Published by

British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Igbo Customary Greetings: A Paradigm of Akokwa Salutations

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 065

Accepted: 28 October 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-FCCW5HP4**

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Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic functions of selected Igbo customary greetings. In the Igbo society and among the Akokwa people of the Southeast, Nigeria, greetings are not merely polite expressions but indispensable communicative acts that embody the values, beliefs, norms and worldview of the Igbo people. They are used to establish social relationships, express solidarity, convey respect, negotiate identity, and reinforce cultural values. Existing studies on Igbo greetings have largely focused on their sociolinguistic and anthropological significance, with limited attention to their pragmatic functions within indigenous discourse. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive research design and draws data from participant observation, oral interview with elders, communal leaders and native speakers. 20 naturally occurring customary greetings in different social contexts were analyzed. The analysis is anchored on the pragmatic theories of J.L Austin and John Searle's Speech Acts and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness theory. Both theories elucidate the phenomenon of language in culture. Findings reveal that Igbo customary greetings are rich and sophisticated cultural discourses whose meanings are beyond the literal expressions. In addition, they perform multiple illocutionary functions such as blessings, solidarity, respect, reconciliation, hospitality and social cohesion. Their interpretations and meanings are context-dependent. Furthermore, they preserve the indigenous cultural values and are essential instruments for peace-building and conflict management. Recommendations include the inclusion of pragmatics of Igbo greetings in Igbo studies curriculum, promoting more literature on Igbo customary greetings and application of pragmatics to African languages other than Igbo.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Customary Greetings, Igbo Communicative Discourse, Akokwa

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INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable and inevitable in human society. In her opinion, Ekwelibe (2021), language and culture are like kissing cousins because language is the primary medium through which culture is expressed, transmitted and preserved from one generation to another. Kramsch (1998) is of the opinion that language is used to express identity at the personal, cultural, ethnic and national levels. However, Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of culture. Greeting is one of the communicative practices of the Igbo people of the Southeast, Nigeria. It occupies a central position in everyday interactions, facilitates social harmony, establishes relationships and reinforces communal values. The importance of greetings in Igbo society has attracted scholarly attentions because they reflect indigenous philosophies, social norms and cultural expectations. Nwoye (1993) in his work, 'Ethnographic Study of Igbo Greetings,' sees greeting as a fundamental component of Igbo communication system and categorizes it into salutary, exhortative and commiserative forms.

Akokwa is an ancient Igbo community in Ideato North Local Government Area of Imo State and possesses a rich repertoire of customary salutations that embody respect, solidarity, kinship, and community identity. These greetings are often context-dependent and derive their meanings from social relationships, age differences, cultural expectations and situational contexts.

Despite the significance of greetings in Akokwa culture, limited scholarly attention has been given specifically to their pragmatic functions. The study, therefore, examines selected Akokwa salutations to uncover the communicative intentions, implied meanings and pragmatic functions embedded in them.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing influence of globalization, urbanization and digital communication have contributed immensely to the gradual erosion of indigenous greeting practices among younger generations of Igbo speakers. Many customary Akokwa greetings are becoming less frequently used, leading to a potential loss of cultural knowledge, gross disrespect for the elders, misunderstanding and a lack of communicative competence. There is, therefore, a need to document and pragmatically analyze these greetings to preserve their cultural significance and communicative functions.

Objectives of the Study

The study is slated to

1. identify selected customary greetings among Akokwa people?
2. examine the pragmatic meanings of these greetings.
3. analyze the communicative functions performed by Akokwa salutation.
4. explore the sociocultural values embedded in the greeting

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions.

1. What customary greetings are commonly used in Akokwa?
2. What pragmatic meanings do these greetings convey?
3. What speech acts are performed through the salutations?
4. How do the greetings reflect Akokwa socio-cultural values?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Language and Culture: An Overview

The claim that language and culture are like two kissing cousins has been a long-standing one. Sapir

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(1921) acknowledges this close relationship and maintains that they are inextricably related so that one cannot understand or appreciate one without the knowledge of the other. Wardhaugh (1986) states:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone or alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are at the very mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one can adjust to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the people.

The intricate social relevance, deep cultural involvement and human relatedness of language as the basis of social action could be seen in its role in interpersonal relationships. It is in this context that we become conscious of the fact that language is not just merely a mistress to its users, it is undetachably married to man in a way one side of a coin is married to the other. In other words, language is part and parcel of the social man. That is why a native endoglossic or local, or an alien exoglossic or external language has to adapt to the sociocultural context in order to serve the community. This sociolinguistic axion is reflected in Troike observations:

> There is no doubt, however, that there is a correlation between the form and content of language, beliefs, values and needs present in the culture of its speakers. The vocabulary of a language provides us with a catalogue of things of import to the society, an index to other way speakers categorize experience, and it is often a record of past contacts and cultural borrowings, the grammar may reveal the way time is segmented and organized, beliefs about intimacy and the relative power of beings and salient social categories in the culture.

In view of the above statement, Goodenough (6) posits that culture is "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members while language is a human vocal noise used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purposes of communication." Linton states that the culture of a society is the way of life its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation. This transmission is done through language. One would therefore say that the cultural background of a people is so interrelated with the basis of their existence. In support of this, Haralambo (7) says, "to a large degree, culture determines how members of a society think and feel. It directs their actions and outlook." This is the context where the function and character of language come alive since the elements of culture are embedded in language.

Igbo Customary Greetings

Greetings constitute one of the most universal forms for verbal interaction. They function as social rituals that establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Studies on African greetings emphasize their roles in preserving cultural values and social order. Greetings create social relationships, express solidarity and demonstrate communicative competence.

Nwoye (1993), in one of his publications, demonstrates that greetings among the Igbo are highly structured and context-sensitive. They serve various functions including social recognition, inquiry, blessing, encouragement and sympathy.

Similarly, Okolo (1983) argues that Igbo greeting ceremonies reveal conversational patterns that sustain societal norms and reinforce social relationships.

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In Igbo culture, greetings are regarded as markers of respect and communal belonging. Younger persons are expected to initiate greetings when encountering elders, reflecting the hierarchical nature of traditional Igbo society.

The Akokwa People and Greetings

Akokwa is a small town in the Ideato-North Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The town's population of roughly 4,000,000 primarily comprises of Igbos. It is located at the Northern axis of Imo State boundary with Anambra State. They also speak the Igbo language as their major means of communication. Known for her organized culture and hospitality, Akokwa is made up of six autonomous villages, namely: Umuokwara, Umuezeaga, Akwu, Owerre-Akokwa, Umuopia and Umukegwu. However, there is an undisputed and central cabinet office otherwise known as the Obi of Akokwa which serves as her supreme council. Akokwa people celebrate their different cultures every year; "Di Ji (new yam festival)" is celebrated every August. Akokwa masquerade is celebrated every December.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on J.L. Austin and Searle's Speech Acts Theory and, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The two theories are suitable for the study since they emphasize language and culture. In the opinion of Austin and Searle, to speak is to do something; every human utterance performs an action, hence, the term, speech act. Greetings are, therefore, viewed as performative speech acts which accomplish such functions as blessing, welcoming, acknowledging, and showing respect.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness theory explains how speakers use language to maintain social harmony, preserve interpersonal relationships, promote peace and manage conflict. Akokwa greetings often function as positive politeness strategies that reinforce communal solidarity and respect.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

This year, 2026, the researcher was at home in Akokwa during Easter break. Most of the time, she listened to and observed people greet in different social contexts. She discovered that Akokwa greetings unlike the English greetings are not only polite expressions but embodiments and carriers of cultural beliefs, values, morals and communal relationships. They have deep or implied meanings which are context-dependent. As a result of this, she decided to investigate Akokwa salutations. A total of 20 communal greetings were randomly selected and analyzed. Some selected elders who are native speakers of Akokwa-Igbo language were interviewed. The result obtained formed the basis for this paper.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Greeting 1: Ututu oma, nna anyi.

Translation: Good morning, our father.

Context: this is used when greeting elderly men or community leaders

Pragmatic Analysis: the greeting performs the speech acts of respect and recognition.

Beyond wishing the addressee a good morning, it acknowledges his social status and authority within the community. The expression, 'nna anyi' (Our father) symbolizes communal acceptance and reverence.

Greeting 2: I bola chi?

Translation: Have you greeted the day?

Response: A boola m chi (I have greeted the day)

Context: it is used as a general greeting in the morning

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Pragmatic Analysis: this greeting extends beyond a simple morning salutation. It implies gratitude for life and divine preservation. The expression reflects the religious worldview of the Akokwa people where survival into a new day is attributed to divine benevolence.

Greeting 3: Ndeewo nu

Translation: Greetings to you all

Context used: this is when addressing groups during meeting or communal gatherings

Pragmatic Analysis: this greeting performs the speech acts of group acknowledgement, solidarity expression and social inclusion. Greeting functions as a solidity marker. It acknowledges collective identity and promotes social cohesion. The plural maker 'nu' emphasizes inclusiveness and communal belonging.

Greeting 4: Kedu maka ulo gi ?

Translation: How is your family?

Response: Ulo m di mma (my family is well)

Context used: it is used when enquiring about general wellbeing

Pragmatic analysis: it performs the speech acts of inquiry, relationship maintenance and an expression of concern. The greeting reflects the communal orientation of Igbo society. Attention is directed not merely toward the individual but toward the welfare of the entire household. It demonstrates concern, empathy and social responsibility.

Greeting 5: Nnoo!

Translation: welcome

Context used: it is used for visitors and returning family members

Pragmatic analysis: The greeting performs a welcoming function and signifies hospitality. It reassures the visitor of acceptance and belonging within the community.

Greeting 6: Ije oma

Translation: safe journey

Context used: it is used for travelers.

Pragmatic analysis: This greeting as both a farewell and a blessing. It expresses concern for the travelers' safety and invokes divine protection. It performs the speech acts of farewell, blessing and goodwill expression.

Greeting 7: Daalu!

Translation: Thank you.

Context used: it is used for appreciation and gratitude.

Pragmatic analysis: although commonly regarded as an expression of gratitude, it functions pragmatically as a relationship maintenance strategy. It reinforces mutual respect and appreciation. It performs the speech acts of appreciation, politeness and social bonding.

Greeting 8: Ndo!

Translation: Sorry

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Context used: this speech act is used when someone has been offended or when one is hurt or when one loses a loved one.

Pragmatic analysis: it is commonly used as an expression of apology and also to show concern. It performs the speech act of apology and sometimes, politeness.

Greeting 9: Ka chi boo

Translation: May the day break

Context used: it is used when saying goodbye to someone

Pragmatic analysis: this is a farewell speech act and also used to express goodwill and blessings.

Greeting 10: Kedu maka ndi ulo gi?

Translation: How is your family**?**

Context used: it is used to show to show concern beyond the individual.

Pragmatic analysis: it is a solidarity-building and relationship speech act.

Greeting 11. Ehihie oma

Translation: Good afternoon

Context used: It is used to express goodwill and solidarity.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of goodwill.

Greeting 12. Jisie ike

Translation: keep up the good work

Context used: it is used when someone is working hard**.**

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of encouragement and solidarity.

Greeting 13: Daalu oru

Translation: thank you for your work.

Context used: it is used when acknowledging the efforts and contributions of someone**.**

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of appreciation or gratitude.

Greeting 14: Jee nke oma.

Translation: Have a safe journey

Context used: it is used when bidding a traveller farewell.

Pragmatic analysis: it is a comissive speech act of goodwill and solidarity.

Greeting 15: I meela

Translation: thank you

Context used: it is used when someone has completed a task**.**

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of appreciation, gratitude or approval.

Greeting 16. Chukwu gozie gi.

Translation: God bless you.

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Context used: it is used when appreciating someone.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of appreciation.

Greeting 17: I putala ura.

Translation: You are awake.

Context used: it is used to welcome someone who woke from sleep.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of concern and solidarity.

Greeting 18: Unu alona.

Translation: You are back or you are welcome.

Context used: it is used to welcome people who travelled.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of welcome, recognition and social or communal bonding.

Greeting 19. Udo diri gi.

Translation: Peace be with you.

Context used: it is used when wishing someone well.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of blessing, goodwill and solidarity

Greeting 20. Onwu egbuchula gi

Translation: May you not die prematurely.

Context used: it is used when blessing a loved one.

Pragmatic analysis: it is an expressive speech act of blessing and solidarity.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that Akokwa salutations perform numerous communicative functions beyond mere greetings. These include: respect, hierarchy, blessing, social solidarity, cultural identity, religious consciousness, peace-building, conflict management, politeness and face management. For instance, I boola chi (You are awake) and Ehihie oma (Good afternoon) are conventional Akokwa-Igbo greetings which are used daily to communicate goodwill, acknowledgement, respect and solidarity. Daalu (Thank you), I meela (Thank you) and Jisie ike (Keep up the good work) are speech acts of gratitude. They are used to show appreciation.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that Akokwa customary greetings are rich pragmatic resources embedded with cultural meanings and social functions. Through speech acts such as blessing, welcoming, inquiry, respect marking, and solidarity expression, Akokwa salutations contribute significantly to social cohesion and cultural continuity. The greetings serve as vehicles for transmitting communal values and maintaining interpersonal harmony. The study recommends the documentation and teaching of indigenous greeting forms to younger generations to ensure the preservation of Akokwa cultural heritage.

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