

Lexical Semantics and Word Formation in Ngwa Dialect of Igbo

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Abstract: This study examines aspects of word formation and lexical semantics of Ngwa dialect in Igbo language, with the aim of identifying the processes of word formation which include affixation, suffixation, predication and duplication, interfixation, and their meanings. The study adopts descriptive linguistics method, which is based on describing a language in terms of its current form. The study adopts Rochelle Lieber Lexical Semantic Framework (LSF). This theory is concerned with the study of word-formation processes and its semantic implication. The data used were obtained from primary sources via interviews with natives of Ngwa, while some of the data were obtained from secondary sources such as textbooks and journal articles. Through an extensive analysis of lexical items in Ngwa dialect, this study reveals that word formation and meanings in Ngwa dialect are derived and formed contextually, lexically, literally/literarily, and through connotations/denotations, and this has important implication for our understanding of language acquisition and development, in the sense that it is through these processes that dialects and essentially languages develop. The study concludes that due to the word formation processes present in Ngwa dialect, it has enabled users to construct new word expression and meanings out of pre-existing lexically simpler expression, and providing the large amount of vocabulary available in the dialect.

Keywords: Dialect, Lexical, Morphology, Semantics, Word formation.

1.1 Background to the study

Word formation and Lexical semantics are aspects of linguistics studies have generated a lot of interest among linguists. All words have form and meaning (see Imu, & Ejobee 2021). Historically, lexical innovations are naturally-occurring linguistic phenomena and, therefore, they are unstoppable. This is because language as a social fact is easily influenced by societal events that exert influence on communities as a whole, hence, lexical creativity, that is our ability to create and understand new words is not uncommon but a prevalent practice across different periods of human history, allowing people to reflect their interactions and real-world experiences through language (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021).

Lexical semantics and word formation are aspects of linguistics studies which has generated a lot of interest among linguists. In any study of natural languages of human being, words, among other thing, have special position: it have both meaning and form (Lyons, 1995). In the lexicon of any language where all lexical items are stored, they are applied to word formation processes in the language and its variations (dialects). The meanings attached to these words are neither static nor exhaustive in content. It keeps enlarging and changing because language itself is organic.

This study examines aspects of the lexical semantics and word formation of Ngwa dialect in Igbo language, with the aim of identifying the processes of word formation including affixation, suffixation, predication and duplication, interfixation, and their meanings. The study adopts descriptive linguistics method, which is based on describing a language in terms of its current form. The data used were obtained from primary sources via interviews with natives of Ngwa, while some of the data were obtained from secondary sources such textbooks and journal articles. The findings of this study have important implications for our understanding of language acquisition and development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual definitions

This section of the study is concerned with the operational conceptualization of lexical semantics and word formation.

Wollacott (2023) defines lexical semantics as the study of the meanings of words. As well as the simple meaning of a lexical unit, lexical semantics studies how a word represents the meaning it conveys. In this sense, it studies the word's existence as a whole. While grammar is picked up as a child, an individual can expand his or her lexicography throughout his or her life.

MacLaury (2022) states that that lexical semantics is the analysis of linguistic meaning among words, affixes, and stock phrases, especially of the semantic relations that integrate such lexical items into a system, domain, conventional image, syntagma, or discourse.

Race and Hillis (2015) describe lexical semantics as the computation of the representation of the meaning of a word. Lexical semantics is the subfield of linguistics that studies how and what words of a language denote and thus involves the meaning of individual words. It focuses on theories of classification and decomposition of word meaning, differences and similarities in lexical semantic structure between different languages, the relationship of word meaning to sentence meaning and syntax. (Azu, 2007)

Tanvir (2016) refer to word formation as morphological process by which new words are produced either by modification of existing words or by complete innovation, which in turn become a part of the language.

Lieb (2013) defines word formation as forming new lexical words from already existing words using a word formation style. Similarly, Okeke&Obasi (2014) states that a word-formation process may be either or all about the following: a way in which an entirely new word comes into a language and/or a way in which a speaker creates complex words from already existing simpler word(s).

2.2 Theoretical studies

Robert Beard's Lexeme-Morpheme Base Morphology (LMBM) elaborated in a series of works, with a comprehensive account being given in Beard (1995). Lexeme-Morpheme Base Morphology (LMBM) is a theory of morphology developed by Robert Beard. It is a lexicalist theory, which means that it assumes that the basic unit of morphology is the lexeme, not the morpheme. A lexeme is a unit of meaning and form that can be used to create new words. In LMBM, morphemes are seen as the building blocks of lexemes. LMBM makes a number of claims about the nature of morphology or word formation. One claim is that inflection and derivation are distinct processes of word formation. Inflection is the process of changing the form of a lexeme to express grammatical information, such as number, gender, or tense. Derivation is the process of creating new lexemes from existing lexemes.

According to this theory there exists a universal set of supralinguistic cognitive categories (Subjective, Objective, Instrumental, Locational, Diminution, Augmentation, etc.) from which the individual languages select, with the core of these categories appearing in all languages which includes Ngwa dialect of Igbo. This process leads to lexical derivation from affixation and their meanings articulated depending on the context.

Optimality Theory (OT) is a linguistic theory that has origin in a talk given by Alan Prince and Paul Smolensky in 1991, it models how speakers choose between competing forms in the formation and meanings of words in a language. In the context of word formation, this theory account for a variety of phenomena, such as, the blocking of regular forms by irregular forms of words, for example, the regular past tense of the English verb go should be "goed", but this form is blocked by the irregular form "went". In this theory, this can be explained by saying that the constraint requiring the past tense form to be regular is ranked lower than the constraint requiring the past tense form to be specific. This theory also guides the productivity of word-formation rules, that is, some word-formation rules are more productive than others. For example, the rule that forms nouns from verbs by adding the suffix -er is more productive than the rule that forms nouns from verbs by adding the suffix -ness. This can be explained by saying that the constraint requiring the output to be regular is ranked higher for the -er rule than for the -ness rule.

While this theory account for different parts or processes in word formation. It is not suitable for this study but explains other aspects that are not commonly mentioned in the discourse of word formation.

2.3 Empirical Studies

Lexical semantics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of the meanings of words and phrases. It deals with how words relate to each other in meaning and how they are used in communication and language. The study of lexical semantics has shown that the meaning of a word is not just a sum of its parts but is also influenced by the context in which it is used.

In contrast, word formation is the process of creating new words from existing ones. Word formation occurs when speakers of a language need to express new concepts or ideas that are not adequately covered by existing vocabulary.

The word formation process is the process by which new words are produced either by modification of existing words or by complete innovation, which in turn become a part of the language. We can very quickly understand a new word in our language (a neologism) and accept the use of different forms of that new word.

Kortmann (2020) talks about those processes which enlarge the vocabulary and therefore create new lexemes. This means that by dividing the phrase 'word formation' into its components the term almost explains itself, namely 'the processes of the formation of words', thus this may be a very appropriate definition.

Word formation, according to Hans Marchand (1969), is that branch of the science of language which studies the patterns on which a language forms a new lexical unit, ie. words. Word formation can only be concerned with composites which are analyzable both formally and semantically.

Bryson (1990) cited in Pena (2010) identifies six ways words are formed, which include: by adding to them, by subtracting from them, by making them up, by doing nothing to them, by borrowing from other languages and by mistake. This study is not interested in the mechanism of doing nothing to them because it is an aspect of historical semantics.

Crystal (1990) defines word formation in more practical way, he considered it as the process of creating words out of sequences of morphemes. Randolph and Sidney (1969) posits that in the process of word-formation, there are generally known at least seven broad ways how English words are formed affixation, conversion, compounding, reduplication, clipping, blending, and acronym.

Word formation is the process of creating new words from existing words. It is a subfield of morphology, which is the study of the structure of words. Word formation can be accomplished through a variety of processes, including compounding, derivation, and inflection.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Theory adopted is Rochelle Lieber Lexical Semantic Framework (2004). Rochelle Lieber's lexical semantics framework is a model of how the meanings of morphemes combine to form the meanings of complex words. This theory is concerned with the study of the semantics of word-formation processes. Its central goal is to characterize the meaning of simple lexemes and affixes and to show how these meanings can be integrated in the creation of complex words. This theory offers a systematic treatment of the issues that figure prominently in the study of lexical semantic and word formation in Ngwa dialect. The theory's framework is used in this study to account for a wide range of understanding of word formation in Ngwa dialect of Igbo, which includes the affixes, suffixes, coinage, and compounding. Lieber's lexical semantics framework is a powerful tool for understanding the formation of words not just within a language but beyond into the nature of lexical semantics in other human languages

.2.5 Summary of literature

The above review of word formation and lexical semantic will facilitate fine-grained analysis of the study. It has been established that both lexical semantics and word formation are closely related, as one provides the foundation for the other, and this demonstrates how this process can

enrich the lexicon of a language or dialect with new words that can be used to express new concepts.

3. Lexical Semantics and Word Formation in Ngwa Dialect

Igbo, like many other human languages exhibit variations which are consistent with the widely held view among linguists that language of a group of people may show regular variations within the group. Such variations are regarded as dialects of the same language. Hence, every language is made up of dialects. Ngwa dialect is one of such with systematic differences.

The name Ngwa refers to the people, their land, and the dialect. Williamson and Blench (2000) classified it as an Igbolect under the New Benue-Congo sub-family of the Niger-Congo phylum, while Nwaozuzu (2008) placed it under the south-eastern group of dialects. Ngwa Igbo is the major speech form spoken by Ngwa people and used in Ngwaland. It is used as the primary means of communication in interpersonal relationships, community/village meetings, local trades, worship, folktales, songs, entertainments, etc.

Word formation is a very important aspect of most languages, and Ngwa is no exception. The term word formation refers to the processes through which new words are created. Given its significance in the natural human language, this section of the study will outline some word formation processes in Ngwa dialect of Igbo. Ngwa dialect of Igbo language, as any other dialect has its mechanisms of word formation and composition related to the enrichment of the vocabulary and the resolution of its lexical problems. The system of word formation in Ngwa comes from Igbo language. The phenomenon of word formation starts as a morphological one, but certainly it develops and interferes as a lexical-semantic phenomenon, too.

IkonneUgochi, a native of Ngwa, (Personal communication, June 15, 2023), submitted that word formation in Ngwa-Igbo is similar to the regular morphological process of the standard Igbo. The process of word formation can be arrived at through:

3.1 Affixation: Seen from the morphological point of view, are letters or words that are attached to another word (bound morphemes) to modify, extend or change the meaning of the original word. Affixation in Ngwa dialect is mainly with verbs. Hence, new words are derived from the verb root.

Siisi- to cook- i+si

de, ide- to write- i+de

zu-azu- rear/back- a+zu

ri, iri-to eat- i+ri

3.2 Predication and duplication- Another process of word formation in Ngwa dialect is through predication and duplication. The process is very common in Igbo language. This is a process whereby a part or a whole is copied and attached to the stem either at the beginning or at the end of verb root to form gerund.

si, osisi-cooking- o+si+si

ri, oriri-feast/eating- o+ri+ri

de, odide- writing- o+di+de

Zu, ezuola- stealing- e+zuo+la

Aka (length) stem (l) interfix (akalaka) derived(long)

Egwu (playing) stem (r) interfix (egwuregwu) derived (play

3.3 Suffixation: These are affixes which occur at the end of words; therefore, they are called suffixes. Words and meanings are also formed through this process (see Imu 2021).

Ri- rie, -eat- ri+e,

Si-sie, -cook- si+e

De-dere –write – de+re

Che-chere-think – che+re

Nwe - nwere– have – new+re

They also occur in the form of past participle; for example:

Ri-riela- eaten – ri+ela

Si-siela- cooked – si+ela

De-deela- written/wrote – dee+la

Zu- zuola- trained- zuo+la

3.4 Interfixation: This is a morphological process in which an affix is inserted between two morphemes.

Ri-erimeri- to eat – e+ri+meri

Si-esimesi- to cook – e+si+mesi

De-edemedede – to write – e+de+medede

Egwu -egwuregwu – to play – egwu+regwu

3.5 Blending – in this process, two or more words are merged into one so that the blended constituents are either clipped or partially overlap.

Nwo + oke - nwoke - man

afọ + ime- afoime/afime- pregnancy

di+ ike-dike - strong

ańya + ńwụ-ańyańwụ- sunshine

ọzọ+ emena-ọzemena- may it not happen again

nwa+ eke nweke-child born on eke day

nwa+ afọ-nwafọ- child born on afọ day

Apart from the processes above, words in Ngwa dialect are also formed from;

- a. Coinages- such as; teknuuzu for technology but now called nkanuuzu.
- b. Loan/borrowing- such as;
Osikapa from Hausa- rice
Agboro from Yoruba- tout
Ahuekere from Hausa goundnut
Koboko from Hausa-whip
Ichafu from Hausa- headtie
Mugu- from Hausa- onyenzuuzu (Igbo) one who is gullible or easily deceived
- c. Naturalization- such as; Mbalaari, etc.

Meanings and words in Ngwa dialect are derived and formed contextually and lexically, literally/literarily, connotations/denotations. This is consistent with the submission of Ugorji Fyne, (Personal Communication, June 17, 2023), another native of Ngwa, she noted that meanings in Ngwa, just like any other dialect of Igbo are derived according to the context of use, the Situation, event or time frame. Thus, meaning can be denotative (literal), or connotative (stylistic). Furthermore, words in Ngwa dialect like in any other dialect or language are formed through morphological processes of clipping, calquing, blending, acronyms, back formation, or through direct borrowing. These processes influence the meanings and the broadening of meanings, where the meaning of a word becomes more general or more inclusive than its historically earlier form. It is also known as generalization, widening or extension where the word increases its range of meaning over time. For instance in Ngwa Dialect, the word 'Isi' initially referred to 'Human head', but its meaning then broadened to include a 'blind', then 'smell'. The process of semantic broadening takes place during the process word formation where certain Ngwa words take on extra meanings that were not in the original word.

Akwa- cloth or fabric/egg/cry

Iri- to eat/ ten/

Akpu- Cassava/knot/swelling or bump

Akpa- bag/beetle

Afo- stomach/year

Atu- chewing stick/ gazelle

Aja- sand/sacrifice

It is important to state that these words may be spelt the same but in pronunciation they are different because of the different accent marks they take.

3.2 Summary of findings

From the findings, word-formation processes in Ngwa dialect are varied, which include interfixation, borrowing, blending, and other multiple processes. While some words may be the same, meanings are derived according to the context of use, the situation, event or time frame, and these altogether serve as vehicle of expression for the Ngwa people.

3.3 Conclusion

Ngwa dialect is considered unique in Igbo language. This is mostly due to the word formation mechanism that is employed to invent new words in the dialect vis-à-vis the language in the first place, this enable users to construct new word expression out of pre-existing lexically simpler expression. Words and meaning in Ngwa dialect has become more adaptable as a result of the large amount of vocabulary available. Consequently, the importance of the dialect and language grows as a result of word development. It not only helps to sustain the vitality of that language, but it also opens the door for other languages to borrow from the dialect.

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