

Honorific Expressions in Ezeagu Igbo: An Ethnography of Communication

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Abstract

Basically, two types of honorifics have been distinguished, grammatical, and social honorifics: while the former are grammatically encoded in a language by affixal elements, the latter are lexically expressed. Of course, languages that lack grammatical honorifics deploy lexical means to express the same notions and even more. The Igbo language lacks grammatical honorifics and so displays a wide range of lexical items that express honorific notions. Being a multidialectal language representing distinguishable communities with the same cultural orientation but different traditions, these items differ in form and meaning, and use across the Igbo areas. This study investigates honorific expressions in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Data were collected through native-speaker introspection, supplemented and validated by oral consultations with elderly community members, ensuring reliability and cultural authenticity. The analysis applies the principles of the ethnography of communication to describe the functions and meanings of honorifics within this cultural setting. Findings reveal that honorifics in Ezeagu serve not only to mark politeness but also to reinforce cultural identity, social hierarchy, and communal cohesion.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Ethnography of Communication; Honorifics; Igbo Language; Social Hierarchy

Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium of human interaction, encoding a wide range of meanings and social values. One important dimension of language use is the expression of reverence, respect, or deference to members of society, indexed through features such as age, social class, role, or status. This is often achieved through honorifics, which may be grammatical or lexical. Grammatical honorifics are attested in languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, where affixal markers directly encode social relations. By contrast, languages that lack grammatical honorifics, such as Igbo, express honorific meanings lexically. Even in languages with grammatical honorifics, however, many politeness strategies and social distinctions are still expressed lexically.

Honorific systems vary across cultures and reflect diverse social categories, including religion, politics, rank, profession, age, and gender. Their use signals humility, respect, and politeness, thereby regulating social interaction. As Carroll (2005) observes, language often includes terms and behaviors designed to make interactions smoother and more respectful across family, educational, religious, and professional contexts. Beyond politeness, honorifics also play a central role in indexing cultural identity and reinforcing social cohesion (Agha, 1998; Irvine, 1998).

Research on honorifics has therefore been motivated by their capacity to reveal social structures and communicative norms. While numerous studies have documented honorifics in various languages and communities, there remains a need for more localized, community-specific studies to deepen understanding of how honorifics operate within particular cultural contexts.

This study addresses this need by focusing on honorific expressions in communities of Ezeagu Local Government Area, located in the western part of Enugu State, Nigeria. Ezeagu is bordered to the north by Uzo-Uwani LGA, to the south by Oji River LGA, to the east by Udi LGA, and to the west by Anambra State. It

covers approximately 621.87 square kilometers and has its administrative headquarters at Aguobu-Owa (National Population Commission, 2006). Administratively, the LGA comprises thirty-two autonomous communities grouped into four zones: Ezeagu North, Ezeagu North-East, Ezeagu Central, and Ezeagu South (Mba N'ito). Despite these divisions, the people of Ezeagu share a strong sense of cultural unity and linguistic identity, speaking a variety of Igbo classified within the Waawa (Northern) dialect cluster (Nwaozuzu, 2008).

Although honorifics have been widely recognized as significant cultural practices, little research has examined their use in communities of Ezeagu. This study therefore seeks to (i) identify the honorific expressions employed in Ezeagu, (ii) examine the social factors motivating their use, and (iii) explain their cultural significance in maintaining identity and social harmony within the community.

Literature Review

Studies across languages show that honorifics function as markers of respect, social hierarchy, and cultural values. Broadly, two types are distinguished: grammatical honorifics **and** lexical honorifics. Grammatical honorifics are encoded in morphology and syntax, while lexical honorifics rely on special words, titles, and registers. Within the lexical category, many languages also display **social address practices**, the use of pronouns, kinship terms, and titles, which, although not grammatical, are conventionalized markers of respect. These forms often co-exist in a language, differing in locus and function but equally reflecting cultural orientations toward politeness and hierarchy.

Grammatical Honorifics are deeply integrated into a language's structure through affixation, pronoun shifts, and verb morphology. Japanese, for example, distinguishes respectful (*sonkeigo*), humble (*kenjōgo*), and polite (*teineigo*) forms, each encoded in verb conjugation and usage (Barešova, 2015; Maruki, 2022). Similarly, Korean verb endings such as *-hasimnida* (formal polite) and *-haeyo* (informal polite) signal degrees of respect and social distance (Kim, 2017). These systems demonstrate how grammar itself encodes hierarchical relations and cultural expectations of politeness.

Lexical Honorifics employ vocabulary rather than morphology. Thai, for instance, uses titles such as *Khun* (general politeness) and *Ajarn* (teacher/professor), alongside shifts in pronoun choice (Lek, 2023). Indonesian similarly uses *Bapak* (sir/father) and *Ibu* (madam/mother) in formal and informal contexts (Cahyono et al., 2024). English and Arabic also rely on social address practices such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Dr.* or *Sayyid*, *Sayyida*, *Ustadh* (Syarifuddin, 2023; Abed & Hussein, 2025). These forms, though not grammaticalized, function as strong markers of politeness, social roles, and communal respect.

Studies on Nigerian Honorifics

Honorific practices in Nigeria attract growing attention from linguists, sociologists, and anthropologists, as they serve as powerful tools for expressing respect, reinforcing social hierarchies, and sustaining cultural values. Scholars have examined different communities to show how honorifics mark identity and social cohesion, but their emphases and methodological approaches vary.

Ugorji (2022) investigates honorifics and humilifics in the Ngwa-Igbo dialect, showing that they are expressed verbally, behaviorally, and materially. He emphasizes their sensitivity to gender and social status, and the strong discouragement of title misuse in Ngwa society. His key contribution is highlighting the multimodal nature of honorific practices, extending beyond speech into embodied and symbolic domains. However, his study is largely descriptive and does not situate honorifics within the ethnographic dynamics of everyday communication.

Isa (2023) focuses on titular and honorific names among the Kanuri, linking them to communal service, royal heritage, or personal achievement. He shows how these names enhance both individual and familial prestige, often traveling across generations. This genealogical dimension adds an intertemporal layer to honorific practices, underscoring their durability even in the face of urbanization. Yet, while Isa highlights continuity and resilience, his approach remains more classificatory than interactional, paying little attention to how such honorifics operate in the flow of communicative events.

Alhassan (2022) examines honorific expressions in the Igala language, documenting their persistence in family and community life despite modernization. His findings challenge claims of decline, stressing the continued vibrancy of honorific practices in rural settings. Like Isa, Alhassan underscores continuity, but his focus is primarily descriptive, giving limited attention to how honorifics function as context-based, negotiated speech acts.

Nonetheless, these studies confirm that honorifics across Nigerian societies reinforce social hierarchies, sustain cultural norms, and remain resilient in both conservative and modern contexts. They differ in emphasis: Ugorji foregrounds multimodality, Isa highlights genealogical transmission, and Alhassan underscores persistence. Yet, they converge in their descriptive orientation and limited attention to honorifics as lived communicative events embedded in cultural context.

A notable gap remains: no study has directly examined the communities of Ezeagu, whose honorific practices are rich but undocumented. The present study addresses this gap by applying Dell Hymes' S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model to analyze honorific usage in Ezeagu, thereby moving beyond typological description toward an ethnography of communication that situates honorifics in the lived realities of everyday interaction.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Dell Hymes' **Ethnography of Communication (EoC)**, a framework that integrates linguistic analysis with cultural context to understand how language functions in real-life social interaction. Developed in the 1960s as a critique of formalist linguistic models, EoC emphasizes that language cannot be studied in isolation but must be examined as part of the cultural practices and norms that give it meaning.

At the center of Hymes' approach is the concept of **communicative competence**, the culturally informed ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts. This contrasts with Chomsky's more narrow notion of linguistic competence, which isolates grammar from pragmatic use. Hymes further distinguished three levels of communicative analysis: **speech situations**, **speech events**, and **speech acts**. To operationalize this, he introduced the **S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model**, which identifies eight interrelated components of speech events:

- S Setting and Scene** (physical and cultural context),
- P Participants** (roles of speaker and listener),
- E Ends** (goals and outcomes),
- A Act Sequence** (form and order of utterances),
- K Key** (tone or manner),
- I Instrumentalities** (channel and code),
- N Norms** (rules of interaction and interpretation), and
- G Genre** (type of speech act or event).

This framework is particularly well suited for analyzing **lexical honorifics** (including social honorifics) in Igbo, as these forms are embedded in culturally defined speech events rather than encoded grammatically. While prior Nigerian studies have largely described honorific lexicons or social functions (e.g., Ugorji 2022; Isa 2023; Alhassan 2022), few have systematically situated honorific use within communicative contexts.

Previous applications of Hymes' model to honorifics across languages (Takekuro, 2005; Afifah et al., 2017; Al-Rawi, 2019) demonstrate its use for connecting linguistic forms with interactional goals, participant roles, and community norms. These studies consistently show that the model allows researchers to move beyond static descriptions toward a **context-sensitive analysis** of how honorifics operate in real interaction.

Building on this precedent, the present study applies the **SPEAKING framework** to communities in Ezeagu local government in Enugu State. By mapping honorific practices onto the components of speech events, the study not only identifies forms and functions but also interprets how they reinforce cultural values,

social hierarchies, and group identity in lived communication. In this way, the theoretical framework ensures that honorifics are treated not as isolated lexical items, but as ethnographically situated practices of communication.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive design approach, applying Dell Hymes' **S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G** model within the Ethnography of Communication framework. This framework is chosen because it enables a systematic analysis of communicative events by considering contextual elements such as participants, setting, norms, and genres. It thus captures not only the linguistic forms but also the cultural meanings embedded in communication, offering a holistic account of honorific use.

The study is conducted in Ezeagu Local Government Area, located in the western part of Enugu State. The area is administratively divided into four zones, North, South, East, and West, and participants have been selected from eight autonomous communities spread across these divisions to ensure a representative cross-section of perspectives. The scope of the study is limited to social honorifics and related communicative behaviors, particularly those expressed in greetings, naming practices, and ceremonial discourse.

Forty (40) participants have been purposively sampled, with five (5) drawn from each of the eight (8) communities. Both men and women were included to reflect the fact that the honorific expressions may be used for either gender, even though men are more frequently the focus of traditional reverence. The slight imbalance in representation is deliberate, as it mirrors the patriarchal orientation of Ezeagu society while still acknowledging women's roles in kinship contexts where they may also receive honorary titles. The Participants are between 50 and 70 years old, an age range selected because individuals in this group possess the cultural knowledge and linguistic competence needed to provide reliable insights into honorific usage.

The data are collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews **and** participant observation. The interviews allow for open-ended but focused exploration of participants' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences regarding honorific use, while participant observation enable for a witnessing of the practical deployment of honorifics in natural communicative settings, such as traditional ceremonies and everyday interactions.

The analysis of data is done using the principles of the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1974). Specifically, the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G grid was applied to classify and interpret honorific expressions in terms of situational context (Setting), interlocutors (Participants), communicative goals (Ends), forms of address and sequencing (Act sequence), cultural codes (Key), social expectations (Norms), and broader communicative genres (Genres). This analytic procedure ensured that the study captured both the linguistic structure and the cultural significance of honorifics in Ezeagu society.

The honorifics in Ezeagu

This section presents the analysis of Igbo honorifics in the Ezeagu community, organized into four major domains: traditional leadership, kinship, religious/spiritual life, and community service. Using Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication framework, the honorifics are examined through the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model. This approach highlights not only the meanings of the expressions themselves but also the communicative contexts, participants, and cultural norms that give them force.

Traditional Leadership and Title-Based Honorifics

Honorifics associated with traditional leadership emphasize both authority and moral responsibility in Ezeagu society. At the apex stands the *Eze* (king), whose legitimacy derives from lineage, spiritual validation, and communal acceptance. Supporting him are the *Ichie* (council of elders) and members of the *Nze na Ozo* society, who embody wealth, integrity, and ritual prestige.

These tiers of leadership are not simply political but moral institutions, and the honorifics used for them are linguistic acts that affirm legitimacy, consolidate hierarchy, and embody the people's expectations of justice, generosity, and wisdom.

Table 1: Traditional Leadership and Title-Based Honorifics in Ezeagu

S/N	IGBO EXPRESSION	ANNOTATION (LITERAL & INTERPRETATION)	ILLUSTRATIVE & SIGNIFICANCE	CULTURAL
1	Ézè-ùmunnà-kwè	<i>king-kindred-accept</i> → “A king accepted by the kindred”	Illustrates how authority is validated by communal consensus.	
2	Ézè-àfùrù-nà-ànyá	<i>king-love-PERF-eye</i> → “A well-beloved king”	Suggests leadership grounded in affection and moral standing	
3	Ézè-údò	<i>king-peace</i> → “The king of peace”	Highlights rulers as symbols of reconciliation.	
4	Ézè-òrì-mírí	<i>king-wealth-flow-water</i> → “The king whose wealth flows like a river”	Evokes the ideal of leaders as providers.	
5	Ézè-àná-èkwù	<i>king-land-speak</i> → “A king highly spoken of”	Suggests integrity and public accountability.	
6	Nwá-ká-ìbé-yá	<i>child-surpass-peer</i> → “A child greater than his peers”	Marks achievement and distinction among contemporaries.	
7	Nnà-nyéré-ùgò	<i>father-give-glory</i> → “Father gives glory”	Reflects ancestral pride and continuity of dignity.	
8	Ònò-n-éníí	<i>one-mount-elephant</i> → “One who has mounted the back of an elephant”	Symbolizes wisdom and elevated status.	
9	Ógbù-ná-échì-ndó	<i>fig.tree-COMP-give-shade</i> → “A fig tree that gives shade to the masses”	Illustrates leaders as nurturers and protectors.	
10	Akù-rùé-ùnọ	<i>wealth-REACH-FIN-home</i> → “Wealth that reaches home”	Shows the communal ethic in resource use.	
11	Ọchì-ọsọ-àrì-úgwù	<i>runner-climb-hill</i> → “One who runs on the hill with speed”	Celebrates resilience and vigour.	
12	Ìhè-ěnwè-mekpọ	<i>work-NEG.finish-life</i> → “Work does not finish in life”	Reflects the value placed on industriousness.	
13	Ákù-ajù-ùzọ	<i>wealth-refuse-direction</i> → “Wealth cannot refuse direction”	Suggests prudence in wealth management.	
14	Áká-ọsé-àdị-mmá-nà-ànyá	<i>hand-pepper-NEG.be-good-CONJ-eye</i> → “A peppery hand is not good for the eyes”	Warns against harshness; illustrates the virtue of moderation.	
15	Ọkà-á-ọmée	<i>one-say-do</i> → “One who does what he says”	Illustrates integrity and reliability.	

Table 1 illustrates honorifics associated with kingship, elders, and titled individuals. These titles encode authority as well as moral obligations of generosity, wisdom, and justice.

S – Setting: Palace courts, village squares, council meetings, title installation ceremonies.

P – Participants: The Eze, elders (*Ichie*), title holders (*Nze na Ozo*), community members.

E – Ends: Legitimate authority, affirm moral accountability, reinforce communal trust.

A – Act sequence: Greeting → invocation of title → use of metaphor/proverb → bodily gestures (kneeling, clapping, chants).

K – Key: Respectful, solemn, deferential; celebratory in festivals.

I – Instrumentalities: Oral performance in Igbo; proverbs, chants, ritualized formulae.

N – Norms: Omitting or misusing a title is disrespectful; authority must be addressed properly.

G – Genre: Greetings, eulogies, proverbs, ceremonial address.

These honorifics bind political power to communal service. They enact legitimacy linguistically, portraying rulers as both providers (*Ézè-òrì-mírí*) and moral exemplars (*Òkà-á-ò-méé*).

Kinship Honorifics

Kinship honorifics reflect the deeply embedded respect for family hierarchy and generational order in Ezeagụ society. Terms used for fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, and grandparents encode obligations of care, reverence, and reciprocity, reinforcing the family as the foundation of social identity. These honorifics emphasize the ways lineage and seniority govern everyday interactions.

Table 2: Kinship Honorifics in Ezeagụ Culture

S/N	Igbo Expression	Annotation (Literal Gloss & Interpretation)	Illustrative Cultural Significance
1	Óòghò	<i>great-grandparent</i> → “Great-grandparent”	Revered as roots of ancestry and carriers of wisdom.
2	Mpàá-Chínnè	<i>father-big</i> → “Grandfather”	Symbol of lineage continuity and authority.
3	Mmáá-Chínnè	<i>mother-big</i> → “Grandmother”	Embodiment of nurture, wisdom, and tradition.
4	Mpàá	<i>father</i> → “Father”	Head of household and custodian of values.
5	Mmáá	<i>mother</i> → “Mother”	Heart of the family; nurturer and transmitter of culture.
6	Mmụọnwụ	<i>spirit-masculine</i> → “Male”	Represents male role as protector and ritual participant.
7	Nwá-mgbó	<i>child-female</i> → “Female/young woman”	Reflects feminine role in continuity and care.
8	Ụnèé n̄ nwókè / nwányị	<i>sibling-male/female</i> → “Brother/Sister”	Signifies loyalty, cooperation, and kinship bonds.

Table 2 presents honorifics encoding generational hierarchy, respect, and reciprocity within the family unit.

S – Setting: Homes, family gatherings, domestic conversations, storytelling sessions.

P – Participants: Parents, grandparents, children, siblings, extended family.

E – Ends: Reinforce respect, sustain lineage, teach obligations of care and reciprocity.

A – Act sequence: Greetings → kinship address → affectionate/obedient response.

K – Key: Warm, affectionate, deferential; dismissive tone signals disrespect.

I – Instrumentalities: Oral Igbo; intimate registers, proverbs in domestic narratives.

N – Norms: Elders must be addressed with proper terms; omission or mispronunciation breaches respect.

G – Genre: Everyday greetings, family stories, domestic prayers.

Kinship honorifics act as tools of cultural discipline. They sustain family as the root of identity, making reverence for age and lineage non-negotiable.

Religious/Spiritual Leadership Honorifics:

Religious honorifics express the integration of spirituality and authority in community life. Titles for priests, diviners, and custodians of shrines not only denote sacred roles but also embody trust, moral standing, and ritual competence. Such honorifics emphasize the intersection of language, belief, and ritual as essential to communal well-being.

Table 3: Religious/Spiritual Honorifics in Ezeagu Communities

S/N	Igbo Expression	Annotation (Literal Gloss & Interpretation)	Illustrative Cultural Significance
1	Ézè-Mmúò	king-spirit → <i>King of the spirit</i> (a ruler with spiritual authority over or connection with the supernatural realm).	Illustrates the fusion of leadership and spirituality, positioning the king as a divine intermediary.
2	Ézè-Ànị	king-land → <i>King of the land</i> (a ruler with dominion over the sacred land, Ànị).	Highlights the sacred bond between land, ancestry, and communal survival.
3	Óbì-nà-Mkpòmẹ	heart-CONJ-rock → <i>One who lives on the rock</i> (a steadfast, unshakable person).	Conveys resilience and permanence, portraying the bearer as a stabilizing force.
4	Éhèe-Chúkwú	worship-god → <i>Worshipping gods</i> (a person devoted to traditional religious worship).	Symbolizes devotion to gods and deities, underscoring continuity of spiritual practices.
5	Íchéé-Akụ	shell-wealth → <i>Palm kernel skin</i> (something tough outside but valuable inside).	Embodies endurance and hidden worth, echoing cultural ideals of perseverance and inner value.

Table 3 shows honorifics for priests, custodians, and spiritual leaders. These titles embody endurance, sacred trust, and mediation between the human and spirit world.

S – Setting: Shrines, sacred groves, altars, ritual gatherings.

P – Participants: *Dibia* (priests/diviners), shrine custodians, supplicants, wider community.

E – Ends: Invoke divine favor, legitimize ritual authority, ensure spiritual harmony.

A – Act sequence: Invocation of deity → honorific address → ritual act (offering, blessing).

K – Key: Solemn, reverent, cautious; misuse can carry spiritual danger.

I – Instrumentalities: Igbo ritual language, chants, prayers, offerings, libations.

N – Norms: Titles must be uttered with ritual propriety; improper use risks sanctions.

G – Genre: Ritual prayer, incantation, chant, praise.

Religious honorifics are more than names, they are performatives that actualize cosmological beliefs. Titles like *Ézè-Mmúò* establish authority as divinely sanctioned, binding leadership to unseen forces.

Community Service-Based Honorifics

Community Service-based honorifics emphasize communal values of generosity, compassion, and social responsibility. These titles recognize individuals whose contributions uplift the wider society; whether through providing resources, nurturing growth, or extending generosity. They affirm the Igbo ethic that wealth and status gain meaning when shared with the community.

Table 4: Community Service-Based Honorifics

S/N	Igbo Expression	Annotation (Literal Gloss & Interpretation)	Illustrative Cultural Significance
1	Ọnwa-nà-étí-lí-ọrà	moon-COMP-shine-for-people → “ <i>Moon that shines for the people</i> ”. The moon evokes light and guidance.	Illustrates the value placed on those who illuminate the community through development initiatives.
2	Mírí-nà-é-zò-rụ-ọrà	rain-COMP-3SG-fall-for-people → “ <i>Rain that falls for the people</i> ”. Rain signifies blessing and sustenance.	Highlights the cultural appreciation for those who bring life-sustaining resources.

3	Ọzúlù-ùmù-ògbénye	one-care-for-children-poor → <i>“He who cares for the poor”</i> .	Illustrates esteem for compassion and generosity toward the vulnerable.
4	Ọchìrì-òzù-ó	one-feed-train-people → <i>“One who feeds/trains the people”</i> .	Emphasizes respect for those who promote communal growth.
5	Ómè-égó	one-do-money → <i>“He who is generous”</i> .	Illustrates the cultural esteem for generosity and social investment.

Table 4 records titles for benefactors and philanthropists, framed through natural metaphors (moon, rain, fig tree).

S – Setting: Village festivals, public meetings, award ceremonies, communal gatherings.

P – Participants: Honorees, elders, youth, leaders, general community.

E – Ends: Celebrate generosity, inspire others to serve, strengthen social solidarity.

A – Act sequence: Public recounting of deeds, invocation of title, community response (applause, chants, gifts).

K – Key: Warm, celebratory, jubilant; communal pride is central.

I – Instrumentalities: Oral Igbo; speeches, songs, drumming, plaques/certificates.

N – Norms: Proper titles must be invoked; omission downplays contributions and dishonors community values.

G – Genre: Ceremonial speech, praise chant, celebratory song.

These honorifics crystallize the ethic that wealth must circulate for the common good. They elevate generosity into a model for social responsibility, ensuring that benefactors’ deeds are enshrined in communal memory.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of honorifics in Ezeagụ demonstrates that communicative practices are deeply intertwined with social organization, moral values, and cosmology. By systematically applying Hymes’ S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model, it becomes clear that honorifics are not merely ornamental forms of address but powerful linguistic resources through which authority, identity, and communal responsibility are enacted.

First, traditional leadership honorifics highlight the political dimension of speech. The titles bestowed on rulers and elders do not only mark their office but also encode expectations of moral accountability. For example, names like *Ézè-òrì-mírí* (“king who provides water”) align authority with provision and care, demonstrating that political legitimacy is inseparable from social responsibility. Here, the honorific functions as both recognition and reminder: it acknowledges service while also prescribing the behavior expected of leaders.

Second, kinship honorifics reveal how everyday speech sustains intergenerational hierarchy and respect. These expressions are less public than political titles but no less critical, as they ensure that family remains the foundation of moral instruction and cultural continuity. By foregrounding lineage and reciprocity, these honorifics reproduce social norms that are both affective (warmth, belonging) and disciplinary (obedience, deference).

Third, religious and spiritual honorifics make explicit the cosmological dimension of communication. Unlike secular titles, these expressions have performative force, mediating between the human and the spiritual. Titles such as *Ézè-Mmúò* (“king of the spirits”) not only signal respect for priests and custodians but also legitimize ritual practice itself. The ethnography underscores that the authority of spiritual leaders is inseparable from the sacred language that names them.

Fourth, community service-based honorifics highlight the moral economy of generosity. Metaphors of light, rain, and nourishment symbolize how individual wealth and resources gain meaning only when shared. By celebrating benefactors as “the moon that shines for the people” or “rain that falls for the people,” these titles inscribe generosity into communal memory, reinforcing the Igbo ethic that prosperity is validated through redistribution.

The four domains illustrate a **patterned communicative repertoire** that sustains Ezeagu society. Across settings, the consistent use of honorifics both reflects and reinforces key cultural values: respect for authority, reverence for age, acknowledgment of spiritual power, and celebration of generosity. The S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model makes visible the way speech events are structured, who participates, in what settings, with what ends, while the honorifics themselves demonstrate that language is central to the reproduction of social order.

This study therefore contributes to scholarship on honorifics in three main ways. First, it extends typological discussions by demonstrating that Ezeagu honorifics operate primarily as **lexical-social forms**, deeply embedded in ritual and cultural context rather than purely grammatical markers. Second, it highlights the **ethnography of communication** as a necessary framework: without attending to setting, norms, and genre, the cultural force of these expressions would be flattened. Third, it fills a Nigerian and Igbo-specific gap: while earlier studies on Yoruba, Hausa, or broader Igbo politeness have mapped patterns of respect, none have provided a SPEAKING-grounded ethnographic account of how honorifics function across social domains within one community.

Conclusion

The study of honorifics in Ezeagu has shown that language is not simply a neutral medium of communication but a key instrument in the maintenance of social order, cultural values, and cosmological beliefs. By situating the honorifics within Hymes' S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model, there is the demonstration that these expressions carry political, kinship, spiritual, and moral-economic weight. They serve as tools of recognition and regulation, legitimizing authority, sustaining intergenerational respect, validating spiritual practice, and celebrating generosity. Linguistically, the findings highlight how honorifics function as lexical-social forms deeply tied to context, rather than as abstract grammatical markers. Socially, they underscore the performative power of language in shaping conduct, identity, and communal belonging.

The findings here validate and extend Ugorji (2022) observation about the verbal, behavioral, and material dimensions of honorifics among the Ngwa-Igbo in which their sensitivity to gender and social status is noted. Moreover, by applying Hymes' ethnography of communication model, this study further highlights the patterned interactional settings in which honorifics acquire meaning. Thus, the study validates the broader claim that honorifics are central to African sociolinguistic systems while also demonstrating how local worldview shape their communicative force. Here, a four-domain dimension is determined: leadership, kinship, religion, and communal service, each encoding cultural values and social expectations while performing roles that go beyond politeness and serving as instruments of legitimation, cohesion, and value transmission.

Overall, replicative studies across different Igbo communities are anticipated to verify the four-domain dimension identified in Ezeagu or add to it with other patterns and forms. Moreover, factor-based investigation is required, for instance, to determine how modernization, Christianity, and digital communication have affected the use of social honorifics.

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