

Lexical Ambiguity in Urhobo

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Abstract

This paper examines lexical ambiguity in Urhobo, a tonal language. Lexical ambiguity is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word. The specific objectives of this study are to identify lexical ambiguity in Urhobo and examine lexical ambiguity at the word/independent and associative constructions. This paper follows the qualitative paradigm using a descriptive research design for its analysis of data. The data for analysis are gathered through introspection. The paper reveals that lexical ambiguity occurs in the Urhobo language. Lexical ambiguity gives a word multiple interpretations and it is seen mostly in polysemous and homonymous words in the language. This study recommends that more researchers should explore the relationship between ambiguity and idiomatic expressions in the Urhobo language.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Tone, Polysemy, Urhobo

Introduction

It is difficult to define semantics. Scholars such as Ogden and Richard (1923), Agbedo (2000), Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010) etc, agreed that semantics is the study of meaning. Ogden and Richard (1923) present about 23 definitions of meaning. They adopt paradigmatic and syntagmatic substitution methods arriving at these. These attempts point to the fact that there is no clear definition to the study of meaning.

Anyanwu (2008) claims that the study of meaning has always attracted or caught the attention of scholars since the time of Plato and Aristotle, though the term semantics came into popular use about the first half of the 20th century. In an attempt to define meaning, Lyons (1986) in Agbedo (2015) distinguishes emotive and cognitive meaning versus significance and signification, performative and descriptive meaning versus sense and reference, denotation versus connotation, signs versus symbols, extension versus intension, implication, entailment and presupposition versus the analytic and the synthetic. Central to this distinction is the understanding that meaning can be said to be the function of signs in natural language.

It is important to note that semantics is a sub-field of linguistics that takes a careful and critical look to the study of meaning. The use of words in communication generates different meanings to speakers of the language. The ambiguous nature of meaning is what brought semantics to limelight. A particular word may mean different things in different languages such as Chinese, Epira, Hausa, Ibibio, Igala, Igbo, Kalabari, Urhobo, Yoruba, etc. For instance, in the Igbo language, *Olaniyi* means 'a destroyer' while in the Yoruba language, it means 'wealth has value'. This scenario when one word means different things in different languages is a possible area of difficulty for learners of this language pair because of the ambiguity of such word.

Ambiguity is an aspect of meaning in which different interpretations are plausible. It is a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation (Ndimele, 2005). In other words, ambiguity possesses variegated meanings where a hearer chooses the meaning that best suits the setting and time of utterance. As Nwaozuzu (2013) contends, a hearer may decide to choose from a set of possible meanings, the one that the speaker has in mind or decide to choose another meaning which is irrelevant to the utterance. When the latter happens, it results in babelism (cf. Nwaozuzu, 2013). This is applicable to the Urhobo language and many others.

Urhobo is a language spoken in the Delta region of Nigeria with many speakers. The people of Urhobo are located in southern part of Nigeria. Its territory according to Urhobo scholars such as Elugbe (1989) and Aziza (2011) consists of evergreen forests with many oil palm trees. Urhobo is an Edoid language which belongs to the Kwa group of Niger-Congo family. The Urhobo people are known for fishing and farming and they belong to the group with largely undocumented history. There is also an absence of European records of the Urhobo as early European arrivals were preoccupied with economic interests in the coastal communities.

Ambiguity as a semantic relation exists between two or more sentence structures which have the same lexical items and pronunciations but with different meanings. Udemmadu (2012) observes that in every day communication, ambiguity is a rather marginal problem as context, intonation, situation, usually sift out the appropriate meaning. It is a term used to characterise phenomena that have more than one meaning. Ambiguity can be lexical, sentential, tonal or dialectal (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1996). Lexical ambiguity is traced to a lexical item within the ambiguous syntactic structure; sentential ambiguity cannot be traced to a particular lexical item but the whole structure; dialectal ambiguity looks at ambiguous words in the dialect or relative to the standard form of the language and tonal ambiguity looks at structures with the same tone but different meaning. Tone refers to the degree of highness or lowness of pitch when a word is uttered. Urhobo is a registered tone language, having two basic tones: high (H) and low tone (L). Tonal system of Urhobo has been studied by Linguists like Kelly (1969), Welmers (1969), Elugbe (1989) and Aziza (1997). They all agree that Urhobo operates a terraced-level tone system with two basic tones (low and high) and two gliding tones (H-L) and (L-H) falling and rising tone.

Lexical ambiguity is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word and it is also known as semantic ambiguity or homonymy (Nordquist, 2018). It is sometimes used deliberately to create puns and other types of wordplay. Nordquist (2018) contends that

true lexical ambiguity is typically distinguished from polysemy. Depending on the relationship among the alternative meanings available for a particular word form, lexical ambiguity has been categorized as either polysemous, when meanings are related, or homonymous, when unrelated. Although, ambiguity is graded, for words that are at one or the other end of this spectrum and thus are easy to classify, polysemy and homonymy have been shown to have differing effects on reading behaviors. Whereas related meanings have been shown to facilitate word recognition, unrelated meanings have been found to slow processing times.

This paper seeks to examine lexical ambiguity in Urhobo. Its objectives are to identify lexical ambiguity in Urhobo, to examine lexical items with lexical ambiguity and discuss them in associative constructions structures. The paper adopts a qualitative paradigm and it is purely descriptive. Data for this study are generated through introspection. This paper will be of great significance to learners of Urhobo language who find it difficult to use words that are pronounced alike but change in meaning when used. It will also serve as a reference material for the teaching and learning of Urhobo in order to enrich the Urhobo vocabulary. Urhobo has wider community and so only the Agbarho, Abraka and Okpe areas would be covered and still retain the authenticity of this work.

Literature review

Onah (2011) studies ambiguity and polysemy in Nsukka dialect cluster in Igbo. The study extensively looks at the operations of both the lexical and structural features of polysemy and ambiguity using the use of contextual theory propounded by L. Wittgenstein in 1956. The study reveals that ambiguity in metaphorical extensions is a culture-specific phenomenon. It also discovers that polysemous word takes a single entry in the dictionary while homographs take different entries. This paper reveals that while the use of ambiguity is sought in some cases, it is despised in others. The study recommends that for effective communication, speakers/writers should use expressions that have the simple meanings as to facilitate speaker/hearer interaction whenever possible. This study is similar to the current study but the difference lies in the language studies.

Udemmadu (2012) examines the issue of ambiguity in the Igbo language. This paper seeks to investigate the causes and then proffer solution to the existing situation using a descriptive method. The findings reveal the ambiguities in the Igbo language arise from homonyms, homophones, homographs and from anaphoric pronouns, dialectal differences, among other things. This work recommends that utterances should be interpreted based on the context of the discourse; that homographs should be tone-marked and that inherent complements should accompany those verbs that need them. The difference with the current study lies in the language studied.

Prezi, Ikekeonwu, Agbedo and Mbah (2013) study ambiguity in the Igbo language, from the perspective of Ero-Ulo speech community, using the inferential model of linguistic communication as a theoretical framework. The paper discovers that the spoken form of ambiguity is disambiguated when written. The paper also identifies lexical and structural

ambiguity. The study reveals that ambiguities exist in the Ero-Ulo speech community. It also reveals the existence of ambiguity in disjoint constructions, metaphors, puns and Wh-relative constructions. This paper focuses on two types of ambiguity but the current studies looks at only lexical ambiguity in Urhobo. The difference lies also in the methodology.

Mohammed (2014) examines elements of ambiguity in the Kanuri language. The study refutes the claim of Gazali and Modu (2010) that structural ambiguity is not a feature of Kanuri semantics. The study identifies three domains within the two major types of the ambiguity i.e. structural and lexical ambiguities. The paper observes that one domain under structure is uncase-marked subject and object in a sentence while the ones under lexis are homonymic and polysemic words. The paper also points out that perhaps, homonymic words are lesser in number than polysemic words. The study further reveals that polysemous words can be found from words that are related to the parts of the body and from those which are not and from institutionalized names of persons and places otherwise known as onomastics. The study concludes by recommending interested researchers to endeavour to go into further research in this field in order to exploit and enrich the field of Kanuri semantics. This study looks at the aspect of lexical ambiguity which is similar to the current study. The difference lies in the language usage.

Ugochukwu (2014) investigates ambiguity in the Igbo language. This study attempts to examine the nature and sources of this device in Igbo. The work identifies major types of ambiguity, their major causes and implications in Igbo were also highlighted. The objectives are to highlight the uses of the devices in communication and also to enable the users of the language detect them in communicative situations using a descriptive research design. The paper finds out that ambiguity is a linguistic condition that is common in Igbo and it occurs as a result of using expressions that have more than one meaning. The paper observes the necessity of bearing the existence of its features in mind in the process of language teaching. The paper finds out three types of ambiguity which include: phonetic, lexical and grammatical ambiguity. The work reveals that the cause of ambiguity is as a result of complications in thoughts. One of the implications observed is that ambiguity gives rise to humorous double meanings. Ugochukwu's (2014) study and the present study are similar because both centre on lexical ambiguity but they differ in that the former centres on the Igbo language whereas the latter focuses on the Urhobo language.

Babarinde (2018) examines lexical ambiguity in Yoruba: its implications for second language learners. The paper observes the manifestation of lexical ambiguity as evidenced in homonyms in Yoruba. The paper observes that in spite of the lexical function and/or phonemicity of tones in meaning specificity, homonymous words requires some mental processing and contextual placement for the selection of the appropriate form adopting the reordered access model proposed by Duffy et al (1988). The paper notices that the prediction of the sense enumeration lexicon approach, namely that all ambiguous words are processes similarly is in direct contrast to the position of reordered approach as seen by the present results that differential processing depending on the type of ambiguity as seen in 'pa' and 'ro' which represent a class of verbs that exhibit strict subcategorisation. This study is similar to the current study but the difference lies in the language studied.

From the works reviewed, it is obvious that works are done mostly in other types of ambiguity. Much attention has not been given to lexical ambiguity especially in the Urhobo language. The gap is what this paper tends to fill, making available materials for learners of Urhobo language. This study is based on description.

Data presentation and analysis

Lexical Ambiguity in Urhobo

Ambiguity is complex in nature. It involves giving a lexical item different interpretation. Lexical ambiguity has to do with lexical items that are spelt and pronounced alike but have different meanings. i.e. it expresses more than one meaning. The ambiguity of an individual word or phrase can be used in different contexts to express two or more different meanings. The lexical ambiguity of a word or phrase pertains to its having more than one meaning in the language to which the word belongs. The context in which an ambiguous word is used often makes it evident which of the meanings is intended. The goal of clear concise communication with the use of language especially Urhobo is that the listener(s) have no misunderstanding about what was meant to be conveyed by the speaker(s).

Lexical ambiguity in Urhobo is mostly seen in homonymous and polysemous words. Homonyms are words that are spelt and pronounce alike but can be used in different context. Also, polysemous words also have multiple meanings. It occurs in words with multiple meanings. In Urhobo, context is very essential when disambiguating words. For instance, one may say *eguono* which can mean 'love' or 'look/want' and *eban* 'fish or nakedness.' The listener may not understand the particular meaning but the context in which the word is used goes a long way to capture meaning. More examples are seen in subsequent sections. Lexical ambiguity involves a lexical item with plausible interpretations. Urhobo, being a tonal language, makes learners to understand and disambiguate words when used. It is important to note that lexical ambiguity in Urhobo consists of both denotative and connotative meaning of words.

Lexical Ambiguity in Urhobo at Word Level

Words in Urhobo that sound and are spelt alike have different meaning. There are instances of lexical ambiguity in Urhobo. Examples include:

	WORD	INTERPRETATION
1.	isọ (HL) isọ (HL)	feaces Nonsense
2.	evun (LL) evun (LL) evun (LL)	Stomach pregnancy in(side)
3.	ẹbe (LL) ẹbe (LL)	leaf Paper

4.	ega (LL) ega (LL)	barren religion/service
5.	ẹkpa (LL) ẹkpa (LL)	fool unripe
6.	guṣoṣo (LL) guṣoṣo (LL)	want/love find, look for
	ẹvwẹ(LL) ẹvwẹ (LL)	goat kolanut
7.	fà(L) fà (L)	translate cane/whip
8.	ẹban (LL) ẹban (LL)	fish nakedness
9.	gbé (H) gbé (H)	dance narrate
10.	ígho (HL) ígho(HL)	money milk teeth (of babies)
11.	ema (LL) ema (LL)	act of measuring moulding
12.	kpare (LH) kpare (LH)	left postpone
13.	hwé (H) hwé (H) hwé (H)	punish kill Break (of glass, bottle)
14.	mú (H) mú (H)	carry arrest
15.	oma (LL) oma (LL)	body/self Private part
16.	oto (HM) oto (HM)	ground meaning
17.	ómamọ (HHM) ómamọ (HHM)	fruit best/special

The data presented above (1-18) show that a lexical item in Urhobo has more than one meaning and these meanings can be denotative or contextual. Tone also helps in the pronunciation of the words. These words have the same tone mark, spelt and pronounced alike but the difference lies in the meanings. This confirms that at the word level or independent constructions, lexical ambiguity exists in the Urhobo language.

Lexical ambiguity at sentential level

This section looks at lexical ambiguity in associative constructions. From the data hereunder, the lexical ambiguous items have the same tone in the examples they occur. The ambiguity is not a product of tone rather that of the occurrence of the lexical ambiguous items in associative constructions.

18. guonọ (LLL)

a. *Ònòmé* *gùònò* *ékpù* *rhó* *ye*
NOM look for bag his
'Onome is looking for his bag.'

b. *Ònòmé* *gùònò* *me*
NOM love me
'Onome loves me.'

19. hwé

a. *Hwé* *ómó* *nà*
Punish child that
'Punish that child!'

b. *Hwé* *èràvwè* *nà*
kill animal that
'Kill that animal!'

20. fá

a. *Òchùkò* *fá* *ómó*
NOM flog child
'Ochuko flogged the child.'

b. *fá* *èbè* *nà* *kè* *mè*
translate book the for me
'Translate the book for me.'

21. ígho

a. *Kẹ* *mẹ* *ígho*
give me money
'Give me money.'

b. *ọmọ* *teté* *nà* *g-ígho*
child small that milk-teeth
'The baby is growing milk teeth.'

22. gbé

a. *Úfuomá gbé gha*
NOM dance
'Ufuoma danced.'

b. *Òchùkò* *vu* *Úfuomá gbíkú* *gbe*
NOM and NOM narrate story
'Ochuko and Ufuoma narrate a story.'

23. *ísọ*
a. *ísọ* *su* *me*
shit worry me
'I want to defecate.'
- b. *óshárè* *nà* *tá* *ísọ*
Man the talk nonsense
'The man is saying nonsense.'
24. *ega*
a. *Àyè* *nà* *egan*
Woman the barren
'The woman is barren.'
- b. *Ega* *mé* *yòvwírín*
religion me good
'My religion is good.'
25. *ótọ*
a. *ótọ* *òtá* *nà* *yòwírín*
meaning talk the good
'The meaning of the word is good.'
- b. *ọ̀nà̀nà* *ótọ*
this ground
'This is land.'
26. *òmà*
a. *Rùrhò* *òmà* *vwe*
cover body you
'Cover your body.'
- b. *Rùrhò* *òmà* *vwe*
cover image you
'Close your private part.'
27. *èvùn*
a. *Ésè* *mú* *èvùn*
NOM carry stomach
'Ese is pregnant.'
- b. *èvùn* *mia* *mé*
stomach pain me
'I have stomach upset.'

From the data presented above, it is clearly seen that a lexical item that is pronounced and spelt alike is used in different contexts such as *éguóno* 'love, want', *èbàn* 'fish, nakedness' and *òmà* 'body, private part.' The examples above (19-28) show that even in associative constructions, same lexical items can be ambiguous in different contexts of usage.

Conclusion

This paper examines lexical ambiguity in Urhobo. The paper identifies lexical ambiguity both at word and sentence level. The study reveals that lexical ambiguity in Urhobo involves a lexical item with the same spelling and pronunciation but has different interpretations. A word in Urhobo may be pronounced alike but has different meaning. In Urhobo, homonymous and polysemous words are lexical ambiguities. The paper discovers that lexical ambiguity is prevalent mostly among nouns and verbs, although, there are few instances of lexical ambiguity in adjectives. It also shows that lexical ambiguity in Urhobo is possible at independent and associative constructions as seen in the analysis. Lexical ambiguity in Urhobo is denotative and contextual (i.e. context-sensitive).

In conclusion, ambiguity generates numerous interpretations. A word may mean differently when used in different contexts. Homonymous and polysemous words in Urhobo are typical examples of lexical ambiguity. A native speaker exercises his competence when identifying ambiguous words. Urhobo language is one of the languages that have not been given much attention especially in the field of semantics. There is enough room for further research in semantics. The researcher recommends that more researchers should venture into the relationship between ambiguity and idiomatic expressions in the Urhobo language.

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