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**ENCODING IDEOLOGY: A CULTURAL-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF ÍGÁLÂ
PROVERBS**

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Abstract

This paper examines the ideological dimensions of Ígálâ proverbs through an ethnopragmatic lens, employing the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework to elucidate their semantic structures, pragmatic functions, and culturally grounded meanings. In Ígálâ society, proverbs are not merely rhetorical or decorative; they are dynamic instruments of communal ideology, encoding values, ethical norms, and shared expectations regarding personhood, authority, gender roles, and social conduct. Anchored in the speech of elders, these expressions function as cultural scripts, mediating intergenerational communication, social regulation, and moral instruction. The study addresses the growing threat of language shift, particularly the increasing dominance of English in Ígálâ homes and urban contexts, which imperils the transmission of these traditional forms. Through a curated corpus of proverbs, analysed with NSM primes, the paper reconstructs the emic logic underlying their use, revealing how figurative language, metaphor, and cultural scripts encode, perpetuate, and occasionally contest social hierarchies and normative worldviews. Proverbs emerge as ideological tools that shape individual and collective identity, reinforce social cohesion, and transmit moral reasoning, while also providing a medium for subtle negotiation of power, responsibility, and ethical judgment. By integrating semantic analysis with ethnographic insight, the study demonstrates that Ígálâ proverbs operate as active participants in the reproduction and possible transformation of cultural ideologies. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on language endangerment, cultural continuity, and the critical role of indigenous oral discourse in sustaining linguistic, ethical, and social identity.

Keywords: Ígálâ proverbs; ethnopragmatics; linguistic ideology; cultural scripts; Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

1 Introduction

Ígálâ is a West Benue-Congo language spoken by the Ígálâ ethnic group of Nigeria. It is closely related to Yoruba and Itsekiri, with which it forms the Yoruboid subgroup (Akinkugbe 1978; Capo 1989). The Ígálâ homeland, located in Kogi State, covers about 13,150 sq km, stretching from Adamugu, near Onitsha, to the Niger–Benue Confluence (Ejeba 2016). The name ‘Ígálâ’ designates both the people and their language; speakers are collectively called *Àbó Ígálâ* (‘Ígálâ folks’). Estimates place the number of speakers at about two million (Etu 1999), and the language is ranked among Nigeria’s nine major languages (Williamson 1990).

Internally, the Ígálâ nation consists of approximately twelve subgroups (Miachi and Armstrong 1986; Capo 1989; Lewis 2009; Omachonu 2000; Ejeba 2016). Nine – Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Igalamela/Odolu, Ofu, Olamaboro, and Omala – are found in Kogi State, while Inoma, Ebu, and Iluchi are located in Anambra, Delta, and Edo States (Sofunke 1990; Ejeba 2016).

The Ígálâ area falls within Nigeria’s savannah grassland belt, which supports root crops (yam, cassava), legumes (beans, giant beans), and cereals (maize) for the largely agrarian population. Fishing also thrives, owing to the River Niger and its tributaries, while hunting, dyeing, blacksmithing, and weaving constitute important socio-economic activities. These livelihoods have given rise to a wide repertoire of oral genres, among which proverbs hold a central place.

Ígálâ proverbs encapsulate linguistic ideologies; culturally embedded ways of thinking about language that reflect values and norms. Predominantly voiced by elders, they function as cultural scripts, transmitting shared understandings of life, morality, and social conduct. Like in many

African societies, proverbs in Ígálâ are not only communicative resources but also repositories of cultural knowledge: they structure reasoning, regulate behaviour, signal rhetorical competence, mediate disputes, and enable indirect critique. In so doing, they sustain social harmony and underscore the indispensability of culturally sanctioned wisdom.

Despite their centrality, Ígálâ proverbs remain under-documented. Prior work (e.g., Odekina 2014) notes their moral and social utility, but systematic, theory-informed studies are scarce. The tradition is also vulnerable: English is increasingly dominant in urban contexts, threatening the intergenerational transmission and survival of culturally embedded knowledge.

This study examines the ideological dimensions of Ígálâ proverbs, demonstrating how proverbial discourse encodes values, social hierarchies, and moral reasoning while maintaining cultural continuity. Adopting an ethnopragmatic perspective, the analysis employs the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework (Wierzbicka, 2003; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014) to formulate cultural scripts, thereby preserving emic meaning while facilitating cross-linguistic accessibility.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework; Section 3 details the data and methodology; Section 4 examines how proverbs encode ideology in domains of morality, authority, gender, and resilience; Section 5 discusses the broader implications; and Section 6 concludes by highlighting the study's contributions to proverb scholarship, cultural semantics, and language preservation.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ethnopragmatics and Cultural Scripts

Ethnopragmatics is a theoretical approach that integrates linguistic pragmatics with cultural anthropology, emphasising that all communicative practices are culturally situated. Unlike universalist models of pragmatics that prioritise abstract principles such as relevance or cooperation, ethnopragmatics foregrounds the local cultural logic that guides language use. It seeks to uncover the emic perspectives of speech communities by examining how norms, values, and ideologies shape communicative choices.

Within this framework, the concept of cultural scripts plays a central role. Cultural scripts are explicit, cross-translatable descriptions of culturally salient norms and assumptions that guide language use and social interaction. They make visible the implicit rules that community members rely on to act, speak, and interpret meaning appropriately. In the present study, cultural scripts serve as the analytical lens for describing how Ígálá proverbs encode social expectations, moral reasoning, and hierarchical relations.

2.2 Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework provides the methodological foundation for formulating cultural scripts. Developed by Wierzbicka (1996, 2003) and further advanced by Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014), NSM is based on the idea that all languages share a small set of semantic primes – universal, irreducible meanings that can be expressed in every natural language. These primes, numbering approximately sixty-five, encompass fundamental concepts such as *SOMEONE*, *PEOPLE*, *SAY*, *THINK*, *DO*, *GOOD*, *BAD*, *BECAUSE*, and *IF*.

Because semantic primes are shared across languages, they offer a reliable tool for cross-cultural comparison without imposing external categories or distorting local meanings. When applied to

proverbs, NSM enables the articulation of their underlying logic in terms that are both universally intelligible and culturally faithful. This is particularly valuable in analysing Ígálá proverbs, which are rich in metaphor, imagery, and culture-specific presuppositions. By paraphrasing them into NSM explications, it becomes possible to expose the cultural reasoning they encode, such as expectations of deference to elders, constructions of gender roles, or moral lessons about justice and resilience.

2.3 Proverbs, Ideology, and Cultural Transmission

Proverbs have long been recognised as vehicles of cultural transmission and ideological reinforcement. A scholar such as Finnegan (1970) describes proverbs as fixed, pithy sayings that distil communal experience into memorable forms. Their rhetorical and pedagogical power lies in their capacity to convey popular truths in ways that are both affective and authoritative. Schipper (1992) distinguishes between literal and metaphorical African proverbs, while Lakoff and Johnson (1980) underscore their metaphorical grounding as a means of mapping abstract reasoning onto concrete imagery. Moreno (2002) highlights their cognitive economy, describing them as mental shortcuts that illuminate multiple life situations through a single expression.

Beyond their structural features, proverbs also carry ideological weight. They often reproduce dominant cultural values, norms, and hierarchies, whether benign or oppressive. Estaji and Nakhavali (2011) demonstrate in their study of Persian proverbs how proverbial discourse can embed gender stereotypes, for example, equating the intelligence of many women to that of a hen. Such instances reveal how proverbs are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, shaping social roles and expectations.

In the Ígálâ context, Odekina (2014) notes that proverbs serve as ideological instruments that regulate social interaction, negotiation, and authority. However, while this recognition of their cultural utility is important, a significant gap remains in scholarship: few studies have undertaken a systematic, theory-informed analysis that bridges linguistic form, semantic explication, and ethnographic context. The present study addresses this gap by applying ethnopragmatics and NSM to reveal the cultural scripts embedded in Ígálâ proverbs and the ideological functions they perform.

3 Data and Methods

This study adopts a descriptive ethnolinguistic survey, focusing on a curated selection of thirty-two Ígálâ proverbs. Primary data were collected through unstructured interviews with elders, participant observation in social and ritual contexts, and the researchers' insider knowledge as native speakers. Secondary sources included published studies on Ígálâ oral literature, African paremiology, and literature on language endangerment and ethnopragmatics.

Analysis employed the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework, using universal semantic primes to unpack culturally specific meanings and highlight the ideological orientations embedded in the proverbs. AI-assisted tools were used to refine paraphrases and enhance terminological precision, creating a hybrid approach that integrates ethnographic insight with digital semantic modelling.

Each proverb was transcribed in Ígálâ orthography with tone marking preserved, then reformulated into NSM paraphrases that reflect the emic logic of the expression. Contextual interpretation considered speaker roles, interactional settings, and pragmatic function, revealing

how proverbs mediate social behaviour, encode cultural values, and guide decision-making. In illustrating their multifaceted roles, the analysis touches on domains such as family life, social responsibility, moral conduct, interpersonal trust, and collective action, demonstrating the breadth of cultural concerns embedded in Ígálâ proverbial discourse.

4 Ideology and Social Ethics in Ígálâ Proverbs

The thirty-two Ígálâ proverbs in the reference corpus have been grouped into seven thematic domains, each reflecting salient aspects of cultural life and ideology. Within these domains, the proverbs are explicated using NSM paraphrases and situated within their ethnographic context. Together, they reveal the underlying cultural scripts that guide social conduct, encode moral values, and reproduce hierarchical orders in Ígálâ society.

4.1 Proverbs as Instruments of Family Governance and Social Norms

Ígálâ proverbs serve as instruments of family governance and social regulation, articulating values that shape intergenerational authority, domestic discipline, and the moral foundations of community life. The examples in Table 1 illustrate how the family serves as the cradle of moral training, with elders as custodians of wisdom and children as participants in hierarchical yet dialogic relationships of respect and responsibility.

Table 1: Ígálâ Proverbs on Family Governance, Intergenerational Authority, and Social Norms

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
1	Ètè ikwû mà á fà ikwû kwô. People pull the rope from its root	Good upbringing begins in one's own family	People can think: 'If something good starts, it must start inside one's upbringing home; if it starts here, it can be good later.'	Family	Family is the foundation of moral order
2	Ògijo í á nẹ́ íyâ ábojí gò ñ. An elder does not carry on with reckless play	Elders should be cautious and experienced	People can say: 'This person is old; because this person is old, this person can think more; this person can do	Age and wisdom	Age is equated with superior judgment

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
				good things.’		
	<i>Ẹ́nwu kì</i>	What an elder		People can think: ‘This		
	<i>ògijo dàchí</i>	sees lying	Elders’ speech is	person is old;		Elders’
	<i>kì ì lí, ímọ̀tọ̀</i>	down, a child	insightful;	this person	Intergenerational	authority in
3	<i>í chẹ̀kà</i>	cannot see,	children lack can	see more; relations		discourse
	<i>tẹ̀gwù</i>	though he	foresight	this child		
	<i>àgwùbẹ̀ ń á</i>	climbs on a		cannot see		
	<i>lí ń</i>	ladder		far.’		
				People can think: ‘A big		
	<i>Ọ̀rọ̀ ń á gbá</i>	An okro plant	Children cannot	person planted		Hierarchical
	<i>tù ónú óko</i>	cannot grow surpass	their this; this small		Guardianship	parent–child
4	<i>lẹ̀ ń</i>	taller than the guardians’	person cannot			relations
		farmer wisdom	be bigger than			
			this big			
			person.’			
5	<i>Ímọ̀tọ̀ í í fu</i>	No matter	The wisdom of	People can	Age vs wealth	Valuing

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
	<i>ókó nẹ̀ tù</i> how much the ancient is think: ‘An old				wisdom
	<i>ògijo lẹ̀, ỉ́ í</i> wealth a child greater than person has				above
	<i>neke nẹ̀</i> amasses, he youthful wealth more of				material
	<i>ẹ̀gbánukpò</i> cannot get		something		wealth
	<i>tù ògijo lẹ̀ ń</i> more rags		(wisdom) than		
	than an elder.		a young		
			person with		
			many things		
			(wealth).’		
	Though a		People can		
	person has		think: ‘This		
	grown all				Critical
	<i>Ónẹ̀ ỉ́ á gbá</i> he/she can,	Age does not person is old;			stance
6	<i>kpa a mà</i> they have not	guarantee it doesn’t	Maturity		against blind
	<i>ọ̀là kpa ń</i> known all	wisdom mean this			gerontocracy
	they should	person knows			
	ever know	more.’			

The proverbs in this cluster foreground the centrality of family and age hierarchies in the social thought of the Ígálâ people. *Ẹ̀tẹ̀ ikwû mà á fà ikwû kwó* 'Good upbringing begins in one's own

family' frames the household as the moral nucleus of society, where private discipline extends into public virtue.

A recurring motif is the privileged epistemic status accorded to elders. Proverbs such as *Ògijo í á nẹ íyá ábojì gò n* 'Elders should be cautious and experienced' and *Ẹnwu kì ògijo dàchí kì ì lí, ímọ̀tọ́ í chẹ̀kà tẹ̀gwù àgwùbẹ́ í á lí n* 'Elders' speech is insightful, children lack foresight' assign insight and normative authority to age. Elders are cast as arbiters of discourse, while children are portrayed as lacking foresight, reinforcing intergenerational asymmetry.

The proverb *Ọ̀rọ́ í á gbá tù ónú óko lẹ́ n* 'Children cannot surpass guardians' wisdom' underscores parental guardianship, while *Ímọ̀tọ́ í í fú ọ̀kọ́ nẹ́ tù ògijo lẹ́...* 'The wisdom of the ancient is greater than youthful resources' privileges wisdom over material possession, articulating a counter-materialist ethic.

Yet Ígálá proverbial discourse is not uncritical of gerontocracy: *Ónẹ́ í á gbá kpa a mà ọ̀là kpa n* 'Age does not guarantee wisdom' tempers age-based authority, reminding that maturity does not guarantee wisdom.

In sum, these proverbs encode a dual ideological structure: the family as the foundation of moral order and elders as epistemic authorities, tempered by a cautionary recognition that age alone does not ensure insight. Together, they articulate a nuanced ethic of family order, respect, and critical discernment.

4.2 Proverbs on Prudence, Caution, and Moral Foresight

Ígálâ proverbs often function as ethical warnings, urging prudence, restraint, and foresight in the face of life's uncertainties. The examples in Table 2 emphasise the values of patience, prevention, and calculated action, all of which are central to social reasoning of the Ígálâ people.

Table 2: Ígálâ Proverbs on Prudence, Caution, and Moral Foresight

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology	
7	<i>Éjú mǎ nyò</i> <i>ń, mǎ á kà</i> <i>ògèlè ń</i>	does not show disposition, you cannot initiate romantic talk.	A stern look discourages advances.	People can think: ‘If someone looks in a certain way, another person can feel something; because of this, the person will not do something bad.’	Social interaction	Appearance regulates engagement.	
8	<i>Éjúgbogbo</i> <i>mà á mú</i>	People their	tither free-	Take early	precautions to avoid	People can think: ‘If Prudence	Early prevents action

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
	<i>éwó dúdú</i>	ranging black difficulty.	someone does		bigger
	<i>té íkwû</i>	goat before it gets dark outside	something before a bad thing can happen, this bad thing will not happen.'		problems.
			People can think: 'If someone wants to do		
		You need so			
	<i>Éjô kî ì dẹ</i>	much	Be cautious even something bad		Careful
9	<i>éfû òtùbẹ̀</i>	wisdom to when acting in (kill a snake),			strategy
	<i>ibe ibe mà</i>	kill a snake in the face of this person has		Danger/Conflict	ensures
	<i>á nẹ́ du kpa</i>	an earthen danger.	to think much;		survival.
		pot	if this person thinks much, nothing bad will happen.'		

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
10	‘Gò mí éjú, gò mí éjú’ <i>cheógwù éjú</i>	‘Watch out for my eyes!’, that’s before the medicine for the eye	Be proactive and happens, if I avoid problems think about it, before they I can do something; because of this, something bad will not happen.’	People can think: ‘If I see something before it Preventive care superior to cure.	Prevention is superior to cure.
11	Énwu kì ì burrowing game that life asked for a certain hoe (to dig it out)	Adverse circumstances that life warrant someone negative trouble, reactions from people	People can think: ‘If someone is in trouble, they are really not smart enough.’	Cause-effect	Misfortunes have consequences.

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
12	<i>Ìnájú ùlè</i> <i>kì ì á kpa</i> <i>ùlè chì</i>	Hurrying to embark on a journey ends the journey errors. halfway through	People can think: ‘If someone wants to do something fast, Decision- this person making can’t do it well; something bad can happen.’		Caution and patience over rashness.

The proverb *Éjú mǎ nyò ñ, mǎ á kà ògèlè ñ* (If a woman’s countenance does not show disposition, you cannot initiate romantic talk) ‘A stern look discourages advances’ highlights how non-verbal cues regulate social engagement. Here, appearance is moralised as a guide for interaction, reminding individuals that impulsive action without regard for context invites rejection or impropriety.

Prudence as preventive wisdom recurs in *Éjúgbogbo mà á mú éwó dúdú tẹ íkwù* ‘Take precaution early to avoid difficulty’, which encodes the ethic of acting early to forestall danger. Similarly, ‘*Gò mí éjú, gò mí éjú*’ *che ógwù éjú* (‘Watch out for my eyes!’ – that’s the medicine

for the eye) ‘Be proactive and avoid the problems before they escalate’ frames vigilance as the best protection: prevention is superior to cure.

Other proverbs emphasise a cautious approach in the face of risk. *Éjô kî ì dẹ éfû òtùbẹ, ibẹ ibẹ mà á nẹ dù kpa* ‘Be cautious even when acting against danger’ portrays the delicate balance between necessity and danger, teaching that hasty or reckless action invites harm. Likewise, *Ùnájú ùlẹ kî ì á kpa ùlẹ chì* ‘Hastiness leads to errors’ cautions against impatience, asserting that haste undermines success.

Not all Ígálâ proverbs idealise prudence as mere restraint: *Ẹnwu kî ì dẹ éfû úrâ kà kí ma du úkòché wa* (It is the burrowing game that asked for a hoe). The meaning expressed is ‘Adverse circumstances of life warrant certain negative reactions from people’, suggesting that circumstances sometimes provoke adverse reactions. Here, the ideology is not caution but realism: misfortune or provocation justifies actions that might otherwise be condemned.

Together, these proverbs construct a pragmatic ethic of foresight, balancing prevention, restraint, and strategic caution with the recognition that context can justify deviation from the norm. In doing so, they embody moral philosophy of the Ígálâ people as situationally flexible rather than rigidly prescriptive.

4.3 Proverbs on Justice, Social Accountability, and Moral Retribution

The proverbs in this cluster foreground the Ígálâ conviction that justice, accountability, and moral retribution are indispensable for social order. They articulate a worldview in which

wrongdoing inevitably attracts consequences, whether through social isolation, cosmic justice, or communal checks on power.

Table 3: Ígálâ Proverbs on Justice, Social Accountability, and Moral Retribution

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
13	Òlópù ájújà égbé égbé The lineage of a habitual che fighter is a persons stretch of themselves. grass field	Conflict-ridden persons isolate (fight, others), isolate (fight, others), people will not want to live with this person.'	People can think: 'If someone does something bad hurt social other harmony people will not want to live with this person.'	Conflict & Violence social harmony	and discord isolate individuals.	
14	Ójò té ójò dú che ójò ájójí; ójò òkâ tété che ójò ónúóko. Every single day the thief has a field Justice may be someone does day; only one delayed, but not something bad, day is the day denied. another day will of the farm come; on that owner day, something	Justice may be someone does Justice & accountability Justice & accountability	People can think: 'If someone does something bad, another day will come; on that day, something	Justice & accountability	Karma and ultimate accountability.	

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
				good can happen to another person; this bad person can't escape.'		
		The one who		People can think: 'If someone does		
15	Úchùóká kí i mú ádû nwu du should his load	rolled up the load-carrying headpad carry load	Every wrongdoer will be punished.	something bad, something bad will happen to this person later.'	Retribution	Justice and cosmic retribution.
16	Ónú nẹ ójâ; ójâ nẹ ónú king	A king owns a realm; so does a realm own a king	Leaders are accountable to the people.	think: 'This person is big (king); this person can do things; but many	Governance	Checks and balances in leadership.

S/N Proverb	Literal	Communicative	NSM	Thematic	Underlying
	Translation	Meaning	Paraphrase	Domain	Social Ideology
			people can also do things; because of this, the king cannot do bad things alone.'		

The proverb *Òlópù àjújà che égbé égbé* (The lineage of a habitual fighter is a stretch of grassfield) 'Conflict-ridden persons isolate themselves' highlights the social consequences of persistent aggression, underscoring that violence alienates the perpetrator from the community. In a similar vein, *Ójọ́ tẹ́ ójọ́ dú che ójọ́ ájójí; ójọ́ òkà tété che ójọ́ ónúókò* 'Justice may be delayed but not denied' emphasises that while injustice may appear to prevail temporarily and for a long time, the balance of justice ultimately reasserts itself, affirming a cultural belief in delayed but inevitable accountability.

The principle of retribution is further crystallised in *Ùchùóká kí i mú ádú nwu du* 'Every wrongdoer will be punished', which presents wrongdoing as self-incriminating; every individual must bear the consequences of their actions. Extending this logic of accountability to leadership, *Ónú nẹ́ ójà; ójà nẹ́ ónú* 'Leaders are accountable to the people they lead' underscores the reciprocity between rulers and the ruled, presenting power not as absolute but as circumscribed by communal consent and moral responsibility.

Taken together, these proverbs weave a cultural script in which justice is multidimensional: social sanctions restrain disorderly individuals, time vindicates the righteous, retribution guarantees moral balance, and governance is tempered by accountability. In this way, proverbial discourse of the Ígálâ people frames justice not as an abstract ideal but as a lived principle embedded in everyday social relations, ensuring that individual conduct remains tethered to communal well-being.

4.4 Proverbs on Character, Loyalty, and the Dynamics of Trust

The Ígálâ proverbial imagination often turns to questions of character and loyalty, foregrounding the fragility of trust as a social currency. These proverbs reveal a profound suspicion of human motives, warning that betrayal, envy, and ingratitude are enduring risks within communal life.

Table 4: Ígálâ Proverbs on Character, Loyalty, and the Dynamics of Trust

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
17	Ájúwẹ fufu á du òlā nwu ñà òbóchí.	The white-feathered hen will expose itself to the medicine man	One's character cannot be hidden.	People can think: 'If someone thinks badly and does badly, other people will see it with their eyes; it	Character & morality	Character will always be revealed.

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
			cannot be hidden.'		
			People can think:		
			'Something bad		
	The stranger	Insiders are often happens in a		Trust &	Distrust of
18	Ónonojò í á mà ọ̀kpa ùbioko n pathway	does not know behind community place; the backyard evils.	often, someone inside this place does this bad thing.'		
			People can think:		
	If you save an		'Someone does		
	É fu éla	animal, it will	something good	Reciprocity	Ingratitude
	jàdù, i lè;	Some rescued	(helps another		
19	é fu ónè	people become	person); this other	&	among
	you save a	enemies.	person does	ingratitude	humans.
	jàdu, i fu	person, he will			
	é kpa.	kill you.	something bad to		
			this person later.'		
20	Énwu kì	Whatever the What	doesn't People can think:	Envy &	Self-interest
	ájúwẹ mǎ	chicken does benefit a person,	'If something is	self-interest	and envy in

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
jẹ́ n í fú ú not fiátúkà	eat, scatters.	it they may spoil for here, others.	someone cannot eat it; this person does something bad to it so that no one else can have it.'		social relations.

The proverb *Ájúwẹ́ fufu á du ọ́là nwu ñà òbóchí* (The white-feathered hen will expose itself to the medicine man) 'One's true character cannot be hidden' emphasises the inevitability of character disclosure. In the Ígálà cultural space, the spotless white chicken, especially the cock is considered a ritually desired specification for various sacrifices. In fact, white cocks are prized way higher in the market than coloured or speckled ones for this reason. Just as the white cock may not have the savvy to conceal itself even though it is in high demand for sacrifice, an individual's true nature, whether good or evil, will ultimately be revealed. Similarly, *Ónonojò ń á mà ọ́kpa ùbioko ń* 'Insiders are often behind community evils' subverts assumptions of external threats by pointing instead to insiders as the real perpetrators of communal harm. The proverb cautions against misplaced suspicion, revealing a worldview that sees betrayal as most dangerous when it arises from within.

The theme of ingratitude is poignantly expressed in *É fu éla jàdù, i lè; é fu ónè jàdu, i fu é kpa* (If you save an animal, it will get away; if you save a person, he will kill you). The meaning expressed is ‘Some rescued people become enemies’. Here, the very act of kindness is portrayed as precarious, for the benefactor may unwittingly nurture a future adversary. Envy and self-interest emerge in *Énwu kì ájúwẹ mǎ jẹ ñ i fu ú fiátúká* (Whatever the chicken does not eat, it scatters) ‘What doesn’t benefit a person, they spoil for others’, which captures the tendency of some individuals to destroy what they cannot personally enjoy, thereby depriving others of benefit.

Together, these proverbs chart a moral landscape in which trust is conditional, loyalty is fragile, and human relationships are fraught with the risks of betrayal. Yet by naming and critiquing such tendencies, the proverbial wisdom of the Ígálâ functions as a moral compass, encouraging vigilance, affirming the value of integrity, and cautioning against envy and ingratitude as corrosive forces in social life.

4.5 Caution, Subtlety, and Restraint

Ígálâ proverbial wisdom places significant emphasis on the virtues of caution, discretion, and strategic restraint in both speech and action. These proverbs remind speakers and actors alike that openness, when unguarded, can become vulnerability, and that survival and success often depend on subtlety rather than bravado.

Table 5: Ígálâ Proverbs on Caution, Subtlety, and Restraint

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
21	Égbé che Grasses é nẹ étí ears.	have Be careful what you say in public.	People can think: 'Many people can know something if someone says it outside; one should not say everything.'	Speech & speech, discretion especially in public.	Caution in	
22	Ówó éjô kí i dẹ éfû of the snake be éjô inside the snake	Let the hands of the snake be one's plan to small word is caution oneself.	People can think: 'Someone thinks a	a Wisdom & wisdom and caution.	Subtlety in	
23	Égọ í á jẹ nwú égọ kpa éla mate	The mate does not allow his allow others to the attain high honours equal can't get	People can think: 'Watch out if your reasoning & strategy	Quick Discretion and dynamic thought in		

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
ògwú n	honour	of beyond their own	this very good		actions.
	killing	the reach	thing, he will not		
	fierce animal		let you get this		
			very good thing.'		

The proverb *Égbé che é nẹ étí* (Grasses have ears) 'Be careful what you say in public' warns against reckless speech in public spaces. It recognises that words, once spoken, travel beyond their immediate context, carrying consequences that may expose the speaker to danger or disrepute. Discretion, therefore, is not mere politeness but a protective strategy in a world where listening ears are everywhere.

Similarly, *Ówọ́ éjò kí i dẹ́ éfù éjò* (Let the hands of the snake be inside the snake) 'The best way to succeed is to keep one's plan to himself' extols the wisdom of keeping one's plans secret. Just as the snake ordinarily looks vulnerable without hands but conceals its actual capabilities to function with excellent mobility, precision and tact now of strike, a person should protect their strategies from premature exposure. Success, in this worldview, is tied not to noise or display but to quiet calculation and restraint.

This cautionary ethic finds resonance in *Égọ́ ń á jẹ́ nwú égọ́ kpa éla ògwú n* 'A person does not allow another attain high honours beyond their own reach', which warns that even friendship leaves the undiscerning open to manipulation and exploitation. In a society where envy, rivalry,

and betrayal are real threats, discretion and the ability to take dynamic choices in response to threats, even from the closest associates, is a vital shield.

Together, these proverbs articulate a cultural script in which silence, subtlety, and strategic secrecy are highly valued. Ígálâ social philosophy thus presents restraint not as weakness but as wisdom: to speak less, reveal less, and act with measured discretion is to preserve one's safety, dignity, and success.

In the contemporary digital age, where oversharing has become commonplace, the lessons of these proverbs remain especially relevant. The 'one's mate' principle warns that revealing too much in friendship communities, even seemingly innocuous information, can expose one to surveillance, exploitation, or harm. Ultimately, Ígálâ proverbs frame restraint, subtlety, and calculated disclosure not as weakness but as culturally sanctioned forms of wisdom and social power, illustrating the enduring relevance of indigenous communicative ethics in guiding behaviour and maintaining communal harmony.

4.6 Proverbs on Self-Reliance, Diligence, and Foresight

The proverbial philosophy of the Ígálâ people strongly affirms the virtues of self-reliance, responsibility, foresight, and diligence as foundational to personal and communal success. These proverbs critique dependence, opportunism, and half-hearted effort while commending those who embrace responsibility, seize opportunities, and complete their tasks with thoroughness.

Table 6: Ígálâ Proverbs on Self-Reliance, Diligence, and Foresight

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
24	Ówọ wẹ í biẹnẹ ẹ á du nwú ẹnẹ òmúnẹ fáná n	If your hand is bad, you can not give it to someone else to lick.	You must face your own something bad problems; no one else will do it for you.	People can think: ‘This body is mine; if someone else can do it for me; I have to do it myself.’	Self-Responsibility & self-dependence.	Responsibility dependence.
25	Ègbà kì í biẹ ma close when the tẹ wá food is done	They come close when the food is done	People often not do avoid effort but something want to enjoy the before; later reward.	People can think: ‘Someone did something good is there.’	Social Critique of Opportunism	Critique of opportunism and lack of contribution.
26	Átákpá	He who goes	Seize	People can	Opportunity & Early	action

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
		nyí ájá kì to the market opportunities		think:	‘If Foresight	brings an
		ì á mú early secures a while they last.		someone goes		advantage.
		ùñà ènyò good		before other		
		placement.		people,		
				something		
				good can		
				happen for this		
				person.’		
		A merchant		People can		
		does not cringe		think:		
		from the early A	visionary	‘Someone goes		
27	Ányájá í á gbò ímiẹ́ n	morning mist person is not early; (as he walks discouraged through the obstacles. bush paths with dew)	is not early; by something bad is there, it cannot stop this person.’	if Vision Determination and foresight.		& Determination
28	É fu éjô kpa, ẹ a snake, crown you gbògbà the effort by thoroughly.	When you kill Complete what People can start think: someone does		Diligence & thoroughness Completeness		Diligence and thoroughness in tasks.

S/N Proverb	Literal	Communicative	NSM	Thematic	Underlying
	Translation	Meaning	Paraphrase	Domain	Social Ideology
	mú ójí cutting off the nwu bù head.		something, it is good if this someone does it to the end.'		

The proverb *Ówọ wẹ í biẹnẹ ẹ á du nwú ẹnẹ òmúnẹ fáná n* 'You must face your own problems; no one else will do it for you' underscores the principle of personal responsibility. Everyone must confront their own struggles; no one else can carry the weight of another's burdens. Self-reliance, here, is not a matter of pride but of necessity.

In contrast, *Ègbà kì í í biẹ ma tẹ wá* 'People often avoid effort but want to enjoy the reward' critiques opportunism and parasitism. Those who avoid effort yet rush to enjoy the fruits of others' labour are exposed as socially irresponsible. The proverb affirms communal disdain for laziness and opportunism, placing moral value on contribution and participation.

The theme of foresight is captured in *Átákpá nyí ájá kì ì á mú ùñà ẹnyọ* 'Make use of opportunities while they last, which teaches that timeliness and proactive effort secure advantage. This principle is reinforced by *Ányájá ỉ á gbọ ímiẹ n* (A merchant does not cringe from the early morning mist) 'A visionary person is not discouraged by obstacles', emphasising that determination and vision require braving obstacles. The mist here symbolises temporary hardship, which a farsighted person endures for long-term gain.

Finally, *É fu éjô kpa, ẹ gbògbà mú ójì nwu bù* ‘Complete what you started thoroughly’ extols diligence and completeness. Beginning a task is insufficient without seeing it through to its conclusion. Thoroughness, rather than partial effort, is the true measure of responsibility.

Together, these proverbs reveal a cultural ethic that esteems foresight, self-dependence, and diligence as indispensable virtues, while casting opportunism, laziness, and incompleteness as social vices. They reflect a worldview where success belongs to those who are proactive, accountable, and determined.

4.7 Proverbs on Communal Cohesion, Conflict Resolution, and Collective Responsibility

The proverbs in this cluster highlight three interrelated values central to the social thought within the Ígálâ cultural milieu: the indispensability of unity, the wisdom of peaceful conflict management, and the necessity of responsible prioritisation.

Table 7: Ígálâ Proverbs on Communal Cohesion, Peaceful Resolution, and Responsible Prioritisation

S/N	Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
29	Álu má	If the lips do	Unity leads	to People	can Unity	& Collaboration

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
jón ǐ á fa not ífôn	come together, there is no whistling	collective success	think: 'If people are together, they can do something good; if they are not together, they cannot do it.'	Cooperation	and communal effort
30 Mǎ á dú úná kpá úná lún	You don't use fire to put out with fire	Resolve conflicts with peace, not retaliation	happens, you cannot do another bad thing; it is good if you do something good.'	Conflict Resolution Peace	Nonviolence & and peaceful dialogue

S/N Proverb	Literal Translation	Communicative Meaning	NSM Paraphrase	Thematic Domain	Underlying Social Ideology
31	Énwu kì ẹ̀tẹ̀lẹ̀ má dún, àgbúlú neke dún Whatever delicate handling does not carry, roughness cannot carry	If the force of gentleness cannot resolve a matter, brute force cannot either	People can think: 'If something good cannot bring something good, something bad can never bring something good.'	Conflict Resolution Peace	Nonviolence & and peaceful dialogue
32	Éne kì ì nẹ̀ òkwú àdagbá ójì ń́ gwà òlùlèn Someone carrying the carcass of an elephant does not dig a cricket hole	Focus on priorities and avoid trivial distractions	People can think: 'If something big is on someone, & this person cannot do small things.'	Prioritization Responsibility	Wisdom in prioritisation and responsibility

The proverb *Álu má jọ n ń́ á fa ífô n* 'Unity leads to collective success' underscores the indispensability of unity, presenting collaboration as a prerequisite for meaningful achievement.

Complementing this, *Mǎ á du úná kpa úná lu n* ‘Resolve conflicts with peace, not retaliation’ and *Énwu kì ètèlè mǎ du n, àgbúlú neke du n* ‘If the force of gentleness cannot resolve a matter, brute force cannot either’ highlight the value of non-retaliation and moral restraint, framing peaceful resolution as central to maintaining social harmony. Meanwhile, *Énẹ̀ kì ì nẹ̀ òkwú àdagbá ójì í á gwà úrà òlùlẹ̀ n* ‘ocus on priorities and avoid trivial distractions draws attention to prudent prioritisation, advocating that individuals and communities allocate their efforts wisely toward essential tasks.

Collectively, the cluster presents a culturally grounded vision of communal life, where collaboration fosters collective success, restraint and dialogue preserve peace, and careful prioritisation sustains continuity. In this way, the proverbs reveal Ígálá cultural wisdom as an ethic of responsibility and coordinated conduct, one that underpins durable cohesion, effective conflict management, and collective well-being.

5 Proverbs, Ideology, and Cultural Semantics

The analysis of Ígálá proverbs shows that ideology is systematically encoded in figurative imagery and cultural scripts. Sayings such as *Álu mǎ jọ n, í á fa ifô n* (If the lips refuse to come together, they can never whistle) ‘Unity leads to collective success’ foregrounds unity through embodied metaphor, while *Ègbà kì í í bìẹ ma tẹ wá* (They were absent during cooking but present at eating) ‘Some avoid effort but want to enjoy reward’ critiques opportunism via food and labor imagery. Gendered proverbs like *Éjú mǎ nyọ n, mǎ á kà ògèlẹ̀ n* (If a woman’s countenance does not show disposition, you cannot initiate romantic talk) ‘A stern look discourages advances’ further reveal asymmetrical ideologies: women are cast as passive gatekeepers, while men embody initiative, reinforcing hierarchies of dependence and agency.

At the same time, proverbs serve as cultural instruments that both preserve and regulate. They valorise foresight, responsibility, and coexistence, yet also reproduce asymmetries of gender and age. Circulated in everyday speech, ritual performance, and intergenerational teaching, they function simultaneously as repositories of communal wisdom and as ideological mechanisms that legitimise authority.

These patterns affirm that proverbial discourse is never ideologically neutral. Figurative semantics, grounded in bodily imagery, ecological metaphors, and social practices, renders cultural values memorable and authoritative. The Ígálâ case highlights how ideology resides not only in meaning but in form: metaphor, ellipsis, and cultural scripts transform lived realities into normative injunctions. More broadly, the findings demonstrate the value of ethnopragmatics for African languages, showing how ideology emerges as an embodied, context-specific practice of meaning-making. This synthesis provides the foundation for the concluding section, which draws out the study's broader implications for proverb scholarship, cultural semantics, and language preservation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Ígálâ proverbs are not inert ornaments of speech but active cultural scripts and ideological instruments, encoding perspectives on morality, authority, gender, conflict, and responsibility. Through the lens of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), proverbial discourse emerges as a site where universal cognitive patterns intersect with locally grounded moral reasoning. Three central insights stand out: first, proverbs function as vehicles of ideology, shaping rather than merely reflecting social values; second, they embody the paradox of oral tradition, preserving communal wisdom even as they reproduce hierarchies of gender and

authority; and third, an ethnopragmatic perspective reveals them as sites where language, culture, and ideology converge, naturalizing moral expectations through figurative speech.

Beyond Ígálâ, these findings foreground the urgency of documenting African proverbial discourse at a historical moment when oral traditions face erosion under the pressures of globalisation, cultural amnesia, and language endangerment. To ignore these verbal arts is to collude in the silencing of indigenous epistemologies. Conversely, engaging them through ethnopragmatics affirms their vitality as repositories of knowledge, ethics, and communal identity. As one of the first native-speaker ethnolinguistic studies of Ígálâ proverbs, this work not only advances proverb scholarship but also contributes to the decolonial project of reclaiming African languages as living archives of cultural memory. It calls for deliberate preservation and revitalisation, not as nostalgic gestures, but as acts of intellectual sovereignty and cultural survival for future generations.

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