

**INDIGENOUS DISCOURSE MARKERS IN  
LIWHU BETIANG'S *THE CRADLE ON THE  
SCALES***

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**Abstract**

Discourse markers (DMs) are important pragmatic resources that facilitate communication, organize discourse, and guide meaning interpretation within specific socio-cultural contexts. Although extensive research has been conducted on DMs in conversational, media, and literary discourse, scholarly attention has largely focused on conventional English DMs, leaving indigenous discourse markers (IDMs) in African literary texts relatively underexplored. This study investigates pragmatic functions of IDMs in LiwhuBeti's *The Cradle on the Scales*, integrating Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory as framework. The study adopts qualitative descriptive design, utilizing data purposively extracted from the novel. Of the identified IDMs, only seven- *ah, eyah, ah ah, enh hen, mm, hm, um* - were selected and subjected to discourse-pragmatic analysis, for want of space. Relevance Theory provides insights into contextual meaning construction and inferential interpretation, while Speech Act Theory explains how DMs enhance communicative intentions and strengthen illocutionary force. Findings reveal that IDMs perform multiple functions, including emotional expression, interaction management, speech act enhancement, contextual meaning construction, interpersonal relationship maintenance, cultural identity representation, discourse cohesion, characterization, and narrative realism. The study further demonstrates that these markers are not merely fillers or hesitation devices

but multifunctional pragmatic tools that contribute significantly to communication and interpretation in literary discourse. The findings contribute to scholarship in pragmatics, discourse analysis, literary linguistics, Nigerian English studies, and African sociolinguistics by highlighting the relationship between language, culture, and meaning-making. The study demonstrates the explanatory relevance of combining Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory in the analysis of IDMs in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

**Keywords:** Indigenous discourse markers, Pragmatics, Relevance Theory, Speech Act Theory, Nigerian literary discourse

## **Introduction**

Language remains one of the most important instruments through which human beings construct reality, negotiate social relationships, express emotions, and communicate cultural values. Beyond the literal meanings of words, successful communication depends on numerous pragmatic resources that enable speakers and hearers to interpret utterances appropriately within specific contexts. One of the most significant of these resources is discourse markers. Discourse markers (DMs) are linguistic expressions that facilitate discourse organization, regulate interaction, indicate speakers'

attitudes, and guide contextual interpretation (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999; Aijmer, 2023). Although they often appear optional from a grammatical perspective, discourse markers perform indispensable communicative functions that contribute to coherence, cohesion, and meaning construction.

Over the years, DMs have attracted considerable scholarly attention within pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and literary linguistics. Foundational studies by Schiffrin (1987), Fraser (1999), and Blakemore (2002) established discourse markers as essential components of communication that help interlocutors interpret relationships between utterances. More recent studies have expanded this understanding by demonstrating the role of DMs in identity construction, emotional expression, intercultural communication, digital discourse, and literary interaction (Fischer, 2021; Aijmer, 2023; Ezeifeke, 2024). Contemporary scholarship, therefore, views DMs not as insignificant conversational fillers but as sophisticated pragmatic devices that facilitate effective communication.

Within the Nigerian context, discourse marker research has increasingly focused on localized linguistic practices

and the domestication of English. Studies have shown that Nigerian English contains several indigenous discourse markers (IDMs) that reflect local socio-cultural experiences and communicative norms (Ibbi, 2019; Unuabonah & Gut, 2018). They derive much of their communicative force from shared cultural knowledge and contextual assumptions rather than from fixed lexical meanings.

Despite growing interest in discourse markers, existing scholarship has concentrated largely on conventional English markers such as *well*, *so*, *but*, and *you know*. Furthermore, many studies have focused on spoken discourse, media texts, and sociolinguistic identity, with comparatively little attention paid to indigenous discourse markers in literary discourse. This gap is significant because literary texts provide valuable opportunities for examining how writers deploy culturally embedded linguistic resources to construct meaning, portray characters, and represent social realities.

African literary writers frequently incorporate indigenous pragmatic forms into English-language texts to achieve authenticity and reflect local communicative practices. Through such linguistic choices, writers reproduce naturally occurring speech patterns, depict

cultural experiences, and strengthen narrative realism. Consequently, IDMs constitute important resources for understanding the relationship between language, culture, and literary representation. Their study, therefore, contributes not only to discourse-pragmatic scholarship but also to broader discussions of Nigerian English, African sociolinguistics, and literary communication.

LiwhuBetiang's *The Cradle on the Scales* (2011) provides a suitable context for investigating indigenous discourse markers because the novel contains numerous examples of localized pragmatic expressions embedded within fictional dialogue. These expressions perform diverse communicative functions that extend beyond grammatical structure to include emotional expression, speech act enhancement, interpersonal relationship management, and cultural identity representation. However, little scholarly attention has been devoted to examining these functions systematically.

This study, therefore, investigates the pragmatic functions of indigenous discourse markers in *The Cradle on the Scales*. Specifically, the study identifies the indigenous discourse markers employed in the text, examines their communicative functions, explores their

contribution to contextual meaning construction and speech act realization, and analyzes their role in cultural identity representation and narrative realism. By adopting the complementary frameworks of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory, the study provides a comprehensive explanation of how indigenous discourse markers contribute to meaning-making in Nigerian literary discourse.

## **Literature Review**

### **Concept of Discourse Markers**

Discourse markers constitute an important area of study in pragmatics and discourse analysis because of their role in facilitating communication and interpretation. Schiffrin (1987) defines discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of discourse and establish relationships between utterances. Similarly, Fraser (1999) views discourse markers as pragmatic expressions that signal how one discourse segment relates to another. Contemporary scholarship extends these definitions by emphasizing their contribution to contextual interpretation, interpersonal communication, and discourse organization (Aijmer, 2023; Fischer, 2021). Research indicates that discourse markers perform multiple communicative functions, including signaling transitions, managing interactions,

expressing attitudes, indicating speaker stance, and facilitating coherence. Consequently, they are increasingly regarded as indispensable pragmatic resources rather than optional linguistic elements.

### **Indigenous Discourse Markers (IDMs) and African Pragmatics**

The study of IDMs is closely connected to African pragmatics, which emphasizes the influence of culture, context, and communal knowledge on communication. African scholars such as Nwoye (1992), Adegbija (2004), and Odebunmi (2015), argue that meaning construction in African societies is deeply shaped by socio-cultural assumptions and shared experiences.

Within Nigerian communicative contexts, IDMs frequently encode emotions, social relationships, politeness and cultural values. They often possess meanings that cannot always be translated directly into conventional English equivalents. Their interpretation depends largely on contextual and cultural knowledge. These markers serve as important indicators of

indigenous communicative practices and cultural identity.

### **Discourse Markers in Literary Discourse**

Recent developments in literary pragmatics have highlighted the relevance of DMs to literary communication. Literary texts are communicative events in which authors strategically employ linguistic resources to construct fictional worlds and guide readers' interpretations. Studies by Fischer (2021) and Ezeifeke (2024) demonstrate that discourse markers contribute significantly to characterization, dialogue construction, narrative coherence, and reader engagement. Through DMs, authors reproduce natural speech patterns and create realistic communicative situations. Consequently, DMs function not only as discourse-organizing devices but also as stylistic resources that enhance literary authenticity and narrative effectiveness.

### **Discourse Markers, Culture, and Identity**

Contemporary scholarship recognizes a strong relationship between DMs, culture, and identity. According to Kirkpatrick (2020) and Bolton (2022), localized linguistic forms often function as indicators of

cultural orientation and group membership. Similarly, Agyekum (2021) argues that indigenous pragmatic forms embody communal values and social norms. In multilingual societies such as Nigeria, IDMs contribute to the domestication of English and reflect local communicative realities. Their use in literary discourse, therefore, facilitates cultural representation and identity construction. Through such markers, writers preserve indigenous communicative practices while simultaneously enriching literary expression.

## **Review Gap**

Although previous studies have examined DMs in spoken discourse, media discourse, and Nigerian English, limited attention has been paid to IDMs in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Existing studies also tend to rely on single theoretical framework or none at all, and provide insufficient explanation of how DMs simultaneously facilitate contextual interpretation and speech act realization. This study addresses these gaps by examining IDMs in *The Cradle on the Scales* through the integrated perspectives of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the complementary framework of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive explanation of how IDMs function as pragmatic resources in LiwhuBeti's *The Cradle on the Scales*. While Relevance Theory explains how readers infer meanings from discourse markers within context, Speech Act Theory accounts for how such markers strengthen communicative intentions and modify the force of utterances.

### **Relevance Theory**

Relevance Theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995) as a cognitive-pragmatic approach to communication. The theory argues that communication is fundamentally inferential and that hearers derive meaning by combining linguistic input with contextual assumptions. According to the principle of optimal relevance, communicative acts are designed to achieve maximum cognitive effects with minimal processing effort. Meaning is, therefore, not fully encoded in linguistic expressions but emerges through contextual interpretation. Within discourse-pragmatic studies, DMs function as procedural devices that guide hearers and readers toward intended interpretations rather than contributing substantial conceptual meaning.

(Blakemore, 2002; Fischer, 2021). IDMs derive much of their communicative significance from context and shared cultural knowledge. Their meanings vary according to communicative situations and interpersonal relationships. Relevance Theory is useful for explaining how readers infer emotions, attitudes, sympathy, surprise, concern, and social meanings from DMs in literary discourse.

### **Speech Act Theory**

Speech Act Theory was originally proposed by J. L. Austin (1962) and later developed by John Searle (1969). The theory views language as a form of action rather than merely a system of symbols. It argues that utterances perform communicative acts such as requesting, apologizing, advising, promising, warning, expressing emotions, and conveying attitudes.

Speech Act Theory is particularly relevant to this study because DMs frequently strengthen the illocutionary force of utterances. IDMs often intensify expressive, directive, and assertive speech acts by signaling emotions and interpersonal orientations. Thus, DMs contribute significantly to communicative effectiveness and pragmatic interpretation.

## **Integration of the Theories**

The combination of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory provides a robust analytical framework for this study. Relevance Theory explains how DMs facilitate contextual meaning construction, while Speech Act Theory explains how they strengthen communicative intentions. Together, the theories account for both the inferential and functional dimensions of IDMs, making them highly suitable for analyzing literary discourse.

## **Critical Evaluation of Previous Studies**

Existing studies have made valuable contributions to the understanding of discourse markers; however, several methodological, theoretical, and contextual limitations justify the present investigation.

Schiffrin's (1987) seminal work remains foundational in discourse marker studies because it establishes discourse markers as important organizational devices in communication. Nevertheless, the study was conducted primarily within American English conversational

contexts and focused largely on interactional discourse. Consequently, it offers limited insight into the functions of IDMs within African literary texts. Furthermore, its emphasis on spoken discourse leaves literary and culturally specific applications relatively underexplored. Similarly, Fraser (1999) provides a comprehensive classification of discourse markers based on their pragmatic functions. While the work remains influential, it largely concentrates on conventional English markers such as *well*, *so*, and *but*. The study pays insufficient attention to indigenous and localized discourse markers found in postcolonial English varieties. As a result, its applicability to Nigerian literary discourse is somewhat restricted.

Blakemore's (2002) relevance-theoretic approach significantly advanced understanding of DMs as procedural constraints on interpretation. However, the study is predominantly theoretical and relies heavily on examples from English discourse. Its limited engagement with empirical literary data and non-Western communicative contexts creates a contextual gap that necessitates further investigation. Within the Nigerian context, Ibbi (2019) examines DMs peculiar to Nigerian English and demonstrates their role in identity construction and linguistic ownership. Despite its relevance, the study focused primarily on spoken

Nigerian English and sociolinguistic identity. Methodologically, it did not provide an in-depth literary analysis of discourse markers, nor did it explore their contribution to narrative meaning construction and characterization in literary texts.

Jauro, Adamu, & Delia (2014) investigate discourse markers in Nigerian newspaper discourse and establish their importance in textual cohesion and communication. However, the study was restricted to media discourse and employed a largely descriptive analytical approach. The findings, therefore, cannot be fully generalized to literary discourse, where discourse markers often perform additional aesthetic and pragmatic functions.

More recently, Ayoola, Agbeleoba, & Ogunrotimi (2023) examine DMs in Habib Yakoob's (2007) *The Ugly Ones Refuse to Die*. Their study successfully demonstrates the contribution of DMs to textual coherence and literary communication. Nevertheless, the analysis concentrated on general DMs and did not specifically investigate IDMs as culturally embedded pragmatic resources.

Ezeifeke (2024) provides a valuable discussion of discourse analysis and pragmatic interpretation within literary texts. However, the work remains largely conceptual and theoretical. It offers limited empirical evidence regarding the specific functions of IDMs in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Consequently, questions concerning their role in emotional expression, cultural identity representation, and interpersonal relationship management remain insufficiently addressed.

Collectively, these studies reveal three major gaps. Methodologically, most previous studies focus on spoken discourse, media texts, or general linguistic data rather than literary discourse. Theoretically, many rely on a single analytical framework and, therefore, provide limited explanations of how discourse markers simultaneously facilitate speech act realization and contextual interpretation. Contextually, most studies emphasize English DMs and pay insufficient attention to indigenous discourse markers embedded within Nigerian socio-cultural realities. The present study addresses these limitations by examining IDMs in Liwahu Betiang's *The Cradle on the Scales* through the integrated framework of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of their pragmatic, literary, and socio-cultural functions.

## Empirical Gap

Although studies such as Ibbi (2019), Ayoola, Agbeleoba, & Ogunrotimi (2023), and Ezeifeke (2024) have examined DMs in Nigerian English and literary discourse, none has specifically investigated IDMs in LiwuhuBetiang's *The Cradle on the Scales* using an integrated Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory framework. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how indigenous discourse markers simultaneously facilitate contextual meaning construction, speech act realization, emotional expression, interpersonal relationship management, cultural identity representation, and narrative realism in contemporary Nigerian fiction. This study fills the empirical gap.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

Seven of the instances of indigenous discourse markers identified in *The Cradle on the Scales* were selected and analyzed in order to discover their pragmatic functions in literary discourse. The markers investigated are *ah*, *eyah*, *ah ah*, *enh hen*, *mm*, *um*, *hm*. They perform diverse communicative and sociocultural functions. These are discussed in the following subsections

numbered 1-8. Example items for each number are arranged as serially as they appear in the novel:

## 1. Expression of Emotions and Affective Meanings

### Example 1:

- a) *“Ah sister, you fine no be small o.”* (p. 71)
- b) *“Eyah... so how did you come off it?”* (p. 133)
- c) *“Ah ah! That's bloodstains all over your shirt; what happened?”* (p. 159)

The IDMs *ah*, *eyah*, *ah ah* function as affective resources through which characters express admiration, sympathy, concern, surprise, and shock. The marker *ah* in 1(a) communicates admiration and approval, *eyah* in 1(b) expresses empathy and emotional solidarity, while *ah ah* seen in 1(c) intensifies shock and disbelief. Their use enriches emotional expression and enhances readers' understanding of the characters' feelings and attitudes.

## 2. Turn-Taking and Interaction Management

### Example 2:

- a) *“Mm, I'll not go back home again.”* (p. 35)
- b) *“Mm... some distant cousin; but we're related by blood all the same.”* (p. 36)
- c) *“Um, then I shall also be able to quit this beggars' thankless work.”*(p. 78)

The markers *mm* and *um* regulate conversational flow and facilitate discourse management. Example 2(a) indicates hesitation, 2(b) reflection, and 2(c) cognitive processing; while all contribute in helping speakers maintain interaction. Their use makes for conversational continuity and reproduces naturally occurring speech patterns.

### 3. Enhancement of Speech Acts

#### Example 3:

- a) *“Ah God, help me o!”*(p. 109)
- b) *“Ah, money fixes everything.”* (p. 131)
- c) *“Eyah... so how did you come off it?”* (p. 133)

The IDMs *ah*, *eyahin* example 3 strengthen communicative intentions by intensifying the illocutionary force of utterances. In 3(a), *ah* strengthens a plea while in 3(b) it strengthens an assertion. *Eyah* in 3(c) transforms a simple inquiry into an expression of sympathy and concern. Consequently, the markers enhance pragmatic effectiveness and speech act realization.

#### 4. Contextual Meaning Construction

##### Example 4:

- a) “*Ah sister, you fine no be small o.*” (p. 71)
- b) “*Enh hen! Sit down then.*” (p. 108)
- c) “*Ah Tyozenda, what's chasing you?*” (p. 164)

Example 4, like the preceding ones, demonstrates that the meanings of discourse markers are context-dependent. In context 4(a), *ah* expresses admiration, while in 4(c) it conveys concern or surprise. Likewise, *enh hen* in 4(b) derives its interpretation from surrounding discourse conditions. These markers, therefore, function as contextual cues that guide readers toward the intended meanings.

## 5. Interpersonal Relationship Management

### Example 5:

- a) “*Eyah... so how did you come off it?*” (p. 133)
- b) “*Ah don't mention!*”(p.109 )
- c) “*Mm, see am, I talk say she fine.*” (p. 71)

The indigenous discourse markers in example 5 facilitate interpersonal bonding by expressing empathy, politeness, and social involvement. *Eyah* in 5(a) signals emotional support, *ah* functions as a politeness marker in 5(b), and *mm* in 5(c) encourages listener participation. The use of these IDMs promotes harmonious interpersonal relationship among the characters.

## 6. Cultural Identity Representation

### Example 6:

- a) “*Enh hen! Sit down then.*” (p. 108)
- b) “*Eyah... so how did you come off it?*” (p. 133)

- c) *“Ah ah! That's bloodstains all over your shirt.”* (p. 159)

The markers *enh hen, eyah, ah ah* in example 6 (a-c) reflect indigenous Nigerian communicative practices and cultural values. Respectively, they embody local ways of expressing authority, sympathy/emotional response, and surprise. Their recurrent use in *The Cradle on the Scales* contributes to the cultural authenticity of the novel and demonstrates the nativization of English.

## 7. Discourse Cohesion and Coherence

### Example 7:

- a) *“Mm... some distant cousin; but we're related by blood all the same.”* (p. 36)
- b) *“Hm, Unimke will have to wait a little more.”* (p. 57)
- c) *“Um, then I shall also be able to quit this beggars' thankless work.”*(p. 78)

The markers *mm, hm, um* establish connections between utterances and facilitate logical progression. They help

readers follow the flow of ideas and maintain continuity within conversations and narrative development, thereby contributing to textual cohesion and coherence.

## **8. Characterization and Narrative Realism**

### **Example 8:**

- a) *“Hm, Unimke will have to wait a little more.”* (p. 57)
- b) *“Ah sister, you fine no be small o.”* (p. 71)
- c) *“Eyah... so how did you come off it?”* (p. 133)

These discourse markers contribute significantly to characterization and narrative realism. They reveal characters’ emotions, personalities, social identities, and interpersonal orientations. Their use reproduces authentic Nigerian speech patterns and enhances the realism and credibility of the narrative.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that indigenous discourse markers in LiwuhBetiang's *The Cradle on the Scales* (2011) function as important pragmatic resources that contribute significantly to communication, meaning construction, and literary interpretation. Through the analysis of the seven selected samples, **ah, eyah, ah ah, enh hen, mm, um, hm**, the study establishes that indigenous discourse markers perform multiple interconnected functions within the narrative.

One of the major findings of the study is that indigenous discourse markers serve as effective tools for the expression of emotions and affective meanings and can communicate admiration, sympathy, concern, surprise, frustration, and shock. These markers enable readers to infer the emotional state and attitude of the characters beyond the literal meanings of their utterances, thereby increasing the emotional depth of the narrative. This finding supports Aijmer (2023), who argues that discourse markers frequently encode speakers' emotions and evaluations. It also aligns with Fischer's (2021) view that discourse markers contribute significantly to interpersonal communication.

The findings further reveal that discourse markers play a crucial role in turn-taking and interaction management.

Markers such as *mm*, *um*, *hm* function as response tokens, hesitation devices, and indicators of cognitive processing. Their use helps maintain conversational continuity while processing information and preparing responses, organize discourse, and create realistic dialogue patterns that reflect naturally occurring speech. This finding supports Schiffrin's (1987) argument that discourse markers are organizational devices that structure interaction and maintain discourse coherence. Similarly, Fraser (1999) notes that discourse markers guide participants through discourse by signaling relationships between utterances.

Another important finding is that indigenous discourse markers strengthen speech acts by increasing their illocutionary force. Expressions such as "*Ah God, help me o!*" and "*Eyah... so how did you come off it?*" demonstrate how discourse markers intensify requests/assertions, and expressions of sympathy respectively. As a result, they enhance communicative effectiveness and clarify the intentions of the speakers. This finding corroborates Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) view that linguistic elements contribute to the realization of speech acts. It also supports Ezeifeke's (2024) observation that discourse markers influence the interpretation of communicative intentions.

The study also establishes that the meanings of indigenous discourse markers are highly context-dependent. The same marker may perform different functions depending on the communicative situation - clear evidence that IDMs perform multiple discourse functions that extend beyond their surface conversational meanings. This supports Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, which emphasizes that meaning, emerges through contextual inference rather than lexical meaning alone. Likewise, Blakemore (2002) argues that discourse markers function as procedural cues that guide interpretation.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that discourse markers facilitate interpersonal relationship management by expressing empathy, politeness, solidarity, and social involvement. They help maintain harmonious relationships among characters and reinforce communal values embedded within the Nigerian culture. This finding goes to support Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as well as Bamgbose's (1995) and Kirkpatrick's (2020) arguments on cultural identity and linguistic ownership.

The study additionally reveals that indigenous discourse markers function as markers of cultural identity. Their recurrent use reflects local communicative norms, sociocultural experiences, and indigenous worldviews, thereby contributing to the nativization of English and the cultural authenticity of the novel.

Finally, the findings show that discourse markers contribute significantly to discourse cohesion, characterization, and narrative realism. They create logical links between utterances, reveal characters' personalities and emotions, and reproduce authentic Nigerian speech patterns. Overall, the study confirms that indigenous discourse markers are not mere conversational fillers but multifunctional pragmatic devices that play indispensable roles in meaning-making, literary communication, and cultural representation in Nigerian literary discourse.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This study is an investigation into the pragmatic functions of indigenous discourse markers (IDMs) in LiwhuBetiang's novel *The Cradle on the Scales* (2011). Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory formed the framework for the study while seven of the IDMs

identified in the novel were selected and analyzed using the discourse-pragmatic approach. The seven IDMS are *ah, eyah, ah ah, enh hen, mm, hm, um*.

The study shows that indigenous discourse markers perform multiple pragmatic functions. They express emotions such as sympathy, admiration, surprise, concern, and shock, while also regulating conversational flow through turn-taking, response management, and discourse organization. In addition, they reinforce speech acts by intensifying illocutionary force and clarifying communicative intent. Their interpretation is largely context-dependent, relying on inferential processes shaped by cultural and situational knowledge. Moreover, indigenous discourse markers are multifunctional pragmatic resources rather than mere fillers.

The study further reveals that indigenous discourse markers contribute to interpersonal relationship management, cultural identity representation, discourse cohesion, characterization, and narrative realism. Their frequent use reflects Nigerian sociocultural communicative norms and enhances the authenticity of the narrative.

Following from the foregoing, the study opines that writers of African literature should continue to consciously incorporate indigenous discourse markers into their creative works as a means of preserving indigenous communicative practices, promoting cultural authenticity, and reflecting the sociolinguistic realities of the African societies. Again, language educators and curriculum developers should integrate the study of indigenous discourse markers into language and literature courses to enhance the learners' understanding of IDMs' contextual meaning and cultural pragmatics, as well as the relationship between language and society.

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