

THE SEMANTICS OF IGBO FIXED COMBINATIONS: DYWORDS AND POLYWORDS

By

Aloysius U. Umeodinka Ph.D

Dept of Igbo, African & Communication
Studies, UNIZIK, Awka.

Phone: 08039563380

Email: au.umeodinka@unizik.edu.ng

and

Christian E. C. Ogwudile Ph.D

Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

08037468693

cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study is set to look into “The Semantics of Igbo Fixed Combinations: Dywords and Polywords”. The research objectives are as follows: to explain the meanings of fixed combinations, dywords and polywords, evaluate the semantics of dywords and polywords and establish the linguistic implications of this study on the Igbo language. The study adopts a descriptive approach, as secondary data are used. The researcher's knowledge, as an intuitive speaker of the Igbo language, is employed in the analysis. The Use Theory of Meaning functions as the theoretical framework to guide the analysis. The study finds out that fixed combinations are Igbo expressions in which each of the units that make up a string of linguistically acceptable utterances is not on its own, but is a mandatory contributor to the meaning of the usual utterance. It also discovered that dywords and polywords are Igbo fixed collocations which employ two words and many words, respectively, in expressing different Igbo meanings. Some evaluated semantics of Igbo dywords are found in: 'ka chere' (still wait), 'any[any[' (it is all about us), 'hoo haa' (fully or completely said) and 'jisi ike' (be encouraged/keep on trying), whereas 'jide onwe gi' (take heart), 'ka q d[echi' (let us suspend it till tomorrow), 'ka chi fo' (good night), and 'lad[mma' (safe journey back to base) are all polywords. The findings on the implications of the study are that it has not only revealed the depth of Igbo semantics, but also constitutes a sort of education to those yet to know about fixed phrases in Igbo semantics. The study is a huge contribution in increasing the stature of Igbo semantics as well as becoming another perspective for students and researchers in classifying the collocations used in communication in the Igbo language.

1.0 Introduction

In semantics, the subjects of study are signs, symbols and meanings used in communication in a given language. Semantics also has to do with the overall meaning of expressions from both the linguistic and the non-linguistic points of view. In both points of view, the building blocks of sentences used in communication are lexical items. It is these lexical items that are arranged to make meaningful phrases, clauses and sentences. The meaningful arrangement of lexical items, in the Igbo language, can occur in both free

and fixed combinations. These are the two essential ways of combining words, phrases, clauses and sentences in somewhat predictable, structured and synergistic for communication in the Igbo language (Emenanjo, 2015). Out of these two ways, this paper is set to study “The Semantics of Igbo Fixed Combinations: Dywords and Polywords”

The purposes of the research are: to explain the meanings of fixed combinations, dywords and polywords, and evaluate the semantics of dywords and polywords in Igbo. Another prompting for the study is to find out the implications of the study of dywords and polywords in the Igbo language.

In order to accomplish these set goals, the mode of study to be used is descriptive. And the theoretical framework to steer the investigation is the Use Theory of Meaning propounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1953. The researcher, being a bonafide, native speaker of the Igbo language, validates the secondary data which the study employs.

In terms of organisation, the study has the initial introductory section, followed by the literature review section. The next is the section for data presentation and analysis, after which is the fourth and last section, the summary and conclusion.

The study holds a lot of promises for monolingual learners, students, translators, language teachers, researchers, foreign language learners and lexicographers.

2.0 Literature Review

Here, the relevant academic writings collected for the research will be synthesized into a cohesive study of the existing knowledge.

2.1 Semantics

In the view of Finch (2000:142), semantics is “the study of meaning communicated through language”. To him, semantics is a branch of linguistics which has interest in the manner in which words get to have the meanings for which they are known. It is also concerned with the series of actions by which native speakers of a language are able to assign interpretations to strings of words.

Agbedo's (2000) opinion is that, semantics, technically speaking, is about the study of meaning. And what meaning does is to explain the processes by which words and sentences generated through the rules of grammar, are applied and comprehended by native, fluent users of the language in question. On his part, Prasad (2012) sees semantics as a discipline which examines the meaning of words and phrases in a language. The meaningful ideas are said to reside in the mind of a man, as the structure of the language goes there to get them expressed; and that these meaningful ideas are carried about through the spoken and graphic forms of a language.

Subjecting these views of Finch (2000), Agbedo (2000) and Prasad (2012) to analysis, it sums up to the fact that they all agree that semantics is a field of study that strives to acquire some knowledge about meaning. While Finch (2000) and Agbedo (2000) specify that native speakers are the custodians and interpreters of these meanings, Prasad (2012) is silent on who is the determinant of the meaning of an utterance.

At last, our take home is that semantics is the study of meaning, and the meanings of strings of words are what is understood or interpreted by the native speaker of the language in question. These meanings arise from how the words that convey them are arranged in their spoken or written form.

2.2 Meaning and Grammar

In Ofoegbu (2022:165), citing Ndimele (2008), grammar is defined to involve

“knowledge about appropriate pronunciation, about word formation, about sentence formation, about individual meaning of words and longer expressions and about the appropriate context in which to use a particular utterance”. This shows that grammar is more than what is contained in syntax and morphology.

As Echebima (2015) puts it, grammar gives an account of all the set of rules of a given language showing how the word strings are structured with their semantic meaning. Grammar studies the lexical items (words, including their semantic meaning) and syntax, which is about the manner of arrangement of lexical items to generate meaningful phrases, clauses and sentences. Echebima (2015:125) gives a grammatical summary of grammar thus:

“sound + word + order = sentence meaning”. Here, sound represents phonology, word represents morphology and order represents syntax, whereas sentence meaning stands for semantics.

A re-look at these views shows that Ofoegbu (2022) stresses about the embodiment of individual word meanings and the right context in which such a word is often used. Echebima (2015) shares the same view.

It, therefore, follows that one of the objectives of grammar is to follow the rules of word arrangement to produce some sentence meanings.

2.3 Lexical Semantics

Agbedo (2000:150) quotes Cruse (1990:144) who says that a word's meaning:

“is best grounded in the use of the word in sentences and the meaning itself is best derived from the meaning of sentences containing the word”. Agbedo (2000) maintains that, most times, in the study of word meaning, the place where the main attention is concentrated is on the lexical (or content) parts of the sentence.

Each word, in a given language, constitutes a sign of some concept. That is, the word stands for the meaning of some object or information. But when this word is either spoken or written in language, it must meet the criteria to be the correct choice of word, be grammatical and the relationship between the word and the concept must correspond before the word would have a meaningful message (Prasad, 2012). Adding to this, Finegan (2008) stresses how the individual words constitute the makers of the sentence which conveys the meaning of such an utterance or written sentence.

Finegan (2008) holds the opinion that lexical semantics is an offshoot of semantics whose concern is to look into word meaning. It takes interest in finding out the relationships among word meanings.

What this implies is that the discipline wants to know what language users mean when they use some expressions. The field is interested in how the lexicon is organised, including how the meanings of the lexical items share some interrelationship. Our take here, therefore, is that through the knowledge of the lexical semantics of Igbo words, one can categorize the types of relationships that exist between words, the linguistic meaning of such words.

2.4 Language and Society

As Agbedo (2000), quoting Ndukwe (1988:1), maintains, “...sociolinguistics...endeavours to study the significant aspects of the relationship between language and society”. What it studies is to comprehend the structure of language, especially the way language works in communication in society. Supporting

this view, McGregor (2009) says that, in speech, there is always an interactive context that enables interactants (speakers and hearers) make choices from the linguistic system. The views of Ndukwe (1997) and McGregor (2009) are on point. This is because the interactants in speech often want to express appropriate experiential meaning. The meaning is the type that will be about their construal of the world of experience. Such words also do express attitudinal values.

2.5 Free Combinations

Describing free combinations, Emenanjo (2015) insists that the string of words do not share any mutual expectancy. That is to say, each of the elements is on its own in generating a linguistically acceptable utterance. To illustrate the free combination, Emenanjo (2015:91) uses the following expression: Example (1): “M ga-aga echi” (I will go tomorrow).

Analysing free combination from this view, it just stands for a situation where words independently come together to form an acceptable linguistic utterance in a specific language. In this case, there is zero mutual expectancy from the other words in the expression. What can be understood from here is that free word combination is a combination in which any of the constituting units can be substituted by another.

2.6 Fixed Combinations

Studysmarter.co.uk is an internet website that tries to explain what fixed combination is all about, that it is words in a group which are applied together to convey a specific idea or concept that appears to be more particular than when the individual words are used. This implies that the order and pattern of these words remain constant. Fixed expressions are known to convey ideas or concepts in ways that are standard or generally acceptable and straightforward to understand by native speakers.

Explaining fixed combinations, Emenanjo (2015:91) offers the following Igbo examples. Example (2): (i) A na-ekwu, a na-eme (it is said, it is done); (ii) oha na eze (the commoners and the nobility); kedu ka o di (How is it?). In his explanation, none of the words in the any of the examples can be interchanged with another word. If it is interchanged, the meaning of the expression will not be the same. Once a word in the combination is mentioned, it will call up its other associates. This makes all the items to be mutually predictable and have mutual expectancy. He maintains that the fixed expressions could take the forms of clichés, idioms, metaphors, proverbs and collocations in Igbo.

Making references to Nattinger and Decaririco (1982) who had some influence on Crystal (2003:162-163), Emenanjo (2015:91) classifies Igbo words into free lexemes, phrasal constraints, sentence builders, grammatical words and fixed phrases. Under fixed phrases, Emenanjo (2015) has dywords, polywords and institutional expressions as fixed phrases or fixed combinations.

The deductions we can make about fixed phrases or combinations is that they are expressions that are not flexible in patterning, but are generally transparent in meaning, and their meanings are usually understood and known by native speakers. The words that make them up have mutual expectancy for each other.

2.7 Dywords as Fixed Combinations

Dyword is a group of two words with mutual expectancy which translates into one expression in Igbo. They are Igbo fixed collocations which always consist of two words, but have one meaning or one expression in Igbo (Emenanjo, 2015).

Ogbalu (1974:65) has the following as Igbo examples of dywords: Example (3): (i) obi ebere (merciful heart) (ii) obi otiti (palpitation/irregular heart beat because of exertion), (iii) ita amusu (witchcraft), (iv) obi ike (having a strong mind), (v) obi qkx (uncontrolled anger), (vi) obi mmiri (soft-hearted/soft-minded).

The following are dywords from Emenanjo (1991:119): Example (4): (i) nwa Igbo (an Igbo indigene, (ii) xmx Igbo (Igbo indigenes), (iii) nwa osisi (a small tree/a child of), (iv) onye Igbo (Igbo person). Another set of dywords from Emenanjo (2015) is this: Example (5): (i) maka na (because), (ii) ike kwe (perhaps), (iii) o zugo (enough), (iv) d[ka (like/as), (v) q b[la (whatever it is).

2.8 Polywords as Fixed Combinations

When a phrase or many words act as a single word, it is called polywords. Polywords are defined as short phrases which work very much in the manner of individual lexemes. They are such words which cannot be separated (Crystal, 2003). Again, like dywords, they translate, most times as one word in English. And so people are tempted to write each of them as one word. These are some of his illustrations: Example (6): (i) ma q bx (or), (ii) etu o sila d[(no matter how it is), (iii) qha na eze (the commoners and the nobility (everybody), (iv) material and non-material resources (wealth).

2.9 Collocation

As defined by Prasad (2012:127), “when the lexical items enter into the basic formal pattern of grammar to provide a meaningful sentence, clause or phrase, they are said to 'collocate with' another item or items, and the system is known as collocation”. On the part of Finch (2000:152), “Collocation refers to the tendency for certain words to occur together”. He maintains that the principle that expresses collocation better is that of the linguist, Brian Firth with his axiom: “we know a word by the company it keeps”. In Igbo, Oruchalu (1979:126-128) calls them “double-barrel expressions”; listing the following as their instances: Example (7): (i) akq na uche (reasoning faculty/senses), (ii) akx na xba (riches and wealth), (iii) nze na qzq (titled men), (iv) qfq na ogu (innocence), (v) ohi na ama (criminals/crime), (vi) qnwx na ndx (at any cost), (vii) abx na mmee (extreme necessity/inevitable), etc.

It can be deduced from these definitions and samples that collocation is a kind of fixed expression in which, in a linguistically predictable manner, individual words occur together in a syntagmatic relation. Collocation is a feature of lexicology and semantics which makes reference to the habitual or normal staying together of individual lexical items in a language.

2.10 Theoretical Framework

The theory for this study is “Use Theory of Meaning” founded by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1953). The objective of the theory is that the meaning of an expression is a matter of the way the expression is put to use by its competent users. To him, it is the way each society uses a word that gives that word or expression its meaning. The decision and its effects are what endows a word with a meaning (Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme, 2010).

2.10.1 Application of the theory

The theory is applied by establishing whichever non-semantic feature of the expression or word. That is, that the statements are meaningful if, and only if, they can be defined or pictured in the real world. In other words, a language that is understandable by a single individual is incoherent. It is only how the owners of the language use an expression that

gives such an expression its meaning. To apply this theory, therefore, we have to write out some Igbo fixed combinations and specify what each of them means to Igbo native speakers.

2.11 Empirical Review

A.U. Umeodinka (2018) has a paper entitled “Ejima Okwu” published in *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture*. Written in Igbo and not in English (like this one), the objective of the study concentrated on establishing “ejima okwu” collocations, give their meanings, their mode of morphological derivation and contexts of use in Igbo. Obviously speaking, the research and this present study are different not only in title and objectives, but also in the type of language and theoretical framework. The theory used in the ‘Ejima Okwu’ study is Sapir-Whorf’s Linguistic Relativity Theory.

A.U. Esimaje (2011) has a research on “Cultural Influences on the Fictional Expressions of Nigerian Igbo Speaking Writers”. The topic alone shows how poles apart this study is from ours. It is on fictional expressions of Igbo-speaking writers and not on fixed combinations.

C.G. Madueke's (2020) work dwells on “Sociolinguistic Analysis of Binomials in Igbo” published in *Odezuruigbo Journal*, vol.4, no.1 (2020). The work differs from ours by it not treating fixed expressions and also not having dywords and polywords as divisions and main areas of concentration.

3.0 Data Analysis

Here, we have to scrutinize the objectives of the study with the view to arriving at some findings.

3.1 Explanation of Fixed Combinations

From our analysis of the views of Nattnger and Decrico (1982) and Emenanjo (2015), we can establish that fixed expressions are groups of words that are mutually predictable and cannot be interchanged, as they usually are used together to convey a specific meaning.

3.2 Explanation of Dywords

Following the views of Oruchalu (1979), Cruse (1990), Agbedo (2000) and Emenanjo (2015), the understanding is made that dywords, in Igbo, are two words with mutual expectancy, which always translate into one specific meaning.

3.3 Explanation of Polywords

The deduction made of the views of Crystal (2003) and Emenanjo (2015) indicates that polywords is a semantic term for a situation when many words (not two words) which are inseparable, collectively act as a single expression in Igbo.

3.4 Evaluation of the Semantics of Dywords

The task before us, here, is to display some established Igbo dywords and attach their native speaker meanings.

Table 1: Evaluation of the Semantics of Dywords

S/N	DYWORDS	NATIVE -SPEAKER MEANINGS
1	xkwx qjqq	bad omen
2	ebeebe ebeebe	from generation to generation
3	qsq qsq	quickly/in a hurried fashion
4	n'ike n'ike	with quick force
5	q bɔla	whatever it is
6	q bɔladɔ	even if
7	q fɔrɔ	it still remains/not yet finished
8	maka na	Because
9	n'ihina	Because
10	o zugo/o zuola	it is enough/don't put more/don't go further
11	o nwere?	what is the matter?/is anything about to happen?
12	dɔ ka	like/as
13	q nwaka	he/she tried/he/she made a good effort
14	chaa chaa	at all, at all/nothingness
15	ata ata	never dries
16	anwx anwx	never dies/diehard
17	ekwe ekwe	never agreeing/dogged
18	laa n'udo	safe journey
19	jisi ike	pick up courage/keep on trying

20	okwu agwɔla	the matter is ended
21	[nyx anwx	to do what is impossible
22	iji n'olu	to be under total control
23	[ta akpɔx	to be difficult
24	[gba orikɔ	to reconcile
25	ike kwe	Perhaps
26	q tɔmas[gh]	without minding
27	iti/[sq mpi	to rival/ to contend
28	[gbakɔta azx	to neglect/overlook
29	iri xwa	to be lucky in life
30	inwe aha	to have a good reputation

Table 2:Evaluation of the Semantics of Polywords

S/N	POLYWORDS	NATIVE -SPEAKER MEANINGS
1	ma q bx	Or
2	ka chi fo	a wish of good night
3	ka q bqg	let tomorrow's morning come
4	etu o sila d[no matter how it is/however it is
5	abx na mm̄e	inevitable/of extreme necessity
6	ori nri agxta qkx	lazy, but likes enjoyment
7	ekwughi ekwu, akagh[aka	taking action without hesitation
8	echi agwx agwx	too much procrastination
9	elu eru aka, ala eru aka	making unsuccessful effort/tried severally but still failed
10	aka weta, aka weta	unity is strength/all hands to be on deck
11	ka q d[let's end it here till another time
12	akx na xba	properties and wealth/riches and wealth
13	mgbe q b[la	whenever/any time
14	ka o mes[a	i take my leave/let us end it here till another time
15	q[wx na ndx	at all (any) cost
16	nze na qzq	titled men
17	egbe bere ugo bere	no discrimination/let everybody partake or enjoy
18	qsa erwe akwx, uze erwe akwx	a saying for those who struggle for what none of them owns
19	xka [d[ime	a complex matter/something uncertain
20	[chxchx qnx n'ala	being severely dealt with
21	mnu na mmanx	being agreeable friends
22	ome mgbe o ji	liberal/gives whenever he has
23	ahxgh[na erila	to be bosom -friends
24	xkwx na aka	the sole helper
25	iwe na qnxma	extreme anger
26	nkwx na xkwa	all the trees
27	ikwu na ibe	Relations
28	qkx na mmiri	being very active
29	az[za zara ezi zara xlq	affecting everybody
30	melemele n'ihu, kwqmp[t[n'azx	unstable/not trustworthy

3.5 Analysis of the Implications of the Study of Igbo Fixed Combinations

Here, we look into how this study affects the Igbo language, its users and more.

(a) Understanding the application dynamics

Being a semantic study, the scholars and the Igbo alike, are exposed to understanding of the dynamics of fixed expressions in Igbo.

(b) Understanding word meanings and their mediation mode

Centred on lexical semantics, the study makes it easy to understand word meanings and the manner in which words mediate between Igbo concepts and linguistic form.

(c) Accounting for meaning variability

The study enables us to now be able to account for the variability of meaning from context to context.

(d) As listed lexicographic units

Truly, fixed expressions are the properties of lexicography. Being lexicographic units, therefore, fixed expressions are usually listed as single items in a dictionary. Like this, lexicographers see fixed expressions as tools to improve their work and benefit their audience/users.

(e) Improve interpretation ability

Equipped with the knowledge of fixed expressions, the ability to correctly interpret such collocations will be enhanced.

(f) Selection of appropriate Expressions

As there abound some contextual variations in the use of Igbo fixed phrases, this study offers the privilege of being able to select the appropriate expressions from the range of permanently available possibilities; and be capable of generating new meanings from the old ones.

(g) Understand the synchronic variation of meaning

Through this study, we can understand synchronic variation of meaning which is a prerequisite to an understanding of diachronic change (change from one period to another).

(h) Miscellaneous

The benefits of collocations will be reaped from this study as it helps to boost conversational skills. And language learners will be assisted in their communication.

4.0 Summary and Conclusion

The task of this investigation has come to the rounding off point. Prior to that, we have to summarise what we have done before conclusion.

4.1 Summary

The motivation for this research has been to bring to the fore the semantic relevance of fixed combinations. These are expressions where the elements in the word group are predictable because they share mutual expectancy. Every element in the group is a usual member in the expression of a linguistically acceptable meaning.

Being a clear case of collocation, it became needful to explore into its types—the dywords and polywords for the knowledge of many. In the venture, their semantics were evaluated to reveal the big depth of Igbo lexical semantics. It did not stop there, for the seeming most important revelation in the collocations is the display of words that commonly appear next to each other in speech and series of texts.

The work has shown how indispensable it is to translators, language teachers cum

learners, researchers and students. With this high level of significance, the study has lived up to its billings.

4.2 Conclusion

The study of “The semantics of Igbo Fixed Combinations: Dywords and Polywords” has taken its own place in the array of researches in Igbo lexical semantics.

It has enabled us to see binomials and beyond as examples of collocations. We have seen the assortments of habitual combination of words that identify the core native speakers. We have seen words which are not used outside the collocation, and so completely predict the following words.

From this study, it becomes an obvious lesson that dywords and polywords do not exhaust the varieties of collocations of fixed combinations. There also exist the institutionalized expressions, idioms, clichés, metaphors and proverbs. Each of them can be investigated from different perspectives. Time will tell when the above mentioned will be researched upon as Igbo fixed combinations, from other angles, like this one, not only to offer a new phase of meaning classification, but also to further expose the profound depth of Igbo lexical semantics.

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