Fear, Metaphor and Culture in Igbo and English: A Cognitive Semantic Study

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Abstract

This paper explores fear expressions in Igbo and English, using Mbe Agaba by Rev. Fr. (Dr) F.O.F Onwudufor and Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe. Using a qualitative approach guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the paper examines how 'fear' is expressed, understood, and influenced by culture. Data from folktales and literary texts were analyzed for cognitive and metaphorical patterns. The study found that 'fear' is often represented as a force acting on the body and mind, with physical reactions such as trembling, chills, or paralysis. Fear also arises from social interactions, reflecting communal or social concerns. Igbo expressions emphasize communal, relational, and folkloric contexts, while English expressions focus on individual experiences, social status, and historical challenges. The research concludes that fear is both a cognitive and cultural phenomenon, with language revealing how thought, bodily experience, and culture shape emotional expression.

Keywords: Fear, Culture, Cognitive Metaphor, Emotion, Culture.

Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a window into human thought and culture. Through language, people give meaning to their experiences, including emotions. Among all emotions, fear stands out as one of the most universal and intense. Every human being feels fear, but the way it is expressed differs across languages and cultures. These expressions often show how a community understands and reacts to fearful situations.

Cognitive semantics, a branch of cognitive linguistics, is concerned with how language reflects human thinking. It studies how words and expressions help us to make sense of our experiences, including emotions. It provides a useful framework for understanding how fear expressions emerge from mental imagery, cultural knowledge, and shared experiences (Evans & Green, 2006). By analyzing fear-related expressions in Igbo and English, this study investigates how speakers describe, interpret, and communicate the emotion of fear.

The Igbo language, spoken widely in southeastern Nigeria, is rich in metaphorical and figurative expressions. Proverbs, idioms, and folktales often capture deep cultural truths about human life, including the experience of fear. For instance, the proverb "ụjọ adịghị ama onye mere ya" ("fear does not ask who caused it") reflects a worldview that emphasizes collective caution and moral responsibility. As Emenanjo (2015) notes, Igbo figurative expressions are not only ways of speaking but also carriers of cultural wisdom and ancestral values.

This study therefore aims to explore how fear is expressed and understood in Igbo, with support from English expressions. It seeks to show how cultural beliefs, metaphors, and bodily experiences shape the meaning of fear. To achieve this, data will be drawn mainly from Igbo folktales, and literary texts, alongside selected English literary works. These data will then be analyzed using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and other insights from cognitive semantics. In this way, the study will reveal how fear is structured in the mind, expressed in language, and shaped by culture.

Cognitive Semantics

Cognitive semantics is a branch of linguistics that explores how meaning is created through the connection between language, thought, and experience. In this view, language is not separate from how we think but reflects our thoughts, culture, and physical interaction with the world (Evans and Green,2006). Lakoff (1987) notes that the way we use words is closely linked to how we think. For example, we often use body-related or movement words to talk about feelings or time. In this sense , language is shaped by how we experience life through our bodies and senses (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cognitive semantics also says that meaning often changes based on how people use a word in context. Meaning is not fixed ,it depends on things like culture, memory, and how people understand the world around them (Geeraerts, 2010). Meanwhile, Okoye (2015) adds that Cognitive semantics is useful for studying African languages, as it uncovers how people connect language to belief systems, social values and lived realities. This approach is therefore appropriate for analyzing Igbo fear expressions ,which often involve metaphor, spirituality and community values.

2.1. **Meaning of Fear and Fear Expressions**

Fear is a universal human emotion that arises when a person perceives danger and uncertainty. Öhman (2000) explains that fear plays a protective role, preparing individuals to avoid harm by triggering physical changes such as increased heartbeat, trembling,or stillness. Evans(2007) adds that fear is shaped by the body's sensorimotor experiences, which influence how it is processed and expressed in language.

Fear expressions show how communities understand and react to fear. Kövecses (2000) stresses that these expressions are not random, they are grounded in the body, culture, and environment. In some cultures, fear may be linked to the heart, while in others it may be felt in the stomach or spirit. This shows that fear is not just a feeling, but also a concept that people talk about in different ways.

Fear expressions can also be said to be the linguistic way people describe or communicate

emotions. These expressions maybe literal ("I'm afraid") or metaphorical ("My heart almost stopped"). Across different languages, fear is often described using images of the body, environmental elements or movement. For example,in English someone may describe fear as " I got a cold feet" which implies hesitation or withdrawal due to fear. While in Igbo language, fear is also expressed through metaphor and culturally rooted imagery. For example " Ujo na-aba n'obi" (Fear enters the heart) or "Ujo juru m n'ahú" (Fear filled my body).

Sharifian (2017) also explains that emotions like fear are shaped by cultural experiences. This means that the way Igbo people talk about fear will reflect their values, traditions, and beliefs. For this reason, studying fear expressions helps us understand more than just the language.

Smith and Jones (2018:102) observe that English speakers often describe fear in bodily terms, such as the expression “My heart was in my mouth.” This expression highlights the metaphor FEAR IS PHYSICAL DISPLACEMENT, where the heart, associated with life and emotion, is imagined as moving upward due to extreme fright.

Similarly, Brown and Harris (2019:88) discuss the phrase “Frozen with fear,” which reflects the conceptual metaphor FEAR IS LACK OF MOVEMENT. Here, fear is understood as a force that immobilizes the body and prevents action.

Adewale (2020:54) explains the English idiom “Fear ran through me,” noting that it represents fear as a substance that spreads through the body like a current. This aligns with the metaphor FEAR IS A MOVING FORCE. Together, these examples show that English fear expressions frequently draw on the body as a source domain to conceptualize emotional states.

Fear Expressions in Cognitive Semantics

In cognitive semantics, fear expressions are more than figures of speech; they reveal how people conceptualize fear. Since fear is an abstract emotion, people often describe it using more concrete things, like movement, temperature, or the body (Kövecses, 2000). This is because abstract ideas are often understood through metaphors, which help people make sense of things they cannot see or touch.

For example, the expression “My blood ran cold” shows fear as a change in body temperature, while “Paralyzed with fear” presents fear as something that stops the body from moving. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), these metaphors are not just ways of speaking; they reflect how people actually think about fear.

Similarly, Igbo expressions like “Ujo juru m n’ahụ” (Fear filled my body) also show how fear is understood as something that can physically occupy or affect the body. This shows that even though different languages use different words, they often use similar cognitive strategies to talk about emotions.

These examples show that both languages treat fear as something that can act on the body, though Igbo expressions often carry spiritual or communal connotations. As Okeogu (2017) observes, in many African languages, emotions are rarely viewed as private or internal states, they are interpreted in light of social context, shared values, and community responsibility.

Studies on 'Fear' Expressions

Smith and Jones (2018:102) conducted a study on how fear is expressed through metaphor in English and how these expressions reveal the mental image of fear in Western culture. They aimed to identify common metaphor patterns and show how bodily reactions shape the language of fear. They found out and concluded that English fear expressions rely on physical imagery. For example, being “frozen” suggests that fear causes a loss of movement. This supports the conceptual metaphor FEAR IS LACK OF MOVEMENT, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) described. Another expression, “my heart skipped a beat,” reflects the metaphor FEAR AFFECTS THE BODY, showing how emotional tension is often explained through physical reactions.

However, their research focused solely on English and did not explore how fear is expressed in other languages or cultural contexts. As a result, their study does not account for how fear might be expressed in African languages. This is a gap that the current study addresses, including Igbo fear expressions that are shaped by different cultural and spiritual experiences.

Adewale (2020:88) carried out a study on emotional expressions in three Nigerian languages, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, using a cognitive semantic approach. The aim was to highlight how embodiment and culture shape the way Nigerian languages describe fear. He observed that Igbo speakers often describe fear as something that takes control of the body, using phrases like "Ujo ji m Ike" (Fear held me strongly) or "Ujo juru m n'ahú" (Fear filled my body). He also observed that in Igbo culture, fear is not just a personal feeling; it is often connected to spiritual forces, moral expectations, or ancestral warnings. For example, fear could serve as a reminder to behave properly or avoid dangerous places, especially in traditional settings. He concluded that Nigerian languages encode fear through both physical and cultural frameworks.

While the study covers multiple Nigerian languages, his discussion of the Igbo language was quite brief. This present research builds on his work by giving more detailed attention to fear expressions in Igbo.

Brown and Harris (2019:67) conducted a comparative study on emotional metaphors in English and indigenous African languages, with particular attention to fear-related expressions. Their aim was to examine how metaphor serves as a tool for both expressing and understanding emotions, using the principles of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory. In their analysis of English fear expressions, they highlighted phrases like “It scared the life out of me” and “My blood ran cold,” which use vivid, body-based imagery to communicate emotional intensity. These expressions illustrate the conceptual metaphors FEAR IS A THREAT TO LIFE and FEAR IS LOSS OF HEAT, linking fear to physical danger or coldness.

In their review of Igbo fear expressions, they used examples like "Ujo na-aba n'ime obi" (Fear enters the heart), which shows fear as something that moves into a person.

Brown and Harris concluded that metaphorical fear expressions in African languages show a deeper connection to culture, tradition, and worldview. While English metaphors often focus on internal physical responses, Igbo and other African languages tend to include external social or spiritual dimensions.

However, their analysis was broad and largely comparative. They didn't go deeply into the Igbo case and lacked detailed cultural interpretation. The current study addresses this gap by focusing more on the Igbo fear expressions.

Ekpe and Okonkwo (2021:104) explored the use of metaphor in fear-related expressions among native Igbo speakers, with a particular focus on proverbs and oral performances. Their study aimed to show how emotions, especially fear, are embedded in Igbo cultural and linguistic practices, and how these expressions reflect collective experiences and values.

One of their key findings was that Igbo fear expressions are deeply metaphorical, but also communal in meaning. Expressions like “Ujo adịghị ama onye mere ya” (Fear does not ask who caused it) and “Ujo bụ onye mba” (Fear belongs to everyone) show that fear is not viewed as an isolated experience. Rather, it is shared as a human condition, influenced by community awareness, moral consequences, and spiritual caution. They concluded that Igbo proverbs treat fear not only as an emotion but as a guide for moral conduct.

However, their study focused mostly on oral proverbs and did not include modern or informal fear expressions used in everyday Igbo speech. As a result, their work does not fully capture the evolving nature of fear metaphors in present-day Igbo usage. This study continues their work by also examining how fear is expressed in ordinary speech today.

Okoye (2015:76), in her article, studied fear expressions in Igbo religious and social communication. Her aim was to show how fear works as a spiritual and moral regulator. She discovered that fear is often used to express respect for divine authority, fear of spiritual consequences or fear of social shame. Expressions like Ujo na-egbu mmuó" (Fear kills the spirit) show how fear can affect a person deeply, not just physically but also spiritually.

She explained that Igbo fear metaphors often serve a moral or cautionary purpose. They are not only used to describe feelings, but also to warn, guide, or correct people in line with their traditional values. Okoye's study confirms that language and culture are closely related in the way fear is communicated.

However, her research focused more on formal or religious uses of fear expressions. This current work expands the view by exploring informal and everyday expressions that also reflect Igbo thinking and experience.

Methodology

This study focuses on the expression of fear in Igbo and English. The Igbo data will be drawn mainly from folktales and literary texts, since these are rich sources of figurative language and cultural wisdom. English data will be taken from selected literary works.

The study will analyze these expressions using cognitive semantic approaches, especially Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which explains how abstract emotions like fear are understood through concrete experiences such as movement, force, or bodily reactions. The analysis will involve identifying fear-related expressions, grouping them into themes, and interpreting their cultural and cognitive meanings.

The Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) was introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to explain how people understand abstract ideas through more familiar and concrete experiences. This theory argues that metaphors are not just decorative language but are central to how we think, speak, and make sense of the world.

One of the main points in CMT is that we often understand emotions like fear by comparing them to things we can see, feel, or experience physically. For example, when someone says, "I was frozen with fear," they are using a metaphor to explain that fear made them unable to move, just like something that has turned to ice. This shows that fear is understood as a physical force that affects the body.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) called these kinds of metaphors conceptual metaphors. These are mental connections between two ideas, for example:

FEAR IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT ("Fear gripped me")

FEAR IS COLD ("My blood ran cold")

FEAR IS MOVEMENT OR LACK OF MOVEMENT ("Paralyzed with fear")

FEAR IS A BURDEN OR WEIGHT ("Crushed by fear")

These patterns are common across many languages, though they can take different forms. In the Igbo language, for instance, expressions like "Ujo ji m ike" (Fear held me strongly) also reflect the idea of fear as a physical force. This supports the theory that people often experience emotions in similar ways, even across different cultures.

Kövecses (2000) expanded on this theory by showing that while some metaphors are shared globally, others are shaped by culture. For example, in some African cultures, fear may be described using images of the spirit, ancestors, or natural forces; these ideas are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs.

Therefore, Cognitive Metaphor Theory is suitable for this study as it explains how Igbo and English speakers use different expressions to communicate the same emotion (fear) while drawing from their own physical, social, and cultural realities.

Data were collected from written and documented sources to ensure consistency, accessibility, and ease of analysis. The following sources were used:

Folklore: Selected Igbo folk expressions were examined, as they often contain metaphorical and emotional representations of fear.

Literary Texts: Igbo texts like **Mbe Agaba by Rev.Fr.(Dr)F.O.F Onwudufor,** and English texts such as **Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe** were analyzed to identify fear expressions, their context, and cultural relevance.

Secondary Data: Scholarly works on cognitive linguistics, semantic analysis, emotion expression, and metaphor theory were reviewed to provide theoretical support and guide the interpretation of fear expressions.

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic and cognitive analysis. The process involved the following steps:

1. Identification and Selection of Data: Fear expressions were extracted from

literary texts and documented cultural materials in both Igbo and English.

2. Thematic Grouping: Expressions were grouped into themes such as fear, anxiety, danger, emotional response, and social concern. This helped reveal common semantic patterns across the two languages.

3. Cognitive Analysis: Using cognitive semantic theories, including Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Image Schemas, and Metonymy, the study examined how fear is mentally structured and expressed in language.

4. Cultural Contextualization: Each expression was analyzed within its cultural setting to understand how beliefs, values, and social norms shape the representation of fear.

5. Comparative Interpretation: Finally, similarities and differences in fear expressions across Igbo and English were identified and interpreted.

IGBO FEAR EXPRESSIONS

Extracts from 'Mbe Agaba' by Rev.Fr.(Dr) F.O.F Onwudufor

1. “Ókè ụjọ bịára Ǹbè n’áhụ.”

Literal Meaning: A great fear came into the tortoise body.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear acts on Mbe like a real force, entering his body and making him feel its power.

2. “Égwú dị.”

Literal Meaning: Fear exists.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: STATE SCHEMA. Fear is presented as a condition or state of being, it is something present rather than an action.

3. “Ụjọ bịára onye ọ bụla n’áhụ.”

Literal Meaning: Fear came upon everyone.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear acts on all the people at once, showing that it can affect a group together.

4 . “Ụjọ na ọbì Ǹmàpù ekweghi enwe kwuo okwu ọzọ.”

Literal Meaning: Fear and trembling stopped the Monkey from speaking again.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear prevents action, in this case, stopping the Monkey from talking.

“Ụjọ ji enwe bịára bawanye.”

Literal Meaning: Fear gripped the monkey and grew stronger.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear acts on the body and grows in strength, showing how emotions can intensify.

6. “Mgbe ahụ ka agụ ji malite ịbé ákwá.”

Literal Meaning: At that moment, the leopard began to cry.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: METONYMY. The leopard’s crying shows its inner fear; the physical act stands in for the emotion.

7. “Ụjọ anụ ojoo jidere onye ọ bụla.”

Literal Meaning: Fear of wild animals seized everyone.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear takes control of the people, showing its power over them.

8. “Éwu ahụ ji ụjọ kwere Ǹbè mgba.”

Literal Meaning: The goat, out of fear, agreed to wrestle with Mbe.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: CAUSATION / FORCE SCHEMA. Fear causes the goat to act differently from normal, showing how fear can influence behavior.

9. “Ápịa were árịrị na anya mmiri hapụrụ Ǹbè ubi ahụ.”

Literal Meaning: Ápịa, weeping with tears, left the farm for Mbe.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: METONYMY. Tears represent internal fear; the physical action of crying shows the emotion.

10. “Onweghị onye egwu na ekwe apụta iro imara onye na-akụ ikoori ahụ.”

Literal Meaning: No drummer dared come out to identify the person playing the ikoori because of fear.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A RESTRAINING FORCE. Fear stops people from taking action, showing how it can limit behavior.

11. “Nwanyi ahụ bere ákwá larute tọghé akpa ahụ.”

Literal Meaning: The woman wept bitterly as she reached the bag.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: METONYMY. The weeping shows her inner fear; the physical action represents the emotion.

12. “Ọ bụghị na nkiti ka eji atụrụ ya egwu.”

Literal Meaning: It is not with silence that one frightens him.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: CAUSATION, Fear can be caused deliberately by someone’s action.

13. “Okorobia ahụ jidesiri ákwá ya ike were gbaa ọsọ gaa kwụ n’ụkwụ osisi ganye mgbe oke ikuku mechara ike ya.”

Literal Meaning: The young man held tightly to his cloth and ran to stand by a tree until the strong wind passed.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FORCE / BLOCKAGE SCHEMA. Fear triggers protective action, showing how the body reacts to danger in the environment.

14. “Ǹbè bụ onye ụmẹ̀ngwụ a maara aha ya tinyerụrụ na ụjọ ịrịgo eru na àtụ ya.”

Literal Meaning: Mbe, the timid one, felt fear rise in his body.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A FORCE. Fear moves through the body, showing how physical sensations reflect emotion.

15. “Onye ọ bụla n’ime ha ekeela nkwucha dị egwu gbasara ibe ya.”

Literal Meaning: Each of them felt a terrible fear concerning the other.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: SOCIAL THREAT. Fear comes from social interaction; people are afraid because of each other.

4.2. ENGLISH FEAR EXPRESSIONS

Extracts from 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe

1. “Darkness held a vague terror.”

Literal Meaning: The darkness made him feel uneasy and a little scared.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: ENVIRONMENTAL FEAR (Embodied Metaphor). Fear is projected onto the surroundings. The darkness represents unknown danger, showing how people understand fear through their environment.

2. “Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness.” p. 11

Literal Meaning: Okonkwo was always afraid of failing or looking weak.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: SOCIAL / PERSONAL FEAR (Metonymy). Fear drives his behavior. Worry about weakness and failure stands for the larger pressure to succeed and maintain respect.

3. “He was terribly afraid.”

Literal Meaning: He felt very scared.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR IS A STRONG FORCE. Fear is a powerful mental state, and terribly shows its intensity.

4. “Fear of his power.”

Literal Meaning: He was scared of someone else’s strength or influence.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: SOCIAL FEAR. Fear arises from an external source that could cause damage.

5. “He was possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death.”

Literal Meaning: He was overwhelmed by fear about his father’s life and death.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: PERSONIFICATION OF FEAR. Fear is described as something that can take control of him, showing how emotions can dominate thought.

6. “Fear of a goddess.”

Literal Meaning: He was scared of the goddess.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR AS RESPECT / POWER). Cultural beliefs make fear arise from spiritual authority.

7. “The air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow.”

Literal Meaning: The atmosphere felt tense, and it made him feel uneasy.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTION (Embodied Metaphor). Fear is reflected in the surroundings; tension in the air mirrors emotional tension.

8. “His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried.”

Literal Meaning: His hands shook because he was scared.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR. Physical reactions show how emotions are felt in the body.

9. “Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him.”

Literal Meaning: Fear made him feel weak in his legs.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR. Strong fear affects the body, showing how emotion impacts physical control.

10. “He was afraid of being thought weak.”

Literal Meaning: He was scared people would think he was weak.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: SOCIAL FEAR (Metonymy). Being “weak” represents losing respect or status. Fear is connected to social judgment.

11. “A vague chill had descended on him.”

Literal Meaning: He felt uneasy, like a shiver ran through him.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR. Fear is felt physically, showing the mind-body connection in emotional experience.

12. “Her blood still ran cold whenever she remembered that night.”

Literal Meaning: Thinking about that night made her feel very scared.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: FEAR AS COLD. Memory triggers a physical reaction, showing how past experiences can continue to affect emotion.

13. “Her heart beat violently.”

Literal Meaning: She felt her heart racing because of fear.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR. Physical response shows how emotions trigger strong bodily reactions.

14. “Okonkwo felt like a cold shudder ran through him.”

Literal Meaning: He shivered because of fear.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR (Embodied Metaphor). Fear moves through the body, showing that emotions can be physically felt.

15. “His voice trembled and choked his words.”

Literal Meaning: Fear made it hard for him to speak clearly.

Cognitive Semantic Analysis: EMBODIED FEAR. Fear influences both body and mind, making speech difficult.

Comparative Analysis of the Igbo and English Fear Expressions

Similarities

FEAR IS A FORCE:

In Igbo, “Ùjọ bịára onye ọ bụla n’áhụ” (fear came upon everyone) shows fear as something that invades the body like a real force. In English, “He was terribly afraid” also presents fear as a strong external power that grips the individual. Both cultures treat fear as an invisible but powerful force that controls people. This shows that fear is not seen as something passive but as an active power that can change people’s behavior. It also highlights how humans in both traditions

imagine fear almost like a physical attack on the body.

FEAR IS EMBODIED:

In Igbo, "Áhụ́ ha niile na-amajijiji" (their whole bodies were trembling) shows how fear shakes the body. In English, "His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried" also reveals the body's reaction to fear. Both languages link fear directly to physical trembling, showing that emotions are understood through bodily changes. This means that fear is often best described through what the body does, like shaking, sweating, or freezing. It also reflects that both cultures ground emotions in physical experiences.

FEAR IS SOCIAL:

In Igbo, "Óbòdò ndịàbịá niile na-ázù ázù" (the whole neighboring community was trembling) shows fear spreading through a group. In English, "He was afraid of being thought weak" shows fear coming from social judgment. Both languages reveal that fear is not just personal but also shaped by social life. Fear comes from how people see us or how we connect with others in our community. This shows that both the Igbo and English societies recognize that relationships and group belonging strongly influence how fear is felt.

FEAR IS COLD:

In Igbo, "Ụjọ jupụtara n'óbí ya dị ka mmírí òzúzó" (fear filled his heart like rainwater) uses water imagery to suggest coldness and heaviness in the heart. In English, "Her blood still ran cold whenever she remembered that night" also connects fear with a chilling effect. Both cultures describe fear as something that cools or chills the body. This shows that the feeling of coldness is a natural way to picture emotional fear. It also reflects the physical reality that fear can slow the body, making it feel weak and cold.

Differences

FEAR IS COMMUNAL vs. FEAR IS INDIVIDUAL:

In Igbo, "Égwú bidoro tụ́wa ndị uwe ojii niile" (fear began to scatter all the people in black) shows fear affecting a whole group at once. In English, "Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him" focuses only on one person's bodily weakness. Igbo emphasizes collective fear, while English emphasizes individual fear. This difference reflects Igbo society's communal orientation, where experiences are often shared by the group. English, on the other hand, highlights personal emotion, showing its more individual-centered worldview.

FEAR THROUGH NATURE vs. FEAR THROUGH THE BODY:

In Igbo, "Ụjọ jupụtara n'óbí ya dị ka mmírí òzúzó" (fear filled his heart like rainwater) uses natural imagery of rainfall to describe emotion. In English, "Her heart beat violently" shows fear through bodily reaction. Igbo expressions lean on nature and environment, while English expressions lean on physical and internal body changes. This reflects the closeness of Igbo worldview to nature, where emotions are often described through environmental imagery. In contrast, English tends to focus on the body itself, showing a more inward and biological understanding of emotions.

FEAR AS COMMUNAL HARMONY vs. FEAR AS PERSONAL IMAGE:

In Igbo, “Onye ọ bụla n’ime ha ekeela nkwucha dị egwu gbasara ibe ya” (each of them felt a terrible fear concerning the other) shows that fear arises from relationships within a community. In English, “He was possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death” focuses on fear of personal shame and image. Igbo ties fear to collective responsibility, while English ties it to personal identity and reputation. This reflects the Igbo belief that individuals are deeply connected to the wellbeing of others. Meanwhile, English culture often highlights individual struggles, showing that personal fear is tied to self-image and private concerns.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This study examined fear expressions in Igbo and English, focusing on how fear is expressed linguistically, cognitively, and culturally. The analysis shows that fear is often conceptualized as a force that acts on the body and mind, influencing both thought and behavior. Physical reactions such as trembling, shivering, weak legs, chills, and a racing heartbeat make fear concrete and easy to recognize in both languages.

Fear also appears in social settings. In Igbo, fear is often expressed within a communal or group context, while in English, it is frequently tied to social judgment or personal reputation. Culture further shapes the way fear is presented. Igbo expressions highlight communal life, folklore, and sometimes supernatural elements, while English expressions lean toward personal struggles, social identity, and historical challenges.

Despite these cultural differences, both languages share similar cognitive strategies. They use metaphors such as FEAR IS A FORCE, FEAR AS A CONTAINER, and COLD IS FEAR to describe the experience of fear. This shows that, while culture influences expression, the human understanding of fear follows similar cognitive patterns.

The findings include that:

1. Fear is commonly portrayed as a force acting on the body and mind, influencing thoughts, behavior, and physical reactions.

2. Physical reactions such as trembling, shivering, weak legs, chills, and racing hearts show the embodied nature of fear in both Igbo and English.

3. Fear arises from social interactions and concern about others’ judgment, showing that it is not only personal but also socially and culturally influenced.

4. Cultural context shapes fear expressions: Igbo emphasizes communal, folkloric, and supernatural aspects, while English highlights individual experiences and social or historical challenges. 5. Cognitive metaphors and semantic strategies help explain how fear is represented and understood in both languages.

The study concludes that fear in Igbo and English is both a cognitive and cultural phenomenon, experienced physically, mentally, and socially. Igbo expressions highlight community dynamics, relational concerns, and cultural symbols, while English expressions focus on individual experiences within social and historical contexts.

Understanding fear through cognitive metaphors and semantic strategies, such as FEAR IS A FORCE, FEAR AS CONTAINER, and COLD IS FEAR, demonstrates how language, thought, and culture interact to convey human emotion. These expressions show that fear is universally embodied yet culturally shaped, making Igbo and English fear expressions valuable for both cognitive and cultural analysis.

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