbo speakers in different social settings and dispositions, textbooks and the internet.

Abusive expressions are annoying, insulting and offensive; they cut across all cultures but may differ in application depending on the society. They may be directed at an individual or a group and can also be explicit or implicit. No matter

how they are presented, either as cheap stare, hurtful comments, name-calling, defamation, hate speeches, disguised jokes, swearing, vulgar words or ordinarily mimicking someone, the aim is to annoy, cause pain or harm physically or emotionally. However, some abusive words also serve some positive functions like creating humor, correcting an erring subordinate and molding and remolding character.

Finally, abusive expressions are expressions (verbal, written, gestures or actions) intended to cast aspersion on a person or group. The meaning is usually relative because what is abusive to one person may be humorous to another; this implies that before one reacts to a supposed abuse, he or she should try to understand the meaning of such expression and what it entails.

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