

## A Semiotic Analysis of Non-Verbal Communication Among the Igede of Central Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

Communication, being an art and process of passing information or messages, rests on a tripod of channels: written, oral and non-verbal. Humans are gregarious and as such rely on all of these channels of communication in everyday interaction. This paper however, focuses its searchlight on the non-verbal aspect of communication as used among the Igede ethno-linguistic group of Benue State in Central Nigeria. The paper explores how the various linguistic signs and symbols are able to convey information among the people based on their historical and linguistic background as well as their worldview. In achieving this, the referential theory of meaning as enunciated by Ferdinand de Saussure as well as Charles Sandal Pierce's semiotic theory is adopted. The study discovers that among the Igede people, non-verbal communication serves as a very significant avenue for information dissemination and meaning sharing among the people.

**Keywords:** *Non-verbal communication, signs and symbols, referential theory and pragmatics.*

### **Introduction**

As social beings, humans are in constant interaction with one another in the ethno-linguistic community and even beyond. This interaction is possible because workable inter-group relationships are often explored. Through the medium of individual communication, linguistic and paralinguistic signs or signals are conveyed. The linguistic signs comprise the oral and written forms, while the paralinguistic signs comprise body contacts, kinesics or gestures, facial expressions, body marks, demonstrative communication and instrumental communication. Thus, it is enough to say that verbal communication is actuated by words while non-verbal communication is conducted using signs, signals and symbols.

This paper however, is only concerned with the semiotic import of non-verbal communication. It specifically assesses the implication of some linguistic signs and symbols used in the course of communication among the Igede. That is, the paper explores the Igede cultural world view of signs and paralanguage symbols used in various communicative modes.

### **Conceptual Explication**

The key concept, which is also the hub of this paper is semiotic analysis. What then is semiotic analysis? Semiotic analysis is a critical study of the meaning of signs and symbols in any non-verbal communication domain. Westman and Turner (2010) establish that communication of this sort is a social process in which symbols are employed to establish and interpret meaning. In everyday communication situations, people's gestures, postures or gesticulations, facial expressions and spatial distance play a remarkable role in the

conveyance of meaning. Hybels and Weaver in their holistic definition, as noted by Ahmad and Nasir (2014), see communication as involving not only the spoken and written words but also body language, personal mannerism and style, the physical environment, and indeed anything that adds meaning to a message.

Taking a specific dimension, Burgoon and Saine (1978:9-10) assert that non-verbal communication incorporates attributes or actions of humans other than the use of words themselves. These attributes or actions have socially shared meanings, and are intentionally sent or interpreted as intentional; they, are consciously sent or consciously received and have the potential for feedback from the receiver. This definition is adopted as the working definition for the purpose of this study. It captures the whole essence of non-verbal communication. Payne (2001:100) submits that non-verbal communication is the one without the use of words. It relies on gestures, body movements, facial expressions, even silence.

For the sake of this paper, we shall discuss non-verbal communication under two broad types: the one actuated by individuals and the other by group(s) of people, all in the Igede cultural milieu. The individual manifestations of non-verbal communication include kinesics, body marks, demonstrative communication (dances), objects, paralanguage and instrumental communication. Meanwhile, non-verbal communication found among humans consists of dress codes, environment, paralanguage, among others. This also includes non-verbal signals by organizations, institutions, pressure groups religious bodies, peer groups and so on. This research undertakes an incisive study of semiotic analysis of the above subdivisions of non-verbal communication among the Igede people.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This research adopts the referential theory of meaning as enunciated by Ferdinand de Saussure and pragmatic theory by Charles Sanders Pierce to clearly describe the form and signs or symbols as well as their meaning in non-verbal communication situations among the Igede ethnolinguistic group of Benue State. The use of these two theories is in order. Charles Sanders Pierce was the first person to be inspired to provide an in-depth discussion of the meaning of “sign”. The result was a theory of sign first presented in a paper titled “On a new List of Categories” in 1867. The theory emphasized that sign is encoded in three basic elements: the object, the referent, and the interpretant. Pierce maintains that anything that somebody upholds as representing something in some degree or specific situation is enough to be regarded as a sign. Pierce strongly maintains that the interpretant is central to the concept of sign in that it is a connection between the object and its referent.

Expanding on the connection among the object, referent and interpretant, Yina (2011) writes that the relationship explicates the core indicant of semiosis (signs and their significations respectively). Signs, according to Yina, are the icons, the index and the symbol. The icon is a sign in which the representative has the resemblance of the actual, such that the real image is easily recognizable. The connection is strong because both the icon and its real image are both tangible and visible; because the icons are always the macrocosms of the actual objects, elements or things represented. For instance, still pictures, drawings, paintings and photographs are good examples of icons. An index meanwhile is a projection of the actual meaning being referred to. Alagh (2017) maintains that index is the consequence of the object to which meaning is referred. For instance, the vehicle tyre-prints indicate the presence of a vehicle and a right thumb print on any

document translates to the consent of the person in question. According to Oloruntoba-Oju (1999:164) an index signifies by being conceptually closely related to its object (e.g. Smoke/fire and danger; human skull and death). Finally, symbols are concerned with conventional experience of meaning references. Oloruntoba-Oju avers that symbols are those signs whose meanings are governed by rules or conventions and whose relationship with the thing signified is arbitrary. Arbitrariness here implies that there is no natural or intrinsic link between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, the signifier becomes the signified only through the force of convention. For example, a nod of the head signifies personal consent, affirmation and agreement.

The three trichotomies according to Pierce include: the trichotomy of logical possibilities; the triadic relations of performance and the trichotomy of thought relation. The trichotomy of logical possibilities has sub-categories such as qualisign, sinsign and "legisign". Qualisign is what Oloruntoba-Oju (1999:165) refers to as a sign whose referent is indicated in its quality. For instance, a pen is a pen but a golden pen may be a sign of affluence, or royalty. Again, academic apparel (gown) is a great sign of scholarship. Sinsign is a thing or an event that individually or singly constitutes a signal. Frequent rainfall is an indication of wet season. A house is an indication of habitation and so on. Legisign is a rule or law that acts as a sign. In Nigeria, green lights indicate a permission for traffic on the concerned lane to go on. Indeed, all the conventional signs are general signs which are generally agreed to, in order to gain significance.

The triadic relations of performance maintain that the object to which a sign refers affects this kind of sign. The index here has same qualities with the object to which reference is made. The dichotomy of thought relation rather regards sign as rheme. A rheme according to Pierce (1886) is a sign, which for its interpretant is of qualitative possibility. It is understood as representing a kind of possible objects. Rheme, to Oloruntoba-Oju (1999) is an item that signals the potentiality of an object. For instance, a big hoe can be used to make heaps or level away heaps. That is, complement possibilities and contending possibilities. It also touches the objective entailment or ambiguity of contending issues that act on the perceptions of the person in question.

Pierce's semiotic theory can thus be seen to hinge on the mental image of an object created in somebody's mind, not just only the referent of such an object. This implies that a sign does not only process physical features but also mental pictures. In sum, both the mental and tangible objects do not convey meaning on their own unless certain values are attached to them. It is therefore instructive to say that, a variety of objects, signs and symbols in Igedeland have much semiotic features in their ethnolinguistic community. Thus, the connection of mental image and visible objects are all connected to the referent(s) depending on the values attached to such objects by the speaker(s) and/or the listeners(s). According to the referential theory, reality precedes language. Language came along later and labelled the already existing bits of reality. Egonu (2016:133) emphasizes that the referential theory is used to explain our knowledge of linguistic meaning but makes no claim about how we actually know how linguistic expressions acquire meaning. This implies that referential theory is the theory of abstraction, also called theory of significance or denotative meaning. Egonu stresses that the theory emphasizes three components of meaning thus; the sound forms or the linguistic sign, the difference in the organization of the concepts and the actual referent, the part of the extra linguistic work, to which the linguistic sign refers.

This paper uses a descriptive approach in conducting a survey of non-verbal communication prevalent among the Igede people. The researcher uses Ferdinand de Saussure's referential theory and Peirce's semiotic theory of sign to uncover the connection of the select aspects of non-verbal communication to meaning, as is obtainable in Igede culture. For this purpose, the researcher examined some communicative signs and symbols and described how they are used in various domains for different communicative purposes. Data were collected in Oju and Obi Local Government Areas that make up the Igede area of Benue State. Five elderly men and five elderly women were randomly selected from each of the local government areas. This is in addition to the researcher's intuitive knowledge as a member of the community. The saved information (in a tape recorder) was replayed, transcribed and translated. The sampled signs, symbols and artifacts were tagged in plates to avoid confusion during analysis. The work interpreted kinesics, demonstrative communication, body marks, paralanguage, objects and instrumental communication based on the two theories already discussed.

### **Problem Gap Identified**

Any serious and scholarly discourse on the analysis of non-verbal communication no doubt falls within the ambit of semiotics. Semiotics is a field of study which deals with the meaning of signs and signals. Many attempts have been made to elucidate the concept of sign and many definitions put forward. Lyons (1981:221-222) asserts that sign is not a meaningful form but a composite entity resulting from the imposition of structure on two kinds of substance by combinational and contrastive relations of the language system. Meaning cannot exist in isolation of forms which they relate with and vice versa.

According to Schneider (2013), Saussure's idea lays a fundamental foundation for semiotics. Saussure sees sign as being a two-sided psychological entity, where a mental concept of an entity (signified) is linked to a sound pattern (signifier). Conversely, Saussure pointed to the fact that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, for nothing intrinsically makes a phenomenon to actually mean what it means. Corroborating this view, Lyons (1981:221-222) argues: "Given the form of a word, it is impossible to predict the meaning and given the meaning, it is impossible to predict the form." In addition, there are differences in meaning perception across peoples of the world. Also, Charles Sandal Peirce's postulations on the study of signs and symbols contends that a sign consists of three elements: the object, its representation and its meaning. In other words, a sign is the object, the referent and the interpretant. In his opinion, the referent is always the mental image directing to the object to which the interpretant is the connecting sense. This notion inspired Peirce to describe the operation of meaning under a diagrammatic representation of a triangle called a semiotic triangle. In Peirce's triangle, three types of signs: the icon, the index and the symbol were considered.

The icon is a sign in which the representation resembles the object which is the real image or real object in question. For instance, paintings, photos, drawings, pictures among others. Index is the referent which is the consequence of the object and meaning, and is not crucial to the relationship. Smoke, for instance is an indication of a burning object without considering who is there to interpret the smoke (Schneider, 2013). This translates that something is burning because without a burning object no smoke will exist. Nevertheless, the symbol is conceived of as an arbitrary representation. It is neither connected to the sign nor the object. It is rewarding to deduce that Peirce's theory is bi-

dimensional because there is interdependence between the constituent-base and conventionality (arbitrariness) of meaning. This connotes that a sign meaning can be arbitrary with an idea, thought, or concept (object). The connotation is a semiotic relation (or sign-function) constituting another semiotic relation. Eco (1979), suggests that there is always a code through which an idea (sign) is expressed and this code determines the meaning.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of the study is to attempt an identification and classification of the diverse types of non-verbal communication in Igede. In doing this, the objectives of the study include: to do a critical evaluation of the importance of non-verbal communication in Igede; and to investigate the function of non-verbal communication in Igede.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study adds to the already existing body of knowledge on non-verbal communication in several ways. First, it adds to the literature on Igede language – a language in the Benue State. Second, it has succeeded in identifying and classifying the numerous types of non-verbal communication in existence in Igede land.

### **Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion on Aspects of Non-verbal Communication in Igede**

The aspects of non-verbal communication are discussed under two broad categories, viz: those by individuals, and those by groups and community organizations. For the individual based non-verbal communication, we have: kinesics, demonstrative communication, body marks, objects and instrumental communication; while group-based non-verbal communication consists of dress code, environment, dance, paralanguage among others. This includes non-verbal signals by organizations, institutions, pressure groups religious bodies, peer groups and so on. All of those non-verbal aspects of communication used are analysed and discussed below.

### **Kinesics/Gestures**

The study of postures, body movements, gestures and facial expression is referred to as kinesics, a word derived from the Greek word *kinesius* which means movement (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter, 2003: 108). In a related sense, Colman (2003: 392) sees kinesics as the study of the role of gestures and other body movements in non-verbal communication. Gestures are classified into: **emblems** (which serves as substitutes for words, such as waving the hand for ‘goodbye’ or putting a forefinger to the lips for ‘silence’); **illustrations** (gestures that accompany speech and depict what is being said, such as moving the hands apart to illustrate a description of a big fish); **adapters** (gestures that involve self-touching, which help one to express emotional reactions such as covering the eyes when in shock or putting a hand over the mouth to show surprise); **regulators** (gestures that accompany speech and help to coordinate turn taking, like putting up ones hand in the air to indicate that one has not finished speaking). Affective displays are facial expressions that convey both emotional and psychological states. Under this aspect of the study, it is rewarding to consider a number of gestures and the meanings they convey.

In Igede society, we have the following gestures and their signification:

Gesture	Signification/Meaning
(a) Bowing down/genuflecting and touching the ground with the right hand before a group of elders	Respect
(b) Supporting the hand at the elbow with the left hand while shaking hands with an elder	Respect

### Analysis and Discussion

The Igede people have great respect for elders and this can be clearly observed in their greetings. In Igede society, all greetings are expected to be accompanied by the shaking of hands. But when a young person greets an elderly person, he does so bowing the head and shaking hands with him or her. While doing this, the right hand is extended and the left one is used to support the right.

In a situation where an individual is greeting a group of people, the individual approaches the group, bows down to touch the ground with the right hand, and at the same time says ‘m kwam eji hanu lee’. All of these gestures are significant being equally symbolic of deep respect, both for the individual and group.

### Space

Space is indicative of non-verbal sign, which signals some significant communicative messages. Space is seen as a gap or vacuum that exists in a particular position or situation and it is meaning-laden in a communication situation. Space can be visible or mental, based on the aspect of non-verbal communicative process. Visible space is generally an empty spot or vacuum that can be practically felt, seen or created and has reflective meaning in any environment.

Object	Meaning
a) Chair/Stool at a corner of a restroom	Reserved for the eldest man in the compound and no one is expected to sit on it

### Analysis and Discussion

In the Igede ethnolinguistic community, an empty chair at a strategic corner of the restroom at the center of the compound indicates that it is the seat for the landlord or oldest man in the compound. This is similar to what we see at wedding receptions today. The unoccupied well draped chairs in a strategic place denote the seats that are reserved for special guests and dignitaries.

### Body Marks

Body marks are cultural identity signals. Both artificial and natural marks on the body surface serve some communicative purpose. Looking at the facial marks worn by some people, one can guess which part of Nigeria they come from.

Marks/Tattoos	Meaning and Symbolism
a) Tattoos on chest and arms	Purity and or royalty

### Analysis and Discussion

The Igede people have a variety of body marks such as tattoos, which signify different things. Maidens sometimes have tattoos on their chests and arms which could signify or symbolise purity. Other tattoos on both male and female members of the Igede society signify royalty; and this is usually flaunted. The average Igede man or woman is able to decipher the meaning of the tattoos worn.

### Paralanguage

This refers to anything done, especially with the body, which helps to accentuate the message conveyed by the spoken word in any communicative endeavor.

Action	Signification/Meaning
a) Gunshot	Obituary announcement, honour, goodwill, love ties, etc
b) A cloth tied round the fore-head or waistline	Mourning/bereavement
c) Ori-ewu and camwood	Peaceful departure for the dead
d) Akpan and achukwu cult performances	To honour heroes and heroine

### Analysis and Discussion

When wedding/marriage ceremonies of people with royal pedigree are performed in Igedeland, gunshots are fired followed by the ululation: 'wiih wiyyih'. This signifies royalty and honour. On the other hand, when slaves marry, no shot is fired. Also, when a person dies among the Igede people, the bereaved ties a cloth around the waist with a knot positioned in the front. Others tie a piece of cloth round their foreheads. Still, others prefer to adorn black clothes or apparels. This can go on for weeks, months or even a whole year, depending on the individual. It is symbolic of the fact that such individual(s) is/are mourning the loss of a loved one.

Also, there exists the practice of firing guns among the Igede when a person dies. Gunshots in Igede can be likened to obituary announcements. When a person dies, gunshots are fired into the air to announce the passing away of the person and also to honour him or her. Friends and relations as well as loved ones purchase gun-powder for these gunshots. This practice communicates extremely important messages of goodwill and ties or bonds. Several weeks after the death and burial of a person, friends and relations when they hear of the death, continue to visit and fire shots in honor of the deceased. After this is done, such a visitor is welcomed and is immediately presented with kolanut followed by drinks and food. This gesture is reciprocated by the visitor right on the spot.

In the group category are such cult groups like the 'achwukwu' and 'akpan' who engage in very symbolic performances during special occasions or ceremonies. In Igede society, valiant men and great hunters as well as farmers often belong to such secret cults and are highly regarded in their communities. When such men die, they are usually celebrated by their group members who give them befitting burials as heroes. For instance, two ceremonies or symbolic displays are carried out before a member of the 'achwukwu' cult is buried. First, is the 'iwo ochi jwu ogwu ehi'. This involves the killing of a cock held upside down and then applying a drop of the blood on the eye of the deceased. The second rite, 'ori ewu', which signifies peace, must also be performed. Here ropes are fetched from the bush and then cut into pieces and thrown in front of the corpse. Camwood is also

sprayed on the ‘ori ewu’; afterwards, water is splashed on the chest of the corpse by means of the leaf. This is followed by ululations; ‘wiih wiiyih, wiih wiiyih’. All these rites are performed exclusively by selected members of the group who also must have excelled in the same heroic deeds like the deceased. In Igedeland, when a person who is regarded as a hero dies, he is specially celebrated by his group members.

### Objects

These are traditional artifacts that have special significance among the people. They come alive during festivals, ceremonies or celebrations. They could be artworks, clothes, or totems and are usually a purveyor of a people’s culture and tradition. The use of these objects can be quite significant.

Objects	Signification/Meaning
a) Raffia mats and strips of cloths	Affection, love and last respect
b) Stump of grass on a tree in a farmland	Ownership and security

### Analysis and Discussion

Different objects in Igede society signify or symbolise different things, thus sending messages to the viewer or receiver. During burials, a lot of clothes, and raffia mats are presented by relations, friends and loved ones to the dead who is believed to be embarking on a journey. These are buried along with the corpse. This ‘gift’ presentation is seen as a sign of affection, love and respect from the giver to the departed. It is the last respect to be accorded the dead.

The Igede society is an agrarian one which practices shifting cultivation. And to warn intruders or people that a piece of land belongs to someone, a farmer would place a stump of grass on a tree in the middle of the said land. This conveys to all other farmers who may want to farm on the land or lay claim to it to keep off. It tells the others that the land has been secured by somebody and so no one else would attempt to cultivate it. The grass in this case is a symbol of ownership and security. For a farmer to secure a fertile land for a long period of time, he has to continue to farm different crops on the said land year after year. That way, he never relinquishes it to any other person even within the family.

### Instrumental communication

As the name suggests, this refers to the use of musical instruments to communicate.

Instrument	Communicative meaning of sound
‘Ohue’, ‘ekwure’ and ‘uba’ sounds	A call for convergence, an announcement or a eulogy of the heroic deeds of a great man.

### Analysis and Discussion

Various instruments like the flute (ohue), trumpet (ekwure), and drum (uba) when played can be used to communicate different messages. The message signaled is usually easily interpreted by the elders in any village of the Igede society. Good dancers are also able to respond to the beats or sounds with their swift gaits and dance steps, which only they can interpret.



The language of the flute, trumpet or drum, convey very powerful messages in Igede society. A good trumpeter can eulogise an individual through the blowing of this musical instrument and the message therein could be well interpreted by elders well versed in this art. The flute could also be used to convey a general call message to the members of the community. Such messages could be for convergence at the village square for a meeting, announcing the death of an individual, or simply singing the praises of a great man.

### **Dress Code**

Dress codes are uniform clothes often worn for identity among members of groups. They are usually worn on special occasions.

<b>Dress Code</b>	<b>Symbolism/Meaning</b>
Ogodogodo	cultural identity, Friendship or even comradeship

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The Igede ethno-linguistic community has a dress code. So also do various groups represent the various clans, lineages, hamlets or friends in Igede society. The general Igede dress code is the locally woven cloth called ‘ogodogodo’. It is a blue and black woven cloth with a strip of white in between. This uniform is for cultural identity. The other groups mentioned above could come up with their own unique uniforms which could be any imported fabric. When this is the norm, then the message or signification is friendship and comradeship. There are many of such uniforms worn by members of associations like: Igede Wives Association, Owo Wives Development Association, Okpaule Wule Friends Association, Igede Unity Forum and many others. These uniforms bind these groups together as women or men with one mission and vision.

### **Environment**

This refers to what is done to the physical surroundings that also carries with it a message. When there is a visible physical change brought to bear on the environment, it no doubt communicates a message to members of the community.

<b>Object</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
A twisted grass rope across a path	A barrier for restriction of movement

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In Igede society, when twisted grass is stringed across a road leading to an ‘ojiya’ (village square), it means that the cult group ‘achwukwu’ is doing a performance. In this case, since women are forbidden to sight them, the grass rope is a message for all women to make a retreat or find an alternative route. In Igede society the punishment or consequences for a woman who sets her eyes on this cult group is very grave and so no woman would contemplate going beyond the barrier.

## Dance

Any rhythmic movement of the body is a dance. Igede dances, like the Tiv dances, can be categorized into: political, social, religious and occupational.

Dance Genre	Performance Occasion/Meaning
a) Ogrinye and akatanka	Warrior dance
b) Iboma and abribri	Celebrative dance

## Analysis and Discussion

Dance groups like the ‘ogirinye’, ‘iboma’, ‘akatanka’, ‘abiribiri’ ‘evo’, ‘ikpirigidi’ among others exist among the Igede and these dance groups carry out very symbolic dances. The dances, just like the songs, are unique to particular occasions. The ‘ogirinye’ dance for instance is a warrior dance and is therefore performed during burials of warriors and great men who have distinguished themselves in their communities. ‘Iboma’ is performed at celebrative or social functions like marriages, and other festivities such as the New Yam Festival (Igede Agba).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored non-verbal communication as used and practiced by the Igede ethno-linguistic group of Benue State in Central Nigeria. Using a two-pronged approach of referential theory and the semiotic theory as propounded by Ferdinand De Saussure and Charles Sandal Pierce respectively, the paper contextualized non-verbal communication within the Igede socio-cultural milieu. Some communicative signs, symbols and artifacts were examined to show how they are used in various domains for different communication purposes.

On the whole, it has been established that there can be no meaningful and effective interpersonal or group interaction in the Igede society without non-verbal communication cues. This implies that, one type is aided by the other; that is, verbal communication is aided by non-verbal, and vice versa. There exist in the Igede communication milieu myriads of non-verbal communication platforms; from firing of guns to adorning clothes on foreheads and the waist during bereavements and burials and shaking of hands. All of these, have been established as symbolic instruments of communication used by members of the community to convey powerful messages about the Igede people’s worldview as well as their psychological and emotional state more than words can ever convey.

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