

The Pragmatic Speech Acts in Selected Ife-Olukotun Eulogies (Oríkì)

Rita BOSSAN

Department of English and Drama, Kaduna State University – Nigeria

gimbiyabossan@gmail.com

 0009-0003-8354-5742

Rofiat ABAYOMI SALIU¹

Department of English and Drama, Kaduna State University – Nigeria

saliurofiat6@gmail.com

 0009-0001-4777-130X

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Abstract

The study investigates the pragmatic dimensions of Okun eulogies (oríkì) within the Ife-Olukotun community, a subgroup of the Yagba ethnic group in Kogi State, Nigeria, whose origins are traced to Ile-Ife. Ife-Olukotun is the second largest Yagba settlement, comprising three clans, Ohi, Ona, and Otun, each under a titled head within a central kingship structure. The paper articulates the essential role of language in conveying cultural identity, preserving history, and facilitating social interactions among the Okun people. The data for this study, were gathered from one compound each from the three clans in the Ife-Olukotun community through observation and interviews with women, a titled chief, youth, and members of the Ife-Olukotun Association, Ilorin Chapter. The eulogies were tape-recorded, translated, and analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods for comprehensive understanding. The study was anchored in Speech Acts Theory, particularly J. L. Austin (1962) and Searle's (1979) classification of direct and indirect illocutionary acts. Findings indicate that eulogies in Ife-Olukotun predominantly perform assertive acts directly, accounting for 97.4% of direct acts, while expressive acts dominate indirectly at 97.4%, projecting the chanters' emotions, attitudes, and intentions toward their addressees during social interactions. Direct expressive and indirect assertive acts each occurred marginally, at 2.6%. The study concludes that eulogy is not merely a form of praise poetry but a multifaceted linguistic practice that conveys cultural values, social hierarchies, and collective identities, serving diverse purposes including social critique, historical preservation, and personal identification, while reinforcing communal cohesion among the Okun people.

Keywords; Eulogies; Ife; Olukotun; Okun; Oríkì; Speech Acts.

¹ Corresponding author: Rofiat ABAYOMI SALIU/saliurofiat6@gmail.com

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Introduction

Language is a distinctive human trait that connects members of a speech community, facilitating interaction and cultural identification (Odebunmi, 2016; Bossan, 2017). Speech communities develop varied linguistic styles to express identity (Fowobaje et al., 2022), leading to the continuous study of language forms, including eulogy. In Yorùbá culture, eulogy, known as Òríkì, is a significant form of praise poetry dedicated to honoring individuals, families, and deities. It portrays and upholds the social norms, cultural heritage and identity of the people (Akinyemi, 2001; Adeniji-Neill, 2014). These honorific chants reveal a duality in identity expression, emphasizing qualities such as tenderness or strength.

Eulogy (Òríkì) plays a crucial role in the community, serving functions such as social critique and historical preservation. It is performed through chanting or singing during significant events, including marriages, social gatherings and naming ceremonies and aims to inspire individuals and soothe infants. According to Barber (1984), oríkì comprises disjunctive and labile epithets that evolve, drawing from varied experiences. Each oríkì possesses a complex meaning that extends beyond its textual performance, with interpretations that can be literal, satirical, or historically contextual (Barber, 1984). While praise is central, eulogy also embodies descriptive qualities that capture the essence of its subjects (Akinyemi, 1991). Thus, eulogy is a multifaceted art form rich in cultural significance.

Undoubtedly, a number of research studies have been done by researchers like Oripeloye and Hunsu (2021) that investigate how Yorùbá eulogies, known as oríkì, influence personal citation and shape individual identity through performance. Bukola (2024) concentrates on the artistic and thematic components of Oka Akoko eulogies. Abimbola (2012) also describes eulogy (oríkì) as a valid source of Yorùbá history by focusing on the Ijebu people of Ogun and Lagos States. Olanubi (2017) uses semiotics and psychoanalysis to discuss the therapeutic benefits of eulogy (oríkì) in Yorùbá culture.

Other scholars like Oniyide (2016) and Adeniji-Neill (2014) have also contributed to the broader understanding of eulogy (oríkì) in Yorùbá culture, but there has been relatively little focused research specifically addressing its usage within the Ife-Olukotun Okun-speech community. Ife-Olukotun, located in Kogi State's Yagba East Local Government Area, is the second largest community among the Yagba ethnic group, speaking the Okun dialect of Yorùbá. Its origins are linked to Ile-Ife in Osun State, with establishment recognized by colonial authorities around 1830 amidst regional conflicts (Iyekolo, 2000). The town's sociopolitical structure comprises three clans—Ohi, Ona, and Otun—each led by Heads or Obas, under a central king (Iyekolo, 2000).

This paper, therefore, intends to fill this gap by exploring the direct and indirect speech acts that are inherent in selected eulogies (oríkì) in the Ife-Olukotun Okun-speaking community. This study reveals how communities use language for cultural interpretation, historical preservation, and identity expression through eulogy. The following are the order of remaining sections in this study: theoretical framework, methodology, data presentations and translation, data analysis, and conclusion.

1. Speech Acts as a Theoretical Framework

This paper employs Speech Act Theory, focusing on both direct and indirect speech acts as a lens for analysis. Speech Acts as a field of Pragmatics originates from J.L. Austin's lectures, published in "How to Do Things with Words" (1962). The framework has significantly developed, particularly through contributions from his student, John Searle. Austin (1975) introduced the term 'performatives,' which denotes that uttering a statement involves performing actions such as asserting, questioning, or requesting. He identified three interconnected meanings in utterances: the locutionary act (literal meaning), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intention), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). These acts occur simultaneously in communication.

Austin categorized illocutionary acts into expositives, verdictives, exercitives, commissives, and behabitives. Searle (1969) expanded this classification, differentiating between direct and indirect illocutionary acts, including representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Indirect speech acts convey meanings beyond the literal, often employed to enhance politeness, such as in requests or apologies. Searle (1979) articulated the discrepancy between the sentence meaning and the

speaker's intended meaning in indirect acts, necessitating shared background knowledge for comprehension. For instance, the question "Do you have some money?" can be interpreted literally as a question (direct act) and as a request (indirect act). Utilizing Speech Act Theory, one can argue that various illocutionary acts—such as asserting, warning, or questioning—commonly arise within the context of eulogies.

In this study, direct speech acts refer to utterances whose grammatical form corresponds with the speaker's communicative intention, whereas indirect speech acts involve meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretation. Following Searle's classification, assertive acts commit speakers to the truth of a proposition through statements, descriptions, and claims, while expressive acts reveal psychological states such as admiration, appreciation, praise, criticism, or celebration. These categories provide the basis for the coding and analysis of the eulogies examined in this study.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique. One compound was selected from each of the three major clans (Ohi, Ona, and Otun) to ensure adequate representation of the sociocultural diversity of the Ife-Olukotun community. A total of thirty-nine (39) eulogistic lines were collected and analyzed across the three compounds. The data comprises three samples, each from the three clans of the community. The data for this study were sourced primarily through the researcher's (Rofiat Abayomi Saliu) interactions with women/wives (waya), a titled chief (Chief Ajiboye Elijah), engaged youth (Mr Muritala Ajakaye), and members of the Ife-Olukotun Association, Ilorin Chapter. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their consent was obtained before interviews and recordings were conducted. The dialectical version of the eulogies (oríkì) was collected and recorded on tape through an interview for easy interpretation and analysis. The coding of speech acts was carried out on the original Yorùbá/Okun eulogistic lines before comparison with their English translations. Coding categories were derived from Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1979) Speech Act Theory. The eulogies were then translated directly to provide clear communicative clues for the reader to infer their intended meaning and to ensure that they retain their aesthetic value. Each eulogistic line was treated as a unit of analysis and classified according to its dominant illocutionary force. Following the translation of the data is a tabular analysis of the direct and indirect speech acts embodied in the eulogies. To enhance analytical reliability, the classifications were reviewed repeatedly and cross-checked against the theoretical categories before the final coding was completed.

2.1. Data Presentation and Translation

2.1.1 Ilero Compound Oríkì

Ilero Compound Oríkì

Omo moro jundu sege

Wo donkan donkan a do gunyeye tangabo

Ahi baba won mo do

Ada ide ni hin re

lji soka soka

Iwo ko mu oro gun ke

Omo onigi buruku dapupu

Wo boshore booni won pa

A pa han pe pe hiyana

Translations

One who enjoys festivities

You finder, who found a vulture

You announced the find to your father

By endowing it with brass tied around its legs

The brass makes a melodious sound

You who climb the mountain to enjoy festivities

Owner of a tree whose bark is medicinal

You befriend witches or wizards like you mean no harm

You eventually killed and left the witch/wizard at a crossroad for all to see

Wo to gorogoro to a diyan hin	You jumped from the hill, unmindful of your leg
Omo aladiye yoyo ilero	Owner of chickens
Abigbe sara sara igbe	The chickens making lots of noise
Omo oloka morin morin, ogbi ogbi se gbi	Owner of a Gaboon viper (a type of snake)
Atomo ro bi aso	You tie children like a wrapper
Omo elejo gbe gunrun gede ni omi ile	You own a big Gaboon viper in your water
Wo soro memun a se iha do we moriwo ope	You who enjoys drinking palm wine
Omo Olope Safi fi li lofe	Owner of palm trees
Wo de ibe wo ti ri ina lorire	Whenever you get there, there is light on it

2.1.2 Oke-Aga Compound Oríkì

Oke-Aga Compound Oríkì

Omo moro omo alaka arisi	<i>Translations</i> One whose barn is filled and refuses to open it
Ewo re igbin kin lajo	Your wealth is abundant Lajo
Omo akoyin mo heyo on gbagba wodi re okun	One who harvests palm kernel fruit by putting a barrel under it till it is full
Otori alejo mo sina amu igi agbun amihi ponno	You use trees to show a sign to your house so that your visitors won't miss their way
Omo baba agbofa mogbo bon	Descendant of the wise man who understands Ife deaf to gun sound
Aro gogogo lori ifa re	The interpreter of the Ifa oracle
Omo moro moko	The legitimate child
Omo oloro arijibe	The child of the wealthy
Ajoko hile awoya firi-firi	You sit at home and know what happens outside
Agboya amkoloya	You who disseminate information
Omo olile loke 'lajo	One who has a house at home and far-away places
Oro re eja gunbe baba odi o	Your deity can't be joked with
Omo agbesu loko aje gborin-gbon re hi	One who harvests yams and leaves the leaves
Omo o do unkan - do unkan ado gun yeye tanga bo	You finder, who found the vulture
Omo ewo ho moti gbo ibobo isikoko were re	Descendant of the wealthy who plucks money like fruit
Omo olisu akale doro be	One who owns abundant yams big enough to be peeled while standing

Koko re igbin kin loko lajo

The one with the big koko farm

2.1.3 Ona Compound Oríkì

Ona Compound Oríkì

On jakan ajiri iwere oni to gun

Translations

Greeting your stubborn fighter

Wo mulele salejo

You entertain your guests with land

Omo mojamaja we tori boso

One who was asked not to fight, yet you're pulling off your cloth

Wo torija ani ibi ketepe idi

Your waist is designed for fighting

Omo agbomi le na amu yefun tore

One who puts water on fire yet gives away your yams flour

Wo kule ija sihan

You who prepare for the fight for nine days

Akeke emu re idun gangan ni sale akoto

Your bowl of palmwine is making sound in the gourd

3. Data Analysis

Table 1: Ilero Compound Oríkì

Eulogies	Speech Acts Type & Illocutionary Acts	
	Direct Illocutionary Acts	Indirect Illocutionary Acts
One who enjoys festivities	A praise for the addressee's love of celebrations and communal enjoyment. (Expressive)	Describes the addressee as sociable, joyful, and central to communal activities, signalling admiration or praise. (Assertive)
You finder, who found the vulture	A descriptive acknowledgement of finding a vulture. (Assertive)	Praising the addressee's skill, resourcefulness, or ability to uncover important or symbolic things. (Expressive)
You announced the find to your father by endowing it with a brass tied around its legs	A statement describing the announcement and the adornment of the vulture. (Assertive)	Demonstrating the addressee's respect for tradition and hierarchy, as well as their pride in their accomplishments. (Expressive)
The brass makes a melodious sound	This asserts that the brass produce music. (Assertive)	Signifying the addressee's attention to detail, refinement, and ability to create beauty even in mundane things. (Expressive)
You who climbs the mountain to enjoy festivities	A declarative description of climbing mountains for festivities. (Assertive)	Praises boldness, adventurousness, and a deep connection to cultural celebration. (Expressive)
Owner of a tree whose bark is medicinal	A declarative acknowledgement of owning a medicinal tree. (Assertive)	Celebrating the addressee's role as a healer or someone who provides solutions and nurtures the community. (Expressive)
You befriend witches or wizards like you mean no harm	Describes the addressee's fearlessness in associating with witches or wizards. (Assertive)	Admiring the person's courage, tact, and strategic ability to navigate risky or threatening situations. (Expressive)

You eventually killed and left the witch or wizard at the crossroads for all to see	Declaring the act of eliminating and exposing a threat to the community. (Assertive)	Praising the person's bravery, justice, and role as a protector. (Expressive)
You jumped from the hill, unmindful of your leg	Acknowledging a daring act of jumping from a hill. (Assertive)	Admiring the addressee's courage, fearlessness, and ability to prioritize higher goals over personal risk. (Expressive)
Owner of chickens; the chickens are making lots of noise	Stating the ownership of noisy chickens. (Assertive)	Suggesting abundance and wealth, using the chickens as a metaphor for prosperity and procreation. (Expressive)
Owner of a Gaboon viper (a type of snake)	Declaring the ownership of a Gaboon viper. (Assertive)	Signifying mastery over danger, strength, or dominance over formidable challenges. (Expressive)
You tie children like a wrapper	Metaphorically describing an act of tying children like a wrapper. (Assertive)	Suggesting care, nurturing, or a strong connection with the younger generation. (Expressive)
You own a big Gaboon viper in your water	Acknowledging ownership of a significant Gaboon viper. (Assertive)	Highlighting power, mystery, and control over dangerous elements. (Expressive)
You who enjoys drinking palm wine	Stating the person's fondness for drinking palm wine. (Assertive)	Suggesting a connection to cultural traditions and enjoyment of life's simple pleasures. (Expressive)
Owner of palm trees; whenever you get there, there is light on it	Declaring ownership of palm trees and their illumination. (Assertive)	Symbolizing divine favor, prosperity, or the addressee's ability to bring vitality and enlightenment wherever they are. (Expressive)

Source: Primary Source

Table 2: Oke-Aga Compound Oríkì

Eulogies	Speech Acts Type & Illocutionary Acts	
	Direct Illocutionary Acts	Indirect Illocutionary Acts
One whose barn is filled and refuses to open it	State that the person has a full barn but chooses not to open it. (Assertive)	Criticizes the person for hoarding resources, indirectly suggesting the need for generosity. (Expressive)
Your wealth is abundant in 'lajo'	Acknowledges the person's vast wealth. (Assertive)	Implies a responsibility to share the wealth or use it wisely. (Expressive)
One who harvests palm kernel fruit by putting a barrel under it till it full	Describes an efficient method of harvesting. (Assertive)	Praises the person's resourcefulness and ability to maximize yields. (Expressive)
You use trees to show sign to your house so that your visitors won't miss their way	Observe the use of markers to guide visitors. (Assertive)	Suggests hospitality, forethought, and care for others. (Expressive)

Descendant of the wise man who understands Ifa and is deaf to gun sound	Declares lineage tied to wisdom and bravery. (Assertive)	Implies the person inherits qualities of wisdom, insight, and fearlessness. (Expressive)
The interpreter of the Ifa oracle	Identifies the person as someone who deciphers spiritual messages. (Assertive)	Acknowledges spiritual authority and responsibility as a guide for others. (Expressive)
The legitimate child	Asserts the individual's rightful status. (Assertive)	Validates the person's identity and inheritance, suggesting pride in their legitimacy. (Expressive)
The child of the wealthy	Identifies the person as coming from affluence. (Assertive)	Suggests expectations for generosity and responsibility tied to their wealth. (Expressive)
You sit at home and know what happens outside	Recognizes the individual's ability to stay informed without being physically present. (Assertive)	Praises insightfulness or strategic intelligence. (Expressive)
You who disseminate information	Acknowledges the person's role in sharing knowledge. (Assertive)	Implies influence and trustworthiness as a communicator. (Expressive)
One who has a house at home and far-away places	Notes the person's extensive property ownership. (Assertive)	Suggests wealth, influence, and a broad sphere of control or presence. (Expressive)
Your deity can't be joked with	Declares the addressee's deity as powerful and serious. (Assertive)	Suggests reverence for their spiritual strength and protection. (Expressive)
One who harvests yams and leaves the leaves	Describes a selective harvesting practice. (Assertive)	Praise the wisdom and sustainable management of resources. (Expressive)
You finder, who found a vulture	Identifies the individual as someone who discovers rare or significant things. (Assertive)	Suggests resourcefulness or a symbolic connection to omens. (Expressive)
Descendant of the wealthy who plucks money like fruit	This directly describes the subject as someone who easily acquires money, as if plucking fruit. (Assertive)	It implies that the subject has such control over their resources or circumstances that wealth comes easily, suggesting both skill and abundance. (Expressive)
One who owns abundant yams big enough to be peeled while standing	Acknowledges the person's vast agricultural wealth. (Assertive)	This implies prosperity, a wealth of resources, and the ability to sustain a large family or community. It reinforces the subject's status as a provider and leader. (Expressive)
The one with big cocoa farm	Acknowledge the addressee's large and successful cocoa farm. (Assertive)	Suggests the individual's industriousness and economic influence. (Expressive)

Source: Primary Source

Table 3: Ona Compound Oríkì

Eulogies	Speech Acts Type & Illocutionary Acts	
	Direct Illocutionary Acts	Indirect Illocutionary Acts
Greeting you, stubborn fighter	A greeting acknowledging the individual. (Directive)	Praise resilience, persistence, and tenacity. (Expressive)
You entertain your guests with land	Describes entertaining guests with gifts of land. (Assertive)	Highlights wealth, generosity, hospitality, and high social status. (Expressive)
One who was asked not to fight, yet you're pulling off your cloth	Describes defiance in preparing for a fight. (Assertive)	Celebrates bravery, honour, and readiness to face challenges. (Expressive)
Your waist is designed to fight	Describes the individual's combat readiness. (Assertive)	Praise natural strength, agility, and an inherent fighting spirit. (Expressive)
One who puts water on fire yet gives away your yams flour	Describes an act of generosity. (Assertive)	Highlights selflessness and prioritizing others' needs over personal comfort. (Expressive)
You who prepare to fight for nine days	Describes preparation for a fight for nine days. (Assertive)	Celebrates discipline, wisdom, and meticulousness in facing challenges. (Expressive)
Your bowl of palm wine is making a sound in the gourd	Describes the sound of palm wine in the gourd. (Assertive)	Symbolizes abundance, prosperity, and the ability to share joy and resources with others. (Expressive)

Source: Primary Source

4. Statistical Analysis of Speech Acts

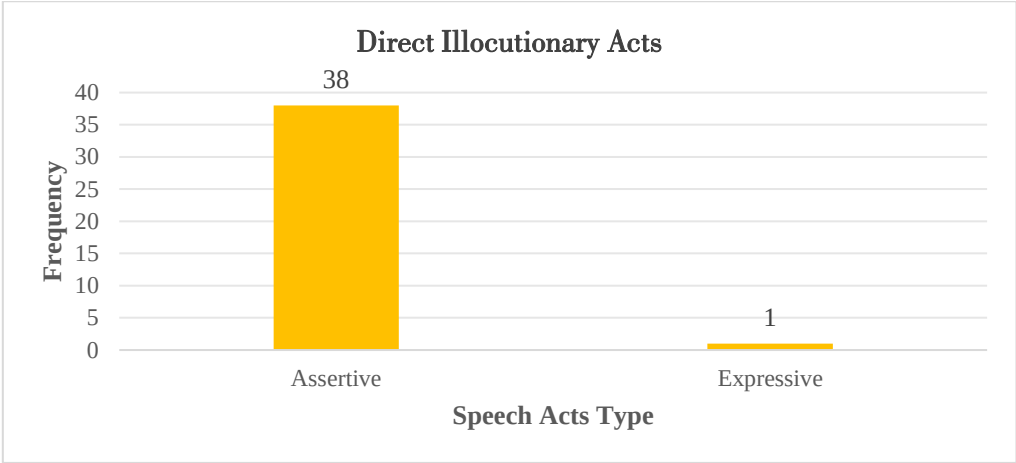
Several observations have been made regarding the Speech Act performed in the use of the eulogies, which are grouped into the direct and indirect acts, using a combination of Austin's 1962 and Searle's 1978 classifications of Speech Acts. To address the first objective of the study, which is to identify the direct speech acts embedded in selected Ife-Olukotun eulogies, Table 4 presents the distribution of direct illocutionary acts across the data.

Table 4: Summary of Direct Illocutionary Acts in the Eulogies

Direct Illocutionary Acts		
Speech Acts Type	Frequency (n = 39)	Percentage (%)
Assertive	38	97.4
Expressive	1	2.6

Source: Primary Source

Figure 1: Bar Plot of Direct Illocutionary Acts Distribution



Source: Primary Source

The data presented in Table 4 and Figure 1 indicate that assertive acts constitute the predominant category of direct speech acts employed in chanting eulogies, accounting for 97.4% of the total. These acts convey assertions, statements, and claims, and they describe actions performed directly by the chanters. In contrast, expressive acts rank much lower, representing only 2.6% of the total acts observed. This suggests that these types of speech acts carry less communicative potency within the context of eulogies as utilised by the chanters.

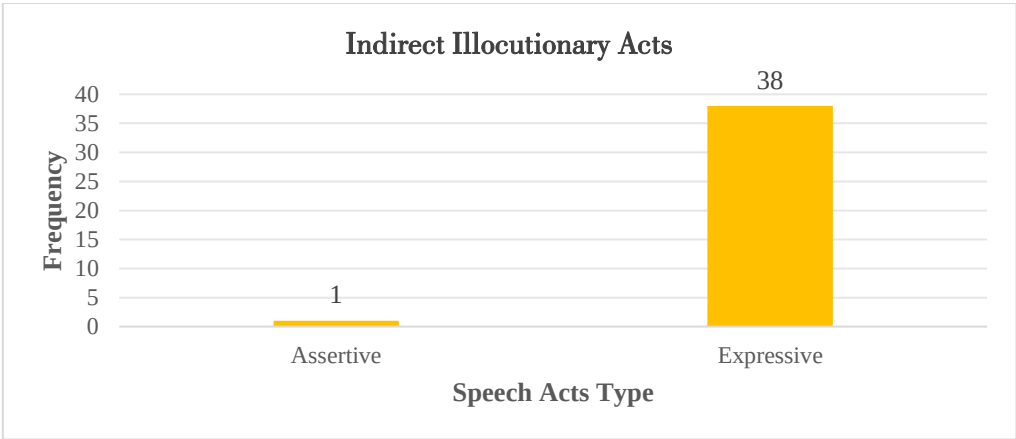
To address the second objective of the study, which is to identify the indirect speech acts embedded in selected Ife-Olukotun eulogies, Table 5 presents the distribution of indirect illocutionary acts across the data.

Table 5: Summary of Indirect Illocutionary Acts in the Eulogies

Indirect Illocutionary Acts		
Speech Acts Type	Frequency (n =39)	Percentage (%)
Assertive	1	2.6
Expressive	38	97.4

Source: Primary Source

Figure 2: Bar Plot of Indirect Illocutionary Acts Distribution



Source: Primary Source

The analysis presented in the accompanying Table 5 and Figure 2 indicates that expressive acts, occurring 38 times and comprising 97.4% of the data, are the most frequently employed indirect speech acts within the eulogies examined. This prevalence is attributable to their capacity to convey the psychological states of both the chanters and the recipients during discourse, as illustrated by various illocutionary forces, including but not limited to praising, celebrating, admiring, acknowledging, mocking, and appreciating. In contrast, eulogies that perform expressive acts are noted once, representing 2.6% of the occurrences. These instances typically reflect the chanters' indirect appeals for respect toward constituted authority, as well as cautions, warnings, encouragement, and praise.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the direct speech acts employed in the chanting of eulogies among the Ife-Olukotun people predominantly manifest as assertive actions, which primarily serve to describe behaviours. Conversely, the indirect speech acts manifested during eulogy performance are primarily expressive, reflecting the chanters' psychological states, emotions, and attitudes toward their addressees.

Conclusion

The pragmatic dimensions of customary eulogies (oríkì) in the Ife-Olukotun community were examined to reveal the intricate ways language conveys cultural values, social hierarchies, and collective identities. This study demonstrates that eulogies (oríkì) serve not only as a means of honouring individuals but also as a reflection of the community's shared ideals, such as strength, courage, hospitality, and familial devotion. Each eulogy encapsulates virtues that are essential for preserving cultural continuity and fostering social cohesion, thereby reinforcing the communal identity. Utilizing speech act theory, the analysis delves into the direct and indirect illocutionary acts present within these eulogies. By categorizing speech acts into assertive and expressive types, the study illustrates the multiple functions of language in eulogies (oríkì).

The findings reveal a clear predominance of direct assertive acts and indirect expressive acts in the selected eulogies. This pattern demonstrates that Ife-Olukotun chanters primarily employ direct speech to describe individuals, events, achievements, and communal values, while indirect speech serves as a vehicle for expressing admiration, praise, celebration, and social evaluation. By addressing the paucity of pragmatic studies on Okun eulogies, this study contributes to the growing body of research on Yorùbá oral traditions and highlights the need for further comparative investigations involving other Okun-speaking and Yorùbá communities. This linguistic framework enriches our comprehension of how language operates within cultural practices and community dynamics, conveying not only information but also emotions and social expectations.

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