

Disambiguating Ambiguous Constructions in Ngwà Ìgbò

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Abstract

This paper examines ambiguity in Ngwà dialect of Ìgbò, spoken in South-eastern Nigeria. Ambiguity is a situation whereby a single lexical item or phrase in a construction is construed to have more than one meaning. The aim is to identify and analyse lexical and structural elements in the dialect which lend a construction to multiple interpretations with a view to disambiguating them. Data were elicited through questionnaires and interviews from six competent Ngwà native speakers who were within the age range of 45-60 years. The participants cut across different groups: community and religious leaders, titled persons, as well as male and female politicians. Simple descriptive method of analysis was adopted using Leipzig Glossing Convention and inter-linear glossing. The article examines lexical items in Ngwà verbal communication that are ambiguous. The result shows that context and word order, among other factors, in most cases are responsible for the construction of ambiguity. For adequate resolution, it is suggested that the meaning of a construction be sought outside the context. The study is useful to language teachers, students and curriculum designers as it greatly enhances how language is most effectively taught and learnt.

Keywords: Ambiguity; Lexeme; Structure; Disambiguation; Construction; Ngwà

Introduction

A female nurse wanted to administer some drugs to a patient in the hospital. Eventually, she noticed that the boy's mother was closer, attending to him. She then requested the woman to administer the medicine to her son, instead. But, while trying to hand over the drugs to the woman, she asked: *Amà m na aka gị dị ọchā* (I am sure that your hands are clean). At the utterance of these words, everybody around in the hospital was startled. Eyes

flashed from one corner to the other and mouths were agape in wonder. Some people who could not contain the shock started murmuring to one another. Others just looked away and laughed it off. One would wonder: what is the reason for these different swift reactions? The reason is simple. The statement is ambiguous; it is loaded with many interpretations and meanings. *Aka gị dī ọchā* ('for your hand to be clean') in Ìgbò linguistic culture and milieu is very ambiguous because it conjures different pictures in the hearers' minds. The statement can be interpreted from the point of view of hygiene or one having sinister intention. Thus, the socio-cultural implication of *aka idī ọchā* ('a hand to be clean') prompted the hearers to react differently.

Understandably, the goal of every human communication in any of its forms (spoken, sign or written) is for the interlocutors to understand each other. But, it turns out sometimes that interlocutors are not always at par in processing the same meaning or understanding of what is communicated in the same way not because they do not hear the message properly, but because the utterance conveys more than one interpretation which creates difficulty for the hearer to come to terms with the actual meaning of the expression. In a situation where the listener is unable to adequately process the information conveyed by the speaker, the result is that interpersonal communication becomes automatically and seriously impaired. Ndimele (2007, 188) notes that "when people share meanings, it means that communication is in effect, when the sharing of meaning does not take place due to linguistic or non-linguistic reasons, communication becomes ineffective". One factor that is responsible for ineffective communication is the presence of ambiguity in sentence interpretation.

Ambiguity, in linguistics, is a phenomenon whereby a word, phrase or sentence has more than one meaning, which leaves it open to more than one interpretation. Ambiguous expression is a problem because it hinders accurate language processing and smooth communication. It can occur at the phonological, lexical, phrasal or sentence levels. According to Akmajian et al. (2008, 365), "the ability to detect ambiguity is crucial in the communicative process and successful communication can depend on both speaker and hearer recognising the same meaning for a potentially ambiguous word". However, most often, linguistic meaning and speaker meaning are observed to be different.

The difference between linguistic or speaker meaning (literal meaning of an expression) and what the hearer feels or makes of the speaker meaning (contextual use or understanding) has been a problem in the study of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. Actually, most of what happens in interpersonal communication depends on the understanding people have of the words or phrases which is in the piece of information

being communicated. Ndimele (2007, 153) reports that where “there is close knit correspondence between linguistic meaning and speaker-hearer meaning, communication is said to be smooth and effective”. However, where disparity or difference occurs between what is communicated and what is perceived by the hearer, then one may think of vagueness or ambiguity. It is only when the receiver perceives the same ideas as the speaker intends that effective communication can be said to have taken place.

Speakers use language in different forms to achieve different communication effects. Hence, language as a tool for communicating information, feelings and ideas among human beings can also be manipulated or used to hide information, alter people’s intention and behaviours, create confusion or mislead people. So, in communicating, a person may employ words, phrases or utterances in an ambiguous manner depending on the information they want to put across, what they want the hearer to grasp or the context in which they speak or write. When an expression can be interpreted in more than one way and each of the interpretations is meaningful then, ambiguity is likely involved. An ambiguous expression is subject to a number of interpretations depending on the speaker, hearer and context. It is in this regard that meaning is said to be an unstable and changing phenomenon. For Ndimele (2007, 2), “meaning is a chameleon changing the colour of its effect with a change of speaker, hearer, context or setting”.

This study is as a result of classroom experiences where the researcher discovered that many students are unaware of linguistic ambiguity and its impact on language processing. To assist the Ìgbò language users, then, the study sets out to discuss ambiguity as found in a variety of Ìgbò called Ngwà. The work discusses ambiguity from two perspectives: lexical (caused by a particular lexical item) and structural (resulting from structural relations of words in a sentence) ambiguity. The goal is to determine the class of words that are lexically ambiguous; find out what word or phrases cause ambiguity in Ngwà sentence constructions and classify the dominant type of ambiguity in Ngwà communication system. The study is relevant because the presence of lexical ambiguity in a construction creates room for multiple interpretation of a sentence, thus, giving the reader or listener the option to choose the meaning which suites their interest. Having a good grasp of how ambiguities operate in a construction equips the writer with the needed skill to employ the same words (homonymy) in different positions or positively manipulate them to refer to different things in the same sentence. Making use of ambiguity or ambiguous constructions can lead to unintentional humour when words are not considered carefully enough. Again, the study will assist students to understand and improve their ability to

detect ambiguous sentences in both spoken and written language. As an attempt to disambiguate Ìgbò structures, the study aims to provide learners with skills for better language processing and equip teachers to develop a more facile and lucid teaching methodology.

Literature review

Ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon that is studied within the subfield of semantics, which itself is the study of “the meaning of words and sentences in language” (Ndimele, 2007:1). It is a situation in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation. Thus, ambiguous sentences give room for alternative interpretations to the same piece of language. A grammatical structure is ambiguous if it can be effective in several ways. Therefore, an ambiguous expression can best be considered as the presence of two or more distinct meanings in an utterance. The two interpretations could be as a result of lexical, semantic, syntactic or pragmatic inflections; and nothing in the sentence favours a meaning over the other.

An ambiguous expression can either be intentional or unintentional. Intentional ambiguity refers to a situation whereas speaker uses flowery language or make statements he/she knows that he/she is not going to be held liable and responsible. Most politicians make bogus campaign promises simply to woo the electorate and win their votes, and never with the intention to fulfil them. According to Awad (2017, 24), “intentional ambiguity can be used to create satire and add humour to the text”. Unintentional ambiguity, on the other hand, is when an utterance or sentence creates difficulty in the hearer’s processing of the message. It is considered as a flaw of one’s communication skills because it can be the root of misunderstanding. The background story at the beginning of this article is a good example of unintentional ambiguity. The difficulty in processing the meaning of the statement is seen in the different understandings and reactions that trailed it.

Scholars likes Lyons (1977), Ejele (1996), Ndimele (1999), Fromkin, et al. (2007) have identified two basic types of ambiguity, lexical and structural. Other studies such as Pryser (1984) and Marciver (2004) identify three types of ambiguity in human language which are phonological, lexical and phrasal. For Ejele (1996, 129), “ambiguity arises when a word or sentence has ‘more than one meaning; when it relates to a word, it is called lexical semantics; when it relates to a phrase, it is called phrasal ambiguity and when it relates to a sentence, it is called sentential ambiguity”.

Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is a phenomenon whereby a word has multiple meanings in a sentence. It takes place when a single word has more than one meaning, or when a word can be interpreted in more than one sense (Dayal, 2004). The ambiguous word is such that it obscures the writer's intent and confuses the reader. According to Omega (2013), "lexical ambiguity comes to play when one word can mean several things". In this way, it is similar to polysemy because one stretch of utterance is given more than one meaning (Ndimele, 1997). There are two reasons for multiple meanings of a word. The first one is if the word is a homonym and, the second is if it is polysemous.

Homonymy

This is when two or more distinct lexemes with the same sound and morphological shape or form have different meanings. Crystal (1998, 185) defines it as "a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but differ in meaning". According to Ullman (1962), the commonest cause of homonymy and more specifically homophones is 'converging sound development'. Two or more lexemes which have different and unrelated meanings may coincide in the spoken and sometimes written language, giving rise to homonymy in the language. For instance, *pen* (where animals are kept) and *pen* (a writing instrument), *bark* (sound made by a dog) and *bark* (of tree), *book* (something to read) and *book* (the act of making a reservation) are homonyms. The word *bear* in figure (1) can refer to many ideas, like:

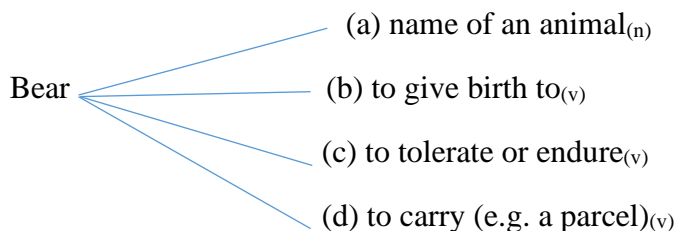


Fig. 1

Some authors make a distinction between homograph and homophones. Homographs (the same written word) are words which are spelled in the same way but which differ both in pronunciation and in meaning. Some examples of homographs in the English language are:

*lead*_(v)/li:d/(to go in front)*vslead*_(n)/led/ (a type of metal), *wind*_(n)/wind/ (a natural element)*vswind*_(v)/waɪnd/ (to adjust a clock). On the other hand, homophones (the same sound) are words which have the same pronunciation but different meanings. Examples of homophones in the English language are: write /raɪt/, rite /raɪt/ right /raɪt/; sight /saɪt/, cite /saɪt/, site /saɪt/; through /θru: /, true /tru: /; met /met/, mate /meɪt/; tail /teɪl/, tale /teɪl/, etc.

Homonymy can be likened to phonological ambiguity which is a situation where a lexical item has the same sound pattern or pronunciation, but differs semantically. The following sentences in examples 1 and 2 contain lexical ambiguous words (written in bold letter).

1. The **table** is fascinating.
2. She went to the **bank**.

In example (1), the word that causes ambiguity is “table”, while in example (2), it is “bank”. The possible interpretations of the ambiguous words in each sentence are as shown in figures 2 and 3 below.

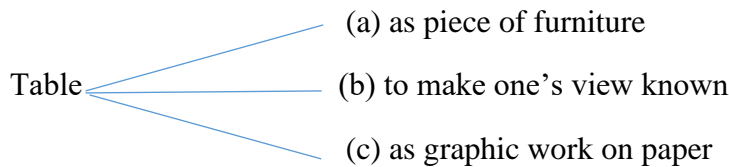


Fig. 2

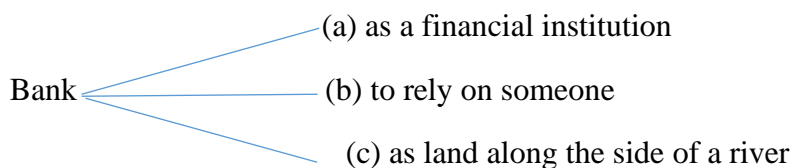


Fig. 3

Lexical ambiguity is more common than structural ambiguity. Lexical semantics poses one of the problems in word and sentence recognition. Another lexical ambiguity to be discussed is polysemy.

Polysemy

Polysemy refers to the multiple senses of the same phonological word. It is a phenomenon whereby a single word is associated with two or several related meanings. It can, also, be described as a meaning relation whereby a single lexical item has more than one meaning and, consequently, more than one referent. An important feature of polysemy is that the several meanings of a polysemous word must be related, that is, they must belong to a common semantic field. Semantic field refers to “a set of lexemes which cover a certain conceptual domain and which bear certain specifiable relations to one another” (Lehrer, 1985, 376).

For instance, the word *head* in figure (4) is polysemous in the sense that all its several meanings belong to the same semantic field or point to the centre or starting point of anything. According to Ndimele (2007, 61), a polysemous word has one meaning out of the several meanings that is central, while the other senses are mere figurative or metaphorical extensions of the core meaning.

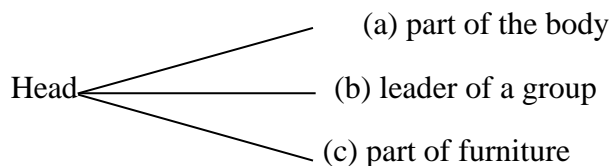


Fig. 4

Omego (2003) further explains that most linguists also see polysemy as a necessary feature of language because of the economy and flexibility it affords language. She observes that “were it not possible to attach several senses to a single lexeme, human memory would have been burdened with the onerous task of possessing separate terms for every conceivable subject we engage in discourse”.

Structural ambiguity

Structural ambiguity is a situation whereby a phrase is interpreted in more than one sense due to structural relation with other words in a sentence. Structural ambiguity takes place, when a particular construction can be interpreted in more than one way because of the way the individual words that make up the expression are structured. In more apt terms, structural ambiguity comes to the fore when one word modifies another in a construction. Thus, when a sequence of words in a construction can be interpreted in more than one way, we say syntactic or structural ambiguity is in place. Ndimele (2007, 83) describes structural ambiguity as “the type of ambiguity which arises when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association”. What the above insights point is the fact that the meaning of a word is slippery, unstable and changing. One major factor that exerts serious influence on the meaning of a word is context. It all means that the meaning of some words can only be gleaned by reference to the environment in which the word or phrase occurs in a sentence. The following sentences in 3 and 4 are examples of structural ambiguity in English.

3. “Flying planes can be dangerous”.

This famous expression attributed to the linguist, Chomsky (1975), can be interpreted in at least three different ways. The ambiguous expression here, however, is the adjectival phrase “flying planes”. The statement can mean that (a) planes in motion can be dangerous; (b) the act of flying planes or piloting is a dangerous activity; (c) boarding or travelling by planes is a risky venture.

4. “A mother beat up her daughter because she was drunk.

The ambiguity in this construction is the subordinate conjunction or adverbial phrase “because she was drunk”. The difficulty in understanding the above expression is the phrase “she was drunk”. If the phrase refers to the woman, it means a mother beat up her daughter because she (the woman) was under the influence of alcohol. If it refers to the daughter then, the girl was beaten up by her mother because she (the daughter) was intoxicated. Some scholars have carried out research works on ambiguity in different languages. Onah (2011) studies ambiguity and polysemy in Ìgbò with focus on Nsukka dialect cluster. The findings reveal that ambiguity in metaphorical extensions is a culture-specific phenomenon. It was discovered that ‘relatedness’ is a criterion in determining

whether a word is polysemous or homonymous. The study, also, revealed that a polysemous word takes a single entry in the dictionary while homographs take different entries. She further recognises two types of ambiguity which are lexical and structural ambiguities. The other type discussed was phonetic or tonal ambiguity which she says disappears as soon as the expression is reduced to writing. She also asserts that the grammaticality of a sentence does not in any way keep such a sentence immune from being ambiguous.

The work agrees with the fact that metaphorical extensions are prone to more than one interpretation because they always have their literal and figurative meanings. This feature is a language universal phenomenon because it operates in many languages other than Ìgbò. It was discovered that in the Nsukka group of dialects, ambiguity as a result of inter-clausal pronominal reference does not arise. This is because in the dialect, there is a difference between co-referentiality and a disjoint reference.

For structural ambiguity, she provides the example below to show ambiguity in questions.

5. Ònyé nwe éwú na-ézúzu ezuzu?
 Q own goat AUX-prf.silly BCN?
 ‘Who owns the goat that is unreasonable?’

According to Mbah (2008), the *wh*-relative embedded in the sentence may refer to the subject of the matrix clause or to the verb complement which in turn serves as the subject of the embedded clause. In other words “na-ezuzuezuzu” (‘being silly’ or ‘unreasonable’) may refer to either the owner of the goat or the goat itself.

6. Kedu onye nwe nwa a ụkwụ adighi?
 Q person own child this leg prf.be.NEG
 ‘Who has this limping child?’

There are also two possible interpretations of the example in (6), thus: Who has this limping child? Or who is this limping child? Akinola (2016) examines ambiguity in Kolokuma and identifies two types in the language namely lexical and structural ambiguity. She treats homophones, homonymy, polysemy and homographs as the sources of lexical ambiguities in Kolokuma. Structurally, she avers that ambiguity results, not because of words having multiple interpretations, but as a result of the structure having more than one interpretation.

She states that the word **bái** means ‘crack’, ‘beat’ and ‘daybreak’, a clear case of homonymy. Example:

7. Ari u **báido**
‘you him beat PAST’
‘You have beaten him’

8. Eríivín **báido**
‘he palm nut crack PAST’
‘He has cracked palm nut’

9. Deín**báido**
‘night break PAST’
‘It is daybreak’

3. Methodology

The study adopts oral interview and participant observation methods of data collection. For the interviews, the researcher constructs ten items from which interpretations and information about ambiguity were sought from six Ngwa native speakers who were between 45-60 years of age. The participants were chosen from across different groups: community and religious leaders, titled persons, as well as male and female politicians. During the interview, the participants were asked to explain certain ambiguous constructions. The data collected are presented in tables, using simple descriptive method of analysis. Each table contains two columns. The first one is the data itself, with a morpheme-to-morpheme gloss. The second column is the possible English interpretations. All the interpretations are given and numbered appropriately as the case may be. The first interpretation is morpheme-by-morpheme, while the second (or third) is the semantic or metaphorical interpretation. All the tones, namely: high tone, low tone and down-stepped tone are marked.

Data presentation and analysis

Phonological ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity is when a lexeme has the same form (spelling) and sound (pronunciation), but can be used to refer to different entities. A phonologically homonymous word is a feature that is present in many languages of the world. Consider the following data in (10).

10. Íké di íké
 N be hard
 ‘Íké is difficult’

The single lexeme *íké* in (10) is an example of a homonym. The word has the same morphological form, phonological sound and phonetic representation, but it can be interpreted here to refer to a number of senses. In fact, the occurrence of the word, *íké* in the construction in (10) conjures phonological ambiguity. The first lexeme, *íké* is a personal name and refers to the subject, NP of the sentence. In the second instance, the word can be used as an adjective to mean ‘strong’ or ‘difficult’ or as another NP. However, the ambiguity in this sentence can be disambiguated pragmatically, that is by making reference to the context where it is used or the environment of occurrence. It can, equally be resolved graphologically.

Again, the sentence in (11) provides another instance of phonological ambiguity.

11. Ógè òchòrò íké

(a) Ógè needs strength
 (b) Ógè is looking for Íké

Fig. 5

The lexeme *íké* in the above data in (11) can be interpreted either as an adjectival phrase as in (a) or taken to refer to a human person that is a personal name. Thus, it is either that the subject NP, Ógè is seeking power or that he/she is looking for an individual that goes by the name *Íké*. In what follows, the paper will provide examples of lexical ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity

Table 1

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Ónyèh-húrú úzómā zì nwánné yá Pers prf-see.pst road good show brother 2sg	a) Whoever sees <i>úzómā</i> should inform his brother. b) Whoever sees <i>something good</i> should inform his brother.

The lexical item that causes ambiguity in Table 1 is the word *úzómā*. The imprecision stems from the fact that the word *úzómā* has multiple meanings in the construction, which means that it can be interpreted or understood in more than one sense. The first interpretation in (a) is likened to a situation whereby a certain person by name, *Úzómā* is missing and his sibling is looking for him. So, the speaker announces to his listeners and requests that if anyone sees him (*Úzómā*), they should alert his brother. In the second interpretation in, the lexeme *úzómā* is understood to mean “something good or beneficial”. The Ìgbò culture and idea of community living encourages those who are doing well in life to assist their less privileged ones in their struggles to survive in life. Thus, the interpretation here is couched in the Ìgbò understanding and philosophy of fraternity, communality and *ónyé ághàlà nwánné yá* (i.e. being one’s brother’s keeper) whereby a person is required to carry his brothers and sisters along or encouraged to help his brethren.

Another instance of lexical ambiguity is seen in the next data in Table 2, where the lexeme *íhúómā* is construed to have more than one interpretation.

Table 2

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Íhúómā ò-gí í-kpó ú N prf-will.FUTprf-call 2sg	a) <i>Ihuomā</i> will call you. b) You will be <i>favoured</i> or you will meet good luck.

The ambiguity in Table 2 above is as a result of the presence of the word *íhúómā*, which can be interpreted in, at least, two senses. In the first interpretation in (a), the word occurs as personal name thus, referring to an entity, a noun. Here, the speaker is informing the addressee or listener that someone whose name is *íhúómā* will call or invite him over. In other words, the hearer should expect to receive a call from *íhúómā*. In the second interpretation in (b), the word *íhúómā* means ‘favour’ and it is understood in this context to mean a wish. Under this interpretation, the sentence is saying that the addressee will be “favoured” or “meet good luck”.

In the following data in Table 3, the word, *áhúhú* poses difficulty, in other words, constitutes ambiguity in clearly understanding of the construction.

Table 3

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Áhúhú é-jú-lá m ónū	a) <i>Maggots</i> have filled my mouth.
	Maggot prf-fill-suf-FT 1sg mouth	b) I am beset with <i>hardship</i> .

Sometimes, a piece of food may be infested with maggots because it has decayed. If a person is not careful, he may feast on the maggots when eating. Hence, the first interpretation that *áhúhú* ‘maggots have filled my mouth’ is a semantic or literal understanding of the statement. However, a figurative interpretation is, also, possible and this is what is playing out in (b), where the speaker wants the reader to know that *áhúhú* ‘suffering’ has overwhelmed him/her. In other words, the construction is portraying the speaker as beset with too much suffering and difficulties.

The study further presents some data to show that structural ambiguity is also a linguistic experience in sentence constructions and understanding in Ngwà dialect of Ìgbò as being discussed.

Structural ambiguity

The following data are cases of structural ambiguity whereby some elements (phrases) in the construction hamper a clearer understanding of the whole sentence. It is important to emphasise that structural ambiguity arises not from the range of meanings of single words,

but from the relationship between the words and clauses of a sentence, and the sentence structure underlying the word order therein. Consider the example in Table 4 below:

Table 4

	Data	Possible interpretations
	<p>Ọnyén nwé mmā à ísí mgbáwárā? Qw own knife DEM head break.FT</p>	<p>a) Who owns this knife with <i>broken handle</i>?</p> <p>b) The person that owns this knife is <i>insane</i>.</p>

The data in Table 4 is a statement in the form of a question construction. The meaning of the sentence is confusing due to the use of an ambiguous expression, namely, the phrase *ísí mgbáwárā* ('broken handle or insane'). This phrase has two different interpretations, depending on which part of the sentence it is qualifying. Firstly, it can refer to the direct object complement of the construction, *mmā à* "this knife", or the subject of the whole construction, that is the person who owns the knife, as in (b). If the focus of the message is on the first interpretation, it means that the knife has a broken handle (or head). However, if the sentence is about the main subject of the construction, it means that the person who owns the knife has broken head or he has mental issues, that is to say, he is insane.

In the following data in Table 5, the ambiguity is as a result of the information conveyed by the prepositional phrase *l'ísíú* in relation to other phrases in the sentence.

Table 5

	Data	Possible interpretations
	<p>Á-gà m íńú ábá mmáyá átō l'ísí ú Prf.will 1sg drink bottle wine three prep.head 2sg.</p>	<p>a) I will drink three bottles of beer <i>on your head</i>.</p> <p>b) I will drink three bottles of beer <i>in your name</i>.</p>

The phrase *l'ísíú* has, at least, two basic understandings in the construction. The interpretation in (a) is the literal interpretation and, it means "on the head of" the addressee. On the other hand, the interpretation in (b) is a metaphorical one and it means "on behalf

of’ the listener. In this later sense, it means that the speaker will drink three bottles of wine in the name of the addressee who may be expected to pay for them. There is, equally, a third possible meaning, whereby the speaker is saying that he will drink three bottles of wine to celebrate his friend’s achievements.

It is only by a careful reading of the text in which a construction of this type appears that the reader will be able to grasp which interpretation is the most suitable. Consider another example of structural ambiguity as in Table 6 below:

Table 6

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Úchē nà-émé áká ábúó	a) Uche is doing <i>double hands</i> .
	N Aux-do.FT hand two	b) Uche is <i>a thief</i> .

Every normal person possesses two hands and, a person can use either of the hands to carry out an activity. However, the data in Table 6 has other implied meaning among Ngwa Ìgbò speakers. The other implied meaning stems from the presence of the quantifier noun phrase *ákáábúó* which causes ambiguity in understanding the entire construction. The quantifier phrase *ákáábúó* (or the VP *íméákáábúó*) can be interpreted literally to mean “double hands” as in (a) or metaphorically to mean that *Úchē* is “a thief” as in (b). In other words, it means either that *Úchē* is ambidextrous i.e. a dexterous person or he is a thief.

Going further, it would be observed that the sentence in Table 7 poses problem of understanding due to the presence of a phrase in the construction, which could be given more than one interpretation.

Table 7

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Éméká á-júlá ní	a) Éméká <i>has refused to eat</i> .
	N prf-refuse.pst food	b) Éméká <i>is dead</i> .

The verb phrase *íjúnrí* literally means ‘to refuse to eat something’. A person may decide not to eat anything for some reasons that may border on health, fashion, religion, lifestyle, etc. Normally, this attitude does not cause the raising of the eyebrow by anyone. However, the meaning in the above statement is more than this surface interpretation or

understanding. It goes beyond the normal practice of refusing to eat as in (a), to include a metaphorical meaning as in (b) that the person ‘is dead’. The ambiguity in this sentence stems from the presence of the verb phrase, á-júlá ńrī ‘refuse to eat’.

The following data in Table 8 suffers the same fate as the foregoing examples given above on structural ambiguity.

Table 8

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Ézē á-gbáálá Éméká l’ánwū N prf-shot.pst N prep.sun	a) Eze made Éméká to <i>be under the sun</i> . b) Ézē has <i>exposed</i> Éméká.

The sun serves as an instrument for drying up things like washed clothes, fruits or reducing the turgidity or hardness of some elements like oil. In the interpretation in (a), therefore, the sentence is understood to mean that Ézē caused Emeka to be under the sun, probably as a way to punish him. On the other hand, the interpretation in (b) is saying that Ézē disclosed something that Éméká did which nobody is aware of. The ambiguity in this sentence is caused by the presence of a verb phrase which co-exists with a nominal element or “the bound cognate noun” (BCN) – ágbáálál’ánwū, at the surface structure (Emenanjo, 1978:131).

Table 9:

	Data	Possible interpretations
	Égō á-múólá nwá ó dī ímé yá N prf-birth.pst child 1sg be inside it	a) Égō has been <i>delivered of a baby</i> . b) Égō has <i>accomplished her wish</i> .

The data in Table 9, as it is the case with the others, can be interpreted in two different senses. The phrase or structure that causes ambiguity in understanding the sentence is, á-múólá nwá in the first interpretation in (a), which is the semantic or literal understanding of the statement, it means that Égō (+HUMAN, -MALE) was pregnant at a point in time. But, right now, she has been delivered of the baby. Put simply, it is saying that Égō has given birth to a child. The second interpretation in (b) refers to a situation where a person,

by the name, *Égō* has been nursing some feelings which she kept away from public knowledge. Then, something happens and she visibly lets the cat out of the bag.

Disambiguating ambiguous constructions

From the data presented above, it is observed that certain constructions in Ngwà are ambiguous due to the presence of lexical items or phrases. However, ambiguous constructions need to be disambiguated to make any piece of information accessible to the reader. To disambiguate ambiguity, one needs to properly identify the word or phrase that is ambiguous in a construction. This involves asking the question about the theme or subject matter of the entire expression. In other words, what is the main theme contained in the sentence or the import of the construction? Another way is to look for the head word. The head word is the most important part of the sentence that carries the central meaning or message of the expression. In the following section, efforts are made to identify which words or phrases create ambiguity in a construction and the linguistic tools deployed in disambiguating them.

From the data presented, the lexical item that constituted ambiguity in the data in (10) is *íké*. This singular word, with the same form and sound, is used (or understood) in at least three senses as: a personal name, strength, or difficulty. The word *Íké* in Ngwà setting is a personal name, usually, associated with the male child. Therefore, *Íké* is a noun phrase. The same word can, also, be used as an adjectival phrase to describe other ideas or a person's quality like strength, in which case we say *Úchē siri íké* meaning that a person whose name is *Úchē* is strong. In the third and final instance, *íké* is used to describe a situation as hard or something that is difficult. For instance, *úlé áhù siri íké* 'the exam was difficult'. The lexical item that causes ambiguity in each of the construction in Table 1 is: *úzómā*. Actually, it is difficult to determine the theme of this construction. However, we can apply some linguistic tools to disambiguate the construction.

The word, *úzómā* in all the interpretations or meanings in (a) and (b) is a noun phrase. It is the head word about which the whole construction is concerned with, in each case. This NP is a source of ambiguity in the sentences because of the position it occupies in the expressions. The sentence in Table 1 can be disambiguated morphologically by capping the initial letter of the word *Úzómā*. Usually, personal names in Ngwà dialect begin with a capital letter. In this way, then, the reader understands that the word is a noun, it is a personal name and, therefore, refers to a human being or person. Going further, a closer

look at the word *úzóṁā* shows that it is a compound word, made up of two parts. The two components that make up the word *úzóṁā* can be graphologically written independently as, *úzó*(road, path, or way)+*ṁā*(good). A synthesis of the two components results in the phrase “good path”. Thus, the adjective *ṁā* ‘good’ functions as an attribute of *úzó* referring figuratively to *íhéṁā* that is ‘something good’. Hence, *úzóṁā* in the second sense means ‘good path’ or ‘something rewarding’ or ‘something good’.

Finally, the sentence can also be disambiguated pragmatically by considering the context in which the utterance was made. In this case, the listener or reader will rely on the preceding discussions or immediate environment or circumstance of the communicators. Notwithstanding, both interpretations are correct, acceptable and conventional ways of conveying a message in Ngwà dialect. However, by way of making a linguistic choice or judgement, the more popular interpretation is (b). This meaning is preferred to that in (a) because of the word arrangement and context in which the ambiguous word appeared. With this interpretation, the more standard and preferred meaning of the sentence becomes *ónyé húrú íhé dí ṁṁā mée kà nwánné yá mára*. This is a more conventional understanding of the expression in Ngwà Ìgbò communication system. Another way to put it is: “*gósí nwánné gí úzóṁā*”. Our finding reveals, however, that to a larger extent, both the literal and metaphorical interpretations of a structurally ambiguous statement have equal truth value. For instance, parents give the name *Úzóṁā* to their children to express the idea that the road they had trodden (maybe, their marriage experience or the mother’s experience during childbirth) is good, rewarding or profitable. Thus, *úzó* (road, route, and path) + *ṁā* (good, beneficial, rewarding, and profitable), whether as a personal name or used to describe an experience refers to something beneficial or rewarding. This analysis can also be extended to the other sentence constructions in Table 3 and 4.

Going further, the study observes that some ambiguities resulted from the relationship between words and phrases in a sentence. For instance, in Table 4, *ísí ṁgbáwárā* is ambiguous because it can refer to the direct object complement of the construction, or the subject of the entire sentence. Normally, some knives (especially, machetes) are made with wooden handles. Woods, like other manufactured things, have a limited life span. Hence, it is observed that after sometimes, the wooden head of a knife will begin to tear and wear. Hence, we talk of *ṁmāísí ṁgbáwárā* ‘a knife with a broken head’. However, in Ngwà communication system, a person who exhibits some unusual or queer character can be described as *ónyéísí ṁgbáwárā* ‘a person who has lost his cool’. It is a metaphor for saying that the person is insane or mad. Consider another example in Table 7. The verb phrase,

ájúlá ñrī, which is interpreted as “refused to eat” and “dead” connote the same thing. Normally, we eat food to stay alive, active and healthy. But, when a person refuses to eat, he will likely grow weak and if it is protracted, the person may die. A dead person cannot eat anything. From the data studied, the study observes that the class of nouns constituted ambiguity 4 times, followed by the verb class (3), quantifier phrase class has (1), while prepositions command (1).

Conclusion

This article investigates ambiguity in the Ngwà dialect of Ìgbò, as a phenomenon in which a lexical item or phrase in a construction lends itself to multiple interpretations, which, at times, leaves the reader/listener confused on which one to accept. In this study, it discovers that ambiguity in Ngwà dialect can take different bents like, phonological, lexical and structural. The data presented reveal that different word classes trigger ambiguity in Ngwà dialect of Ìgbò, such as nouns, verbs, quantifiers, prepositional phrase, etc. However, from the data presented and analysed, it was observed that the class of noun causes more ambiguity in the dialect than any other lexical item, followed by the verb class. This study has shown that having a good grasp of how certain words like, homonymy, polysemy, etc. operate in a sentence, is very important in properly understanding a language. It is recommended that language teachers and curriculum planners should be conscious of the appearance or presence of ambiguous structures to aid learners (especially L₂) grapple with the problems they pose in the dialect in particular and the Ìgbò language in general.

Abbreviations: 1sg = first person; 2SG= second person singular; AUX= auxiliary verb; BCN = bound cognate noun; DEM = demonstrative pronoun; FT = factitive; FUT = future tense; N = personal name; PST= past; PERS = person; PRF = prefix; PREP = preposition; QW = question word.

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