

When spittle speaks: the semiotics of saliva and the moral body in Ígálâ communication

Salem Ōchála Èjèbá and Austen Amechi Sado (Port Harcourt)

Abstract

This paper explores the ethnopragmatic significance of saliva (*ító*) in the communicative and ritual life of the Ígálâ people of central Nigeria. More than a biological fluid, saliva functions as a semiotic medium that materializes spiritual force, enacts blessing and cursing, encodes moral judgment, and affirms hierarchy. Acts of spitting, whether gentle or forceful, operate as embodied speech acts that link body, language, cosmos, and moral order. Drawing on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the study renders Ígálâ meanings cross-culturally accessible and highlights metaphorical schemas. These frameworks reveal how saliva grounds communicative practice in embodied experience while extending into domains of conflict, bonding, purification, emotion, and wisdom. Although centered on Ígálâ, the analysis points toward a broader comparative agenda: future research might examine how Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Akan, Zulu, and other African traditions deploy saliva or related substances in blessing, covenant, healing, or censure. By integrating ethnopragmatics with semiotic theory, the study shows that meaning in Ígálâ is inseparable from embodied practice, where mouth, body, and spirit converge to generate the moral substance of speech.

1 Introduction

Ígálâ is a West Benue-Congo language spoken by the Ígálâ ethnic group in central Nigeria. Closely related to Yoruba and Itsekiri, it forms part of the Yoruboid subgroup (cf. Akinkugbe 1976; Capo 1989). The Ígálâ homeland, covering about 13,150 sq. km in Kogi State, stretches from Adamugu, near Onitsha, to the Niger–Benue Confluence. The term *Ábó Ígálâ* (‘Ígálâ folks’) refers to the people, while *Ígálâ* designates both the people and their language. Recognized as one of Nigeria’s nine major languages (cf. Williamson 1990), Ígálâ is also documented in Ethnologue as a distinct language with several dialectal varieties (cf. Eberhard/Simons/Fennig 2025). Nine of these dialects are in Kogi State and others in Anambra, Delta, and Edo States (cf. Miachi/Armstrong 1986; Capo 1989; Omachonu 2000; Ejeba 2016).

Ígálâ oral tradition has developed a rich repertoire of proverbs, idioms, and other verbal genres, many of which remain underexplored. Among these, saliva (*ító*) stands out as a striking semiotic resource. Far from a mere bodily fluid, spittle functions as a medium of blessing, cursing, healing, and authority. It bridges the material and metaphysical, from a father’s protective spittle over his child to proverbial reflections on its fleeting traces. In these ways, *ító* embodies a ‘grammar of being’ that binds individuals to family, community, and ancestors.

Building on this insight, the present study examines how saliva operates as a communicative resource in Ígálâ culture, the contexts and actors that give it force, and the broader semiotic ideologies of authority, kinship, and spirituality that it reveals. Adopting an ethnopragmatic and semiotic lens, the analysis focuses on the temporal and situational conditions of spittle use, the multimodal channels through which it conveys meaning, and the cultural scripts that authorize or constrain its deployment.

In doing so, the study illuminates the Ígálâ philosophy of personhood, relationality, and inter-generational continuity, showing how symbolic expression functions not merely as representation but as a mode of living, relating, and becoming. Particular attention is given to the precise meanings speakers and actors seek to convey, and to the cultural logics through which these meanings are conceptualized and made intelligible. Specifically, it investigates how saliva-based expressions are structured in Ígálâ thought, what metaphorical logics underlie them, and how embodied forms of communication serve as distinct realizations of cultural scripts, while also considering crosslinguistic implications for embodiment and meaning in African languages.

Accordingly, the discussion moves from a review of scholarship (Section 2) and methodological outline (Section 3) to an analysis of saliva-based expressions across conceptual, social, and ritual domains (Section 4), before concluding with a synthesis of their wider theoretical and comparative significance (Section 5).

2 Ethnopragmatics, cultural scripts, and conceptual metaphor

As Duranti (2001) reminds us, language is not a neutral tool for describing the world but a symbolic practice that actively constitutes social reality. This is the central insight of ethnopragmatics, a theory grounded in two premises that reshape how we understand meaning across cultures. First, the meaning of communicative acts is inseparable from the cultural frameworks – the shared beliefs, values, and expectations – in which they are produced and interpreted. Second, these frameworks, though deeply rooted in local worldviews, can nonetheless be rendered intelligible across cultural boundaries through analytical tools such as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM).

Pioneered by Anna Wierzbicka (1991, 2003) and further developed by Cliff Goddard (2006), Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka (2014), NSM demonstrates that all human languages share a core set of semantic primes, basic concepts such as *say*, *think*, *feel*, *do*, *good*, *bad*, *big*, *small*, which can be combined into cultural scripts. These scripts make visible the expectations and values that shape communicative practice, showing how norms of speaking, silence, respect, and emotion are embedded in social life.

While NSM provides the semantic precision to uncover *what exactly is meant* in local practices, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explains how these meanings are organized in thought. CMT traces the metaphorical logics through which cultural frameworks are structured and extended, revealing how concrete experiences, such as bodily fluids, spatial orientation, or physical force, map onto abstract domains like authority, morality, or spiritual power. In Ígálâ discourse, the use of spittle draws on embodied schemas (fluidity, expulsion, transience) that metaphorically ground ideas of blessing, contamination, relational

bonding, or the fleetingness of life. CMT thus complements ethnopragmatics by uncovering the conceptual scaffolding beneath the cultural scripts identified through NSM.

In combination, ethnopragmatics and conceptual metaphor provide a framework for understanding how communication reflects and constitutes social life. Ethnopragmatics emphasizes insider meanings and normative expectations, while CMT uncovers the cognitive patterns and metaphorical mappings that give these meanings coherence and resonance. This dual orientation resists reductionist accounts that universalize pragmatic behavior, instead offering a culturally grounded yet theoretically precise lens for analysis.

Cross-cultural evidence underscores the value of this approach. In Australian Aboriginal societies, kinship-based restrictions foster practices of avoidance speech through indirectness and silence, while in Japanese contexts, values of *enryo* ('restraint') and *amae* ('dependence') sustain a preference for deference, vagueness, and honorifics (cf. Haviland 1979; Eades 2013; Dixon 2011). In both cases, cultural scripts articulate normative expectations, while metaphorical logics structure the reasoning behind them. These comparisons highlight the analytical payoff of linking semantic detail with cultural logic; an approach especially apt for interpreting Ígálâ saliva practices.

By integrating semantic precision with metaphorical logic, the present framework offers a deepened analysis of Ígálâ spittle acts. It highlights not only what participants mean when deploying spittle, but also how those meanings are conceptualized, extended, and legitimated through cultural metaphors of embodiment, relation, and transcendence.

3 Methods

To ensure ethnopragmatic accessibility to the cultural scripts underlying Ígálâ speech acts (cf. Wierzbicka 2003; Goddard 2006), the analysis proceeds from a dual perspective foregrounding both embodied performance and linguistic realization. Data were drawn from multiple sources: elicited narratives and conversational exchanges with Ígálâ native speakers; collected proverbs, idioms, and ritual texts; observation of ritual performances in communal, domestic, and funerary contexts; and secondary ethnographic and linguistic documentation. Cross-checking with speakers of different age groups and ritual statuses (elders, custodians of oral traditions, younger speakers) ensured cultural representativeness and pragmatic validity. The corpus was further triangulated through performance-based recall and contextualized interpretation sessions with knowledgeable tradition bearers.

Complementing this ethnopragmatic approach, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (cf. Lakoff/Johnson 2003) was applied to trace how saliva-based practices (spitting, chuffing, breath projection) are extended into abstract conceptual domains such as blessing, authority, sincerity, resilience, and transience. Data were clustered into structural metaphors (e. g., REJECTION IS EXPULSION, BLESSING IS SPITTLE TRANSFER, GRIEF IS SALIVA ESCAPING) to highlight recurring conceptual patterns.

The structured tables that follow in Section 4.1 integrate NSM and CMT, linking each embodied and verbal act to its literal meaning, social/ritual function, and underlying structural metaphor. This format situates Ígálâ practices within broader African semiotic traditions while

providing a clear framework for analyzing saliva as both an embodied sign and metaphorical schema.

4 Saliva (*ító*) as a symbolic medium in Ígálâ

In Ígálâ thought, saliva (*ító*) is not merely a bodily fluid but a bearer of *ùkpáhiú* ('vital force'), ancestral presence, and intentional agency. It mediates blessing, oath-taking, rejection, and protection, investing words with moral and spiritual weight. Ígálâ speech is inseparable from gesture, movement, and the symbolic use of saliva, so that words not only describe but also act – blessing, cursing, binding, or rejecting. The proverb *ító í í gbẹ, ùkódo í í chẹ* ('When spittle dries, the navel decays') crystallizes this force: it conveys urgency, invokes ancestral authority, and affirms continuity. In rites such as naming and oath-taking, *ító* binds obligation, confers blessing, or enforces rejection, always within cultural scripts that regulate timing, status, and efficacy.

This study approaches saliva-based practices through a combined Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) framework. Expressions are treated as both embodied acts and verbal forms, pairing literal meanings with NSM renderings for cross-linguistic clarity, and analyzing their social functions alongside their metaphorical structures. In this way, saliva emerges not only as a ritual medium but as a semiotic and conceptual resource through which Ígálâ speakers sustain moral order and cosmological balance.

4.1 Saliva as a conceptual resource in Ígálâ

As a cultural symbol, saliva (*ító*) organizes human experience across multiple domains of life. Its use is underpinned by metaphorical logics that map bodily processes onto social, moral, and spiritual realities. Five domains are especially prominent: (i) Conflict/Power, (ii) Bonding/Trust, (iii) Purification/Cleansing, (iv) Emotion/Inner State, and (v) Speech/Wisdom.

Together, these domains show that saliva functions as a mediating substance, bridging corporeal and symbolic worlds, the intimate and the public, the curative and the contaminating. The cultural grammar of Ígálâ thought frames saliva as a marker of essence, relation, and expression, materially grounded in the mouth and its fluids. Each of the five domains is examined in the subsections that follow.

4.1.1 Conflict/power domain

In Ígálâ thought, spitting is a potent act of rejection or domination. Since saliva embodies personal essence, its hostile projection, such as spitting in someone's face, symbolically curses, devalues, or denies personhood. The underlying metaphor is SALIVA IS POWER, with expulsion marking contempt, defiance, and social rupture. Expression SN 1 (*fiá itó rú... éjú*) dramatizes rejection in disputes, while SN 2 (*fiá itó rínyò nwú ónẹ*) encodes defiance as a counter-challenge. Yet saliva can also mediate hierarchy: in SN 3 (*tọ itó wá*), a child's offered spittle empowers an elder to act against harm. Proverbial imagery (SN 4) reinforces the performative force of elder speech, situating saliva at the nexus of bodily essence, authority, and cosmology.

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social/ Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Ideophone/exclamative: <i>fiá!!!</i> (spurt) | <i>fiá ító rú... éjú</i> 'Spit on someone's face' | 'I don't want this person, this thing' | Rejection, contempt, public shaming | REJECTION IS EXPULSION |
| 2 | Ideophone/exclamative: <i>pîâ!!!</i> | <i>fiá ító rínyô nwú ónè</i> 'Spit out against someone' | 'I don't fear this person' | Defiance in disputes | DEFIANCE IS PROJECTION |
| 3 | Ideophone: <i>phù!!!</i> | <i>tô ító wá</i> 'Bring spittle into my hand' | 'Give me your spittle, I can act for you' | Ritual deference, delegated retaliation | POWER IS TRANSFERRED SUBSTANCE |
| 4 | Proverbial imagery: senile drool + dried saliva | <i>Ánágbo á kà òlà, ító á wó ó álu; ító í gbẹ, ùkòlà í chẹ</i> 'When an elder speaks, he drools; spittle scarcely dries before it comes to pass' | 'Elders' words always come true' | Authority, wisdom | ELDERLY SPEECH IS PERFORMATIVE SPITTLE |

Table 1: Conceptual framing of saliva as power in conflict/power domain

4.1.2 Bonding/trust domain

Contrastingly, saliva also indexes intimacy and social cohesion. Rituals of oath-taking, promise-sealing, or shared spittle enact the metaphorical logic SHARED SALIVA IS SHARED LIFE/ESSENCE, projecting part of one's being onto another to forge durable social or spiritual bonds. This underlies covenants, marriage rites, and other intimate gestures. In practice, SN 5 (*tô ító ile rú ówô*) shows elders blessing children through breath-spittle, symbolizing care and prosperity, while SN 6 (*tùtù tùtù, éti mó èjì kí í gbô n*) enforces secrecy in ritual contexts. Narrative imagery like SN 7 (*Áñéjé ò èni Áyíbo óyâ nwu, ító wẹ lẹ á fànẹ gbẹ*) further illustrates how saliva embodies trust and gratitude, reinforcing moral and social cohesion.

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social/ Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|---|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 5 | Ideophone: <i>tùtù.tùtù.tù</i> (soft chuffing) | <i>tô ító ile rú ówô</i> 'Spit onto someone's hands' | 'I want good for this person' | Blessing, bonding, ritual affirmation | BLESSING IS SPITTLE TRANSFER |
| 6 | Ideophone: <i>tùtùtùtù</i> | <i>tùtù tùtù, éti mó èjì kí í gbô n</i> 'Not even a single word of this secret to someone else' | 'Only two people can know this' | Secrecy, confidentiality | SECRETS ARE HELD WITH SPITTLE |

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social/ Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 7 | Oral fable imagery: pregnant woman + clear saliva | <i>Áñéjé ì éni Áyibo óyá nwu, ító wẹ lẹ á fánẹ gbẹ</i> 'The tortoise believes the wife is pregnant simply because of her clear spittle' | 'Spittle is a sign of trust, gratitude' | Trust, gratitude, social balance | TRUST IS VISIBLE SALIVA |

Table 2: Conceptual framing of shared saliva as shared life/essence in bonding/trust domain

4.1.3 Purification/cleansing domain

In Ígálá, saliva also functions as a medium of symbolic cleansing. A healer's spittle applied to charms, wounds, or ritual objects embodies curative and sanctifying force, enacting the metaphor SALIVA IS A PURIFYING FLOW and linking bodily secretion to water and cleansing substances. Saliva transmits potency while removing defilement, restoring balance between the individual, the community, and the spiritual realm. In practice, SN 8 (*tù kpārâ, tù ẽ kì ù che tè ẽ kì ù mǎ che n*) purges wrongs in confessional rituals, SN 9 (*énwu íbí kí i dà rú égbé*) externalizes evil to repel misfortune, and SN 10 (*fẹ́ ódudu dá ító mì*) signals restoration after hardship, demonstrating saliva as a material conduit of moral and cosmic order.

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social/ Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|---------------------------------------|---|--|----------------------------|---|
| 8 | Ideophone: <i>tù</i> | <i>tù kpārâ, tù ẽ kì ù che tè ẽ kì ù mǎ che n</i> 'I spit out all wrong things done by omission or by commission' <i>tọ ító íbí rínyọ</i> 'I spit out all evil' | 'I don't keep any wrong inside me' | Remission, purgation | MORAL CLEANSING IS EXHALATION/ SPITTING |
| 9 | Ideophone/exclamative: <i>tùfẹ</i> | <i>énwu íbí kí i dà rú égbé</i> 'Let evil things be spewed into the bush' | 'I don't want bad things here' | Purification, rejection | BAD IS SPITTLE THAT MUST BE CAST AWAY |
| 10 | Idiomatic imagery: smoke + saliva | <i>fẹ́ ódudu dá ító mì</i> 'Blow smoke, take in saliva' | 'Now it is well again' | Relief, restoration | RESTORATION IS CLEARED SPITTLE |

Table 3: Conceptual framing of saliva as a purifying flow in purification/cleansing domain

4.1.4 Emotion/inner state domain

Spitting and related saliva acts externalize inner feelings, enacting the metaphor SALIVA IS EMOTION MATERIALIZED. Spitting on the ground signals disgust or contempt, while swal-

lowing saliva suppresses anger or desire—making invisible states visible and performative. Saliva thus provides a culturally legible means of expressing emotional intensity, whether disdain, relief, grief, or passion. For example, SN 11 (*tùtù, ǔ kà n*) signals restraint in conflict, SN 12 (*ré álu/ré fu álu tǔnyú úná*) supports reconciliation, SN 13 (*í í bà... álu*) expresses grief or outburst, and SN 14 (*ító í í gbẹ rú... álu*) conveys shock or speechlessness. Across these acts, saliva functions as a visible conduit for inner states, linking emotion to social and ritual contexts.

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social/Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 11 | Ideophone: <i>tùtù</i> | <i>tùtù, ǔ kà n</i> 'I did not as much as say a vexing word' | 'I gave not good for something bad to start' | Quarrel unreadiness | RESTRAINT IS SPITTLE HELD BACK |
| 12 | Ideophone: <i>phuphu.phuphu.phu</i> | <i>ré álu</i> 'I deny my mouth' <i>ré fu álu tǔnyú úná</i> 'I deny throwing the mouth into a fire' | 'I want no bad between us'/ 'I wanted no bad from the start' | Peace, reconciliation | PEACE IS DENYING THE SPITTLE |
| 13 | Ideophone: <i>tùùùùù</i> | <i>í í bà... álu</i> 'It escapes from the mouth' | 'I cannot hold my feeling' | Grief, mourning, emotional outburst | GRIEF IS SALIVA ESCAPING |
| 14 | Idiomatic imagery: saliva + mouth | <i>ító í í gbẹ rú... álu</i> Saliva dries in the mouth' | 'Someone cannot speak' | Shock, speechlessness | SHOCK IS DRYING SALIVA/LACK OF SPEECH |

Table 4: Conceptual framing of saliva as emotion materialized in emotion/inner state domain

4.1.5 Speech/wisdom domain

Saliva in Ígálâ culture is intimately linked to speech and wisdom, enacting the metaphor SALIVA IS THE VEHICLE OF SPEECH/KNOWLEDGE. As saliva lubricates the tongue, enabling speech, it is symbolically understood as the substance that animates and authorizes utterance. Ritualized spitting in prayers, blessings, or curses enhances the performative efficacy of words. Saliva thus embodies wisdom, moral instruction, and evaluative judgment. For instance, SN 15 (*ǔ wó ító rú ẹ̀dọ́ n*) asserts cognitive clarity, SN 16 (*ǔ kó ító rìnyô n*) conveys the ethical value of meaningful speech, and SN 17 (*ító í í gbẹ, ùkódo í í chẹ*) functions as an obedience warning, integrating bodily substance with moral and cosmological authority.

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social / Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|--|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 15 | Idiomatic imagery: drooling onto chest | <i>ǔ wó ító rú ẹ̀dọ́ n</i> 'I don't drool on my chest' | 'I am not stupid' | Assertion of clarity | FOOLISHNESS IS MISPLACED SPITTLE |
| 16 | Idiomatic imagery: wasteful spitting | <i>ǔ kó ító rìnyô n</i> 'I don't waste spittle' | 'I don't speak in vain' | Futility of speech | WASTED SPEECH IS WASTED SALIVA |

| SN | Semiotic Representation | Linguistic Expression (Literal Translation) | NSM Translation | Social / Ritual Function | Structural Metaphor |
|----|------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|--|
| 17 | Proverbial imagery: saliva + navel | ítọ í í gbẹ, ùkódo í í chẹ 'When saliva dries, the navel rots' | 'If children don't listen, bad will happen' | Obedience warning | OBEDIENCE IS MOISTURE; DISOBEDIENCE IS DRY- NESS/DECAY |

Table 5. Conceptual framing of saliva as the vehicle of speech/knowledge in speech/wisdom domain

4.1.6 Embodied logic and conceptual mapping of saliva

The five domains in section 4.1 operate through a shared conceptual mapping:

Source: The body contains spittle → Spittle can be discharged → Discharge produces effect.

Target: The body contains essence → Essence can be transferred → Transfer produces consequence.

This captures the embodied logic of Ígálâ saliva practices: as spittle can be released or withheld with visible effects, so essence can be shared or restrained with social, moral, and spiritual consequences. Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, saliva emerges as a material vehicle of vitality, intention, and speech-act force. Projected, withheld, or ritually applied, it enacts deference, benevolence, judgement, cleansing, and restraint, grounding abstract moral and spiritual categories in the tangible.

The next section examines the ethnopragmatic particularities of saliva expressions – the specific embodied forms through which these domains are enacted.

4.2 Ethnopragmatic particularity of saliva expressions in Ígálâ

Saliva-based practices in Ígálâ are not only conceptual but also pragmatic performances that make cultural scripts visible and effective. They combine bodily enactment, linguistic form, and social meaning, ensuring that abstract metaphorical logics find concrete realization in everyday interaction. Through these embodied expressions, Ígálâ speakers materialize values of hierarchy, solidarity, morality, restraint, and spirituality. These embodied practices are not simply symbolic but deeply ethnopragmatic, each act being governed by cultural scripts that regulate how essence is shared, withheld, or weaponized. In this way, saliva serves as a resource for negotiating respect, solidarity, morality, spirituality, and conflict, fusing bodily performance with social meaning.

4.2.1 Deference

The expression *tọ ítọ wá* ('bring spittle') enacts a script of ritual deference and intergenerational respect in Ígálâ society. It allows a younger person to symbolically transfer agency or decision-making power to an elder, thereby acknowledging the elder's authority and legitimacy. By invoking spittle, the act aligns the young interlocutor with the established hierarchy and signals willingness to cede initiative in matters of importance.

It also functions as a mode of socialisation. Ígálâ children learn that in moments of conflict, confusion, or distress, the proper response is not self-assertion but recourse to elders. A vivid example occurs when a child falls and begins to cry. The father stretches out his hand, saying

tọ ító wá ('bring spittle') or *phù* ('spit'). After the child complies, the father theatrically "beats" the ground, scolding it for harming the child, until the child is pacified and laughter replaces tears.

Such enactments teach that spittle carries potency, that it can be transferred, and that elders use it to intervene on behalf of the young. In this way, *tọ ító wá* both comforts the child and reinforces the worldview that links saliva with respect, authority, and the relational transmission of vital force.

4.2.2 Benevolence

The expression *tùtù.tùtù.tù* is a soft chuffing ideophone widely employed by Ígálâ elders in contexts of blessing, protection, and benevolence. It accompanies benedictions, rites of passage, or everyday acts of goodwill, where the elder vocalizes this gentle, rhythmic sound while sometimes spitting lightly or laying hands on the recipient. The ideophone's subdued chuffing evokes a calming auditory effect and may materialize in ritual acts such as *tọ ító ile rú ówó* ('spit onto someone's hands'). In this instance, the chuffing sound of *tùtù.tùtù.tù* is embodied through the transfer of spittle into the recipient's open palms, a practice that enacts blessing, bonding, and affirmation; an embodied way of saying, "I want good for this person".

Unlike directive or confrontational expressions, *tùtù.tùtù.tù* enacts a benevolence script. It communicates not only the elder's goodwill but also the community's collective desire for peace, safety, and wellbeing upon the addressee. Its delivery is deliberate, gentle, and affectively charged, reflecting the Ígálâ worldview in which words, sounds, and bodily acts transmit more than information; they carry emotional weight and spiritual force.

Ethnographic testimonies highlight this performative richness. A mother from Abocho, one of the Ígálâ areas in Kogis State, recalls how, on some mornings, her husband wakes their children one by one, lifting them gently with words of commendation. He spits softly onto their faces, repeats words of blessing, protection, and prophecy, and wipes the sleep from their eyes so they may awaken to a bright new day. This, she explains, is not a perfunctory gesture but a spiritual transmission that binds the child to ancestral continuity and communal destiny. In another account, a father summoned his son to stretch out his hands in recognition of a noble act. Performing *é tọ ító ile rú ówó* ('to spit unto the hands'), he spat lightly into the boy's palms and followed with words of praise and blessing. Both instances reveal *tùtù.tùtù.tù* not as an abstract sound but as a living, embodied practice where voice, spittle, and gesture converge to convey benevolence.

From an ethnopragmatic perspective, *tùtù.tùtù.tù* is governed by a cultural script that positions elders as custodians of harmony and spiritual intercession. Whether spoken as a soft chuffing benediction or enacted through *tọ ító ile rú ówó*, the expression bestows blessing, reinforces social cohesion, affirms intergenerational bonds, and fulfills the moral duty of care. It exemplifies how Ígálâ discourse integrates language, sound, and gesture to enact relational ethics and sustain the spiritual wellbeing of the community.

4.2.3 Moral judgement and social severance

Ígálâ communicative practice contains a spectrum of expressions that perform moral judgment and social severance. These are not merely descriptive utterances but ritualized acts that embody rejection, condemnation, and exclusion. They may be grouped into two broad types: purificative rejection and shaming/defiance.

One key expression is *tùfê!!!*, an ideophone of spontaneous moral rejection. Typically uttered with sharp intonation and abrupt force, *tùfê* condemns betrayal, dishonor, or offensive acts. It is more than a vocal outburst of disgust: it is understood as purificative, rejecting bad spittle and casting it away so that it cannot pollute the speaker or the community. Its performative correlate is the formulaic utterance *énwu íbí kí í dà rú égbé* ('let evil things be spewed into the bush'), which means, 'I don't want bad things here'. Both dramatize the act of expulsion, symbolically severing the self and community from moral or spiritual contamination.

Ethnographic accounts highlight this dimension. In one recalled incident, a father, upon hearing that his son had stolen a neighbor's goat, spat forcefully on the ground and exclaimed *tùfê!!!*. This action functioned as more than an expression of disgust; it was a performative denunciation, ritually severing the shameful act from the household and reasserting the family's moral integrity before the community. Similarly, a mother who learned that her daughter narrowly escaped an accident exclaimed *énwu íbí kí í dà rú égbé*, rejecting the omen and consigning it to the bush which represents the external world. In both cases, spitting and speech converge in a ritualized act of purgation, severing ties with dishonor, misfortune, or evil.

A second mode of moral severance involves spittle-expulsion ideophones that enact rejection, contempt, or resistance. *Fîâ!!!* ('spurt') is the performative correlate of the verbal expression *fîâ ítọ rú... éjú* ('spit on someone's face'), which conveys rejection, contempt, and public shaming 'I don't want this person, this thing.' By contrast, *pîâ!!!* signifies defiance through spitting, and its performative correlate is the disputative formula *fîâ ítọ rìnyò nwú ónè* ('spit out against someone'), meaning, 'I don't fear this person'.

Here, spittle functions not as purification but as a weapon of social confrontation. When expelled with force and voiced through ideophonic bursts, spitting materializes contempt, dramatizes shaming, or asserts fearless defiance. In Ígálâ discourse, these practices mark ethical boundaries, enforce social discipline, and negotiate power relations in moments of conflict.

Taken together, *tùfê!!!*, *énwu íbí kí í dà rú égbé*, *fîâ!!!*, *fîâ ítọ rú... éjú*, *pîâ!!!*, and *fîâ ítọ rìnyò nwú ónè* form a typology of moral judgment and social severance. They show how Ígálâ communication fuses language, sound, and embodied gesture into cultural scripts that regulate rejection, shaming, and defiance. These practices demonstrate that moral evaluation in Ígálâ is never abstract: it is enacted through spitting, sounding, and speech, performative acts that secure communal order, relational ethics, and the symbolic expulsion of evil.

4.2.4 Didactic and moral teaching

Several Ígálâ proverbs and expressions function as vehicles of ethical guidance and intergenerational instruction, transmitting moral values, social expectations, and pragmatic wisdom across generations. These utterances do not merely advise or inform; they enact moral positioning, shaping listeners' behavior through culturally embedded speech acts.

One proverb says, *Ánágbo á kà òlà, ító á wó ó álu. Ító í í gbẹ, òlà í chẹ* ('When an elder speaks, he drools; spittle scarcely dries before it comes to pass') which is interpreted as 'Elders' words always come true'. Here, the drool of old age becomes a metaphor of inexhaustible authority, affirming that the utterances of elders carry force, reliability, and inevitability. The imagery sustains the asymmetry between generations, grounding respect for elder authority in embodied symbolism.

Another proverb declares, *Ító í í gbẹ, ùkódo í í chẹ* ('When saliva dries, the navel rots'), meaning 'If children don't listen, bad will happen'. Saliva in this expression indexes vitality and continuity, while its drying is linked to decay and loss of ancestral connection. The proverb warns that disobedience and disregard for elders' counsel lead to moral and social breakdown. By invoking the navel, a marker of life and lineage, the saying ties obedience to communal flourishing and disobedience to generational rupture. The cultural metaphor it encodes is striking: obedience is moisture, while disobedience is dryness and decay.

A further idiom adds weight to the ethic of speech: *Ū kó ító rìnyô n* ('I don't waste spittle'), which is understood as 'I don't speak in vain'. The act of wasting saliva metaphorically represents the futility of speaking without effect, offering a rhetorical warning against giving counsel where it will not be heeded. In Ígálâ communicative ethics, speech, like spittle, is precious and morally consequential, not to be squandered. Advice must be offered with discernment, taking account of appropriateness, timing, and audience receptivity.

From an ethnopragmatic perspective, these proverbs and idioms encapsulate cultural scripts that regulate communication as a site of moral action. They teach that speaking is not simply a matter of expression but an enactment of responsibility, relational attunement, and social positioning. Through such sayings, Ígálâ society continually socializes its members into an ethics of speech where words are living forces, inseparable from vitality, authority, and communal continuity.

4.2.5 Purification and spiritual alignment

The ideophone *tù*, with its performative correlates *tù kpără, tù è kì ù chẹ, tù è kì ù mǎ chẹ n* ('I spit out all wrong things done by omission or commission') and *tò ító íbí rìnyô* ('I spit out all evil'), is communicatively understood as 'I don't keep any wrong inside me.' These utterances encode a script of remission and purgation, drawing on the cultural metaphor that moral cleansing is exhalation or spitting.

In Ígálâ ritual practice, saliva plays a central role in purification rites and spiritual safeguarding, functioning as both material and symbolic medium for rejecting impurity, averting misfortune, and invoking sacred potency. The first templatic expression, *tù kpără, tù è kì ù chẹ, tù è kì ù mǎ chẹ n*, is often exclaimed during a thunderbolt, since thunder is believed to strike down those who do wrong. In this context, the utterance is considered a potent safeguard against the destructive element. The second expression, *tò ító íbí rìnyô* ('I spit out all evil') is typically employed when a family member or an associate utters words considered to invoke misfortune or self-destruction. In such cases, another person may admonish them to 'spit out all evil' as a corrective act. The addressee may then physically spit, ritually enacting remission and symbolically neutralizing the negative utterance.

These ritualized acts of spitting often involve casting saliva onto the ground as a means of rejecting misfortune, malevolence, or spiritual contamination. They are commonly performed after hearing bad news, surviving danger, or warding off hostile intentions. In each case, the act of casting away spittle enacts spiritual realignment, ensuring that impurity does not take root within the self or the community.

These expressions demonstrate that in Ígálâ cosmology, language is never merely symbolic; it is material, embodied, and spiritually charged. Through such communicative acts, speakers do more than speak: they reshape reality, protect the self, align with spiritual forces, and maintain the ethical balance of the community.

4.2.6 Emotional and affective resource

In Ígálâ discourse, language does not merely transmit information but also mediates emotion, embodying affective states and ethical orientations in ways that draw deeply on oral tradition. Storytelling, proverbs, ideophones, and idiomatic imagery serve as living resources through which speakers articulate trust, secrecy, shock, relief, and grief in forms that are immediately resonant and culturally intelligible.

A well-known oral fable tells of the tortoise whose wife, the ladybug, was admired for the clarity of her spittle, which the tortoise claimed gleamed like that of a pregnant woman. The imagery, crystallized in the saying *Àñéjẹ ì ènì, Áyíbo óyâ nwu, ítọ wẹ lẹ á fǎnẹ gbẹ* ('The tortoise said, "Ladybug, dear wife, your spittle is sparkling clear and bright"'), conveys the idea that spittle itself can be a visible sign of trust and gratitude. Socially, this fable is often invoked in contexts where a person wishes to express profound gratitude for assistance already rendered. Rather than stating thanks directly, the grateful speaker recalls the tortoise's admiration of the ladybug's spittle, thereby situating gratitude in a culturally resonant and affectively rich form of expression. The fable thus affirms reciprocity and obligation, values central to Ígálâ ethics.

Other expressions encode emotional and relational codes through ideophonic and idiomatic imagery. The ideophonic burst *tùtùtùtù*, performed in rapid repetition to heighten urgency, finds its templatic realization in *tùtù tùtù, étí mọ èjì kí ń gbọ ń* ('Not even a single word of this secret to someone else'). The repetition enacts the injunction to silence and suggests that secrecy must be held as tightly as saliva that is never expelled.

The drying of saliva conveys the paralyzing force of shock, as in *ítọ í í gbẹ rú mí álu* ('Saliva dries up in my mouth'). Here, speechlessness is embodied as a drying up of the body's moisture, an image that equates sudden shock with the impossibility of utterance.

Relief and restoration are figured through the imagery of smoke and saliva in *fẹ́ ódudu dá ítọ mí* ('Blow smoke, take in saliva'). The contrast between smoke, signifying confusion or turmoil, and saliva, indexing life force and calm, provides a vivid way of describing the transition from distress to balance, as if one's inner state is cleared and renewed by swallowing spittle after blowing away the haze.

The texture of grief is dramatized in the prolonged ideophone *tùùùùùù*, often voiced in the heightened tone of mourning, with its templatic correlate *í í bà mí álu* ('It escapes from my mouth'). The sound and the associated image of uncontrollable spittle mirror the way grief overflows, refusing containment, and spilling outward in audible lament.

From an ethnopragmatic perspective, these expressions demonstrate that in Ígálâ culture, emotion is never merely internal but is externalized, embodied, and socially framed. Saliva, as a semiotic resource, provides the imagery through which secrecy is guarded, shock immobilizes, gratitude shines, relief restores, and grief overflows. Language, in this way, is inseparable from vitality and affect, shaping how emotions are both experienced and shared within the community.

4.2.7 Conflict management and restraint

In Ígálâ communicative practice, the handling of conflict, whether through deliberate suppression or ritualized confrontation, is governed by cultural scripts that frame speech and bodily actions as morally and spiritually consequential. Expressions that surface in contexts of quarrel or reconciliation often use saliva imagery to encode restraint, denial, or controlled release, thereby regulating social interaction and preserving harmony.

The ideophone *tùtù tùtù* ('a single word') underlies the performative *tùtù tùtù, ǔ kàh* ('I did not as much as say a single vexing word'). Here the speaker affirms that not even the smallest provocation has been uttered. The containment of spittle mirrors the containment of anger: by refusing to release words that could inflame a quarrel, the speaker demonstrates restraint, composure, and moral maturity. In Ígálâ society, such withholding is esteemed as a conscious act of peace-making rather than weakness.

The ideophone *phuphu phuphu phu* instantiates the performative *é ré álu* ('to deny mouth'), an utterance that explicitly withdraws or reverses the force of spoken words. It is employed to disown statements that might otherwise escalate hostility, thus ritually neutralizing their effect. In traditional settings, this verbal formula could be reinforced with accompanying acts such as animal sacrifice or incantations, underscoring the seriousness of the reversal and the communal commitment to restoring balance. The denial of mouth is more than a speech act: it is a moral and ritual safeguard against the destructive potential of the tongue.

An additional idiomatic image deepens this ethic of restraint. *ǔ wó ító rú èdò n* ('I don't drool on my chest') rejects the portrayal of oneself as foolish, inattentive, or reckless. In the cultural semiotics of saliva, drool misplaced on the chest signifies lack of control; its denial, therefore, is a declaration of clarity and composure. This expression is often invoked by elders to highlight that choosing silence or refusing to retaliate is not a sign of ignorance but of wisdom, dignity, and moral strength.

Taken together, these expressions demonstrate how Ígálâ speakers navigate the delicate balance between suppressing provocation and actively renouncing hostility. Saliva, whether withheld, denied, or redirected, becomes a powerful medium for dramatizing the ethics of conflict management. From an ethnopragmatic perspective, these acts reveal a cultural philosophy where speech is not merely symbolic but performative, binding, and spiritually charged, ensuring that restraint and reconciliation remain central to communal life.

4.3 Structuring principles of saliva-based communication

Saliva-based expressions in Ígálâ discourse are governed by cultural scripts that determine not only what is spoken but also when, how, and why speech and bodily action are appropriate.

Blessings and protection draw on benevolence scripts that mediate communal care and spiritual safeguarding. Rejection and disgust follow moral judgment scripts that enforce boundaries and defend shared values. Shame and disgrace activate sanction scripts, dramatizing exclusion and ruptured ties. Didactic proverbs embed obedience and respect in instructional scripts, transmitting moral education through everyday interaction. Emotional recovery is framed in affective scripts that mark transitions from grief to restoration. Conflict is managed either through restraint scripts that valorize self-control or confrontation scripts that ritualize grievance within accepted limits. Two structuring principles stand out. The first is the polarity of auspicious and inauspicious saliva: gentle acts such as *tùtù tùtù tù* or *tọ ítọ ilẹ rú ọwọ* confer blessing and affirmation, while explosive ideophones such as *fîâ!* and *tùfê!* dramatize rejection and censure. The second is the hierarchy of age and authority: saliva-based acts flow predominantly from elders to juniors, situating saliva as both substance and index of power and ritual efficacy. At a deeper level, saliva functions as a semiotic bridge between body, speech, and cosmos. It materializes emotions, encodes judgments, and sustains ritual power. Far from incidental, *ítọ* is both communicative medium and moral substance, embodying values of respect, reciprocity, and spiritual balance.

5 Conclusion

This study has shown that saliva (*ítọ*) in Ígálâ communicative life is far more than a bodily fluid: it is a polyvalent semiotic medium that materializes spiritual force, enacts blessing and cursing, encodes moral judgment, and affirms social hierarchy. Spitting functions as an embodied speech act through which respect, rejection, kinship, and ancestral sanction are projected, linking language to body, cosmos, and moral order. Through NSM, Ígálâ saliva practices were rendered in cultural scripts that make insider meanings accessible, while CMT revealed metaphorical mappings such as SALIVA IS ESSENCE, SALIVA IS POWER, and EXPULSION IS REJECTION. These frameworks showed how saliva grounds communicative acts in bodily schemas and extends them into conceptual domains of conflict, bonding, purification, emotion, and wisdom. While focused on Ígálâ, the findings point toward a broader comparative agenda. Future inquiry might examine how saliva mediates blessing, covenant, healing, or censure in Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Akan, Zulu, and other traditions, clarifying whether saliva functions as a shared African semiotic of essence and authority or whether other bodily substances assume comparable roles. Such work would illuminate how embodied materials sustain spiritual force, moral judgment, and social accountability across the continent. In Ígálâ thought, saliva lies at the very center of communication. It demonstrates that meaning is not confined to words but emerges through embodied action where mouth, body, and spirit converge to generate the moral substance of speech.

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