

IRREVERSIBLE BINOMIALS AND MEANING IMPLICATION IN IGBO LANGUAGE: SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Over the years, people have used language to communicate various intentions, especially native speakers of a particular language. The way people use language in different social situations gives rise to different meanings, which can be described as context. This context affects communication in several ways, particularly in the area of meaning, which forms the basis of this research paper titled “Irreversible Binomials and Meaning Implication in the Igbo Language: A Semantic Analysis.” The Igbo language contains binomials with meanings that reflect the social and cultural life of its speakers. Accordingly, the first objective of this study is to explain binomials and their different types, while the second objective is to analyze the varieties of binomials in the Igbo language with regard to their contexts of usage. This study adopts the Lexical Theory of Meaning as its theoretical framework and employs the descriptive research method. Data for the study were collected from the everyday conversations of speakers from Umuoji, Nkpor, Obosi, and Onitsha. Additional data were obtained through personal interviews with speakers from these communities, as well as from semantic contexts such as affinity (e.g., *ji na mmanu*), personal or intimate relationships (e.g., *di na nwunye*, *nne na nwa*), and from previous studies including Agbo (2016:33–42) and Madueke (2020). The findings reveal that binomials are expressions consisting of two words joined by a conjunction. Secondly, there are two types of binomials: reversible and irreversible. Thirdly, binomials can be grouped into different categories based on context, such as negation and affirmation, completeness or totality, enmity, and intimate relationship contexts. This work is expected to be of significance to linguists and scholars seeking to expand the scope of semantic studies in the Igbo language.

Keywords: language, Semantics, Binomials, Igbo Language

Introduction

Language is a medium of communication among human beings. Ofoegbu (2022) sees language as the human system of communication which expands continuously as new experiences are recorded by people who speak the language. Ofoegbu (2012) defines language as “the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Language is man and man is language. Man uses language for his everyday interaction”.

According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), language is essentially a human system of communication that is shaped by both linguistic behaviour and extralinguistic norms across different social groups. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) opine that it is a means by which humans alone communicate. This means that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication. Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures. Also in Ofoegbu (2024) “language is man and man is language”. Life has no meaning without language. Language is a means of interaction among people of the same community. The society as we know is a large crowd of people who leave together in an organized way characterized by common interest and may have distinctive cultures and institutions.

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that deals with the scientific study of meaning. It brings out meaning in syntactic structures that made up human language. Every word has meaning, semantics explains word meaning as well as sentential meaning. Ofoegbu (2022) defines semantic as the study and analysis of meaning and meaning of a word in the idea a word conveys in the heart or minds of the speakers or hearers. On this premise, this work analyses the meaning of some Igbo binomials as conveyed in the minds and hearts of Igbo native speakers.

Binominals

The term "binominal" comes from the Latin words "bi" meaning 'two' and "nomen" meaning 'name'. Binominals are expressions made up of two words that are linked together and function as a single unit and also portraying specific meaning or concept. These word pairs have a semantic relationship and a conventionalized order. They are expressions of two words joined by a conjunction. These expressions have different meanings depending on how they are used in expressions. For instance, when the expressions are independent, they could have a separate meaning. When used in a sentence, a different meaning can emerge; it could also have a meaning of which the speaker intends to convey. These expressions have different meanings depending on their usage. For instance, when the expressions are independent, they could have a separate meaning. When used in a sentence, a different meaning can emerge; likewise it could have a meaning of which the speaker intends it to have. Therefore, this work will dwell on what binomials are and their types, Secondly, bringing out some binomial expressions in the Igbo language and give examples of them in relation to the different concepts and finally analyze the multiplicity of binomial expressions in the Igbo language.

The theory in use in this research work is the lexical Theory of meaning. This research work appears in sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section is the review of literature under which the opinions of other people on the concept of binomials are discussed. The third section is for the Semantic analysis of binomials in the Igbo language. Finally, the fourth section is for the findings and conclusion.

Literature review

Concept of Binomials

In this section, we shall be viewing the opinions of different authors and what they have written about the concept of binominals.

Emenanjo (2015), defined binomials as "two nouns or noun phrases linked by a conjunction, or two verbs or verb phrase with or without an overt conjunction linking them. He went further to say that these are complementary bi-verbals".

From the above definition of binomials by these authors, we see Emenanjo (2015) explaining binomials as two nouns or two noun phrases linked by a conjunction, whereas, Emenanjo and Oweleke (2007) sees binomial as a different kind of idiom which comprise of two nouns that go together in complementing themselves. He goes on to say that these two words go together like twins. Emenanjo (2015) agree to the fact that there is a conjunction binding these two words.

The research on Igbo irreversible binomials has explored various aspects, including semantic, pragmatic, morphological, and syntactic constraints. Here's a review of relevant studies:- **Semantic Constraints:** Studies have shown that semantic factors play a significant role in determining the order of elements in Igbo irreversible binomials. For instance, Mmadike (2013) found that male terms usually precede female terms in Igbo gender-based irreversible binomials, reflecting the cultural values of the Igbo people ¹.

Cultural Significance: Irreversible binomials can provide insights into Igbo culture and society. Emenanjo (2015) defines binomials as "two nouns or noun phrases linked together," highlighting their importance in understanding Igbo language and culture ².

Relevant Studies

Mmadike (2013): "A Study of Igbo Gender-Based Irreversible Binomials" examined the precedence order in Igbo binomials and its relation to cultural values.

Chiamaka Gloria Madueke (2016) Conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of binomials in Igbo language, exploring their cultural and linguistic implications

By examining the semantic properties of Igbo irreversible binomials, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the Igbo language and its cultural significance. Emenanjo (2015), defines binomials as "two nouns or noun phrases linked by a conjunction, or two verbs or verb phrase with or without an overt conjunction linking them. He pointed out that these are complementary bi-verbals". Therefore, we can say that binomials are expressions of two nouns joined together, so we can see that the order of words of these expressions are fixed, which means that their meanings will look awkward when switched. These meanings could mean something, but on the other hand, it may lose the speaker's intended meaning.

Binomials can be classified into two categories based on their reversibility:

Reversible Binomials:

Reversible binomials are phrases or expressions that can be reversed without changing their meaning or idiomaticity.

"Me and you

Irreversible Binomials:

Irreversible binomials are fixed expressions that have a specific word order, and reversing the order would change their meaning or make them sound unnatural.

Examples: "Law and order", "Black and white"

Irreversible binomials often exhibit specific semantic, phonological, or cultural properties that determine their word order. Though this research focuses on irreversible binomials in Igbo language. This study of binomials attracted the attention of scholars such as that of Umeodinka (2015) on Binomials. His study is written in the Igbo language and he calls Binomials "*Ejima Okwu*"

Theoretical Framework

Eze (2016) states that theories are analytical tools for understanding, explaining and making predictions about a given subject matter. Therefore, the theory used for this research work is the Lexical Theory of Meaning.

Lexical Theory of Meaning

Lexical theory focuses on how individual words convey meaning in language. Lexical theory does not have a single founder but has been developed by several linguists and philosophers. The key contributors are John Lyons, Leonard Bloomfield, Ferdinand de Saussure and Gottlob Frege. Their contributions on structural semantics, sense and reference played a vital role in developing the theory.

Objective of the lexical Theory

The Lexical theory advocates that words that are interrelated may belong to the same semantic group which provides situation for collocation. This implies that the meaning of a word or an expression is determined by the context of its use. Therefore, this theory of meaning explains that what people say is due to what they mean that is the meaning of a word lies in its use, which means that often times, the meaning of a word is not seen when that word is standing alone but when the word is used to reveal the speaker's intended meaning.

Mode of Application The mode of application here implies that these binomials are used to express the intentions of the speaker in context especially the native speakers. For example, some expressions can be used to describe affinity between two people, the speaker can use the expressions "*nnu na mmanu*". Literally, *nnu* and *mmanu* means 'salt and oil', but the speaker has an inner meaning which he used *nnu na mmanu* to describe. That inner meaning is to show the affection and closeness of those two people; they share mutual love in common. Therefore, in applying this theory, we know that the meaning of any object at all is the use to which it is put in the society. In other words, '*nnu na mmanu*' has been put in the position of describing the affection and love between two people that are so close and always do things in common.

As we know that binomials talk about collocative meaning. Collocative meaning occurs where certain words go with others to create new meaning. These collocations have cultural implications. On this premise, we shall look into how the native speakers of the Igbo language use these binomials to portray meanings in different levels, because the native speakers of a language have full authority of that language and select these binomials as they so please.

Empirical Studies

The study of meaning has always attracted the attention of scholars such as that of Umeodinka (2015) on Binomials. His study is written in the Igbo language and he calls Binomials "*Ejima Okwu*".

The objectives of his study are to find out the kinds of '*ejima okwu*' collocations that abound in the Igbo language. Another objective is to know how they are morphologically generated. He also seeks to know at what occasions they are introduced in speech situations and, finally, he investigates the significance of '*ejima okwu*' in the Igbo language. To help him achieve these objectives, his study is anchored on Sapir-Whorf's Linguistic Relativity theory.

After so much research, Umeodinka (2015) made some findings, which are:

- That the formation of *ejima okwu* is made possible by the use of conjunctions.
- That the Igbo use such idioms to embellish their speech.
- That it is not being an Igbo person that is the main thing, but by indicating one's linguistic competence through the appropriate use of idiomatic expressions of *ejima okwu*.

First of all, his study is Igbo language based while ours is written in the English language. Again, while Umeodinka (2015) uses Sapir-Whorf's Linguistic Relativity Theory, the theory we are using is the Use Theory of Meaning. For these reasons and more, we are not inhibited to embark on this study.

Binomials in the Igbo Language

The Igbo language, just like many other languages, are made up of words and expressions. In this section, we will be looking at different binomial expressions in Igbo language as it relates to the native speakers understanding, some of them are listed below, they are:

1. *Imi na onu* - the nose and the mouth.
2. *Nze na ozo* - noble and title
3. *Oke na nwunye* - male and female
4. *Ji na aja* - yam and sand
5. *Ochie na ohuu* - ancient and modern
6. *Iwe na onuma* - anger and rage
7. *Ji na mmanu* - yam and oil
8. *Elu na ala* - up and down
9. *Nne na nwa* - mother and child
10. *Ube na oka* - pear and corn
11. *Aku na uba* - wealth and affluence
12. *Ofor na ugu* - righteousness and uprightness
13. *Ewu na okuko* - goat and chicken
14. *Oke na ngwere* - rat and lizard
15. *Ako na uche* - wisdom and thought
16. *Ikwu na ibe* - kins and friends
17. *Egwu na amu* - play and laughter
18. *Ugwu na nsopuru* - dignity and respect
19. *Ohia na uzo* - forest and road
20. *Nze na ozo* - noble and title
21. *Oha na eze* - crowd and king
22. *Udo na onu* - peace and joy
23. *Ogu na mgba* - fight and wrestle
24. *Onwu na ndu* - dead and alive
25. *Ukwu na nta* - big and small
26. *Ntu na aghugho* - lies and cunning
27. *Mmuo na mmadu* - spirit and human
28. *Egbe na egbe* - Eagle and gun
29. *Aka ekpe na aka nri* - right hand and left hand
30. *Ugwu na ndida* - Hill and valley

These list of words given above is a practical example of binomials in the Igbo language. These binomials are joined by a conjunction. The conjunction in the Igbo language is 'na' which means 'and'. Illustrations are given above. But in the English language, it can be 'and, or, to, but, by, etc'. For example, bit by bit

Semantic Analysis of Binomials in the Igbo Language

As stated earlier, binomials can be defined as two or more words linked together and function as a singular unit. On the other hand, we are going to how they are used different social situations. This social situation can be called context. This context can be as a result of the speaker's mood or intentions.

Therefore, in this section, we will be analyzing how these binomial expressions can be related with the society, and how people use them in different life situations such as in a friendly relationship, in a serious situation, in enmity, happy moments, etc.

Now we will examine the different categories of binomials in the Igbo language in relation to the society.

Binomials Showing Affinity/Close Relationship

This category of binomial is used when referring to a very close relationship between people whereby one cannot do without the other or, one cannot be called without mentioning the other one. They work together; wherever you see one, you see the other as well.

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- *Aka na ukwu* (hand and leg)
- *Nnu na mmanu* (Salt and oil)
- *Akuko na nti* (story and ear)
- *Udo na onu* (Peace and happiness)
- *Imi na onu* (Nose and mouth)
- *Oka na ube* (Corn and pear)
- *Ofe na utara* (Soup and fufu)
- *Di na nwunye* (husband and wife)

- Akị na ụkwa (kernel and breadfruit)

Examples 1:

- Adaku na Nkechi bu nnu na mmanu.
(Adaku and Nkechi are salt and oil)(They are close or they are always seen together)
- * Umu ejima ahu bukwa imi na onu.
(The twins are very close to each other)

Antonymous Association

Binomials that fall into the antonymous association are those that are opposite in meaning to each other but when paired together, they still portray a binomial pair. In this association, the combined words are individually opposed words, but in their contextual application, they imply a wholistic involvement or a wholeness of an effect.

1. *Onwu na ndu* (dead or alive)
2. *Oyi na ekpomoku* (cold and heat)
3. *Elu na ala* (up and down)
4. *Ihe na ochichiri* (light and darkness)
5. *Isi na odu*(head and tail)
6. *Ukwu na nta* (big and small)
7. *mma na njo* (good and bad)
8. *Qchi na akwa*(laughter and tears)
9. *Oji na ocha* (black and white)
10. *Nwoke na nwaanyi* (man and woman)
11. *Okochi na udumiri* (Dry and rainy season)
12. *Okoro na agboghọ* (spinster and bachelor)
13. *Uru na okpukpu* (flesh and bone)
14. *Nne na nna* (mother and father)
15. *Udo na oghaaghara* (peace & chaos)
16. *Ochie na ohuru* (old and new)
17. *Mmalite na ogwugwu* (beginning and end)
18. *Uru na oghom* (profit and loss)
19. *Mbido na njedewe* (beginning and end)
20. *Ugwu na ndida* (hill and valley)

Examples 2:

- Oriahuru Obiageli riara tara uru na okpukpu na ndu ya.(This means that Obiageli's sickness claimed everything she had).
- Ndi udo ga-chi kuru Okeke ochi na ohuru (This means that the security men beat Okeke mercilessly).
- Ama m gi ihu na azu. (This means that I know everything about you, there is nothing about you that I don't know).

Synonymous Association

This category of binomials are those that both words forming the binomial expression are synonymous to each other, that is, their meanings are near to each other; notwithstanding, when used together, they portray the intended meaning.

- *Okwu na uka* (talk and discussion)
- *Ezi na ama* (Outside and open space)
- *Ezi na uzọ* (road and way)
- *ike na ume* (power and strength)
- *Egwu na amu* (play and joke)
- *Akọ na uche* (wisdom and thought)
- *Ikwu na ibe* (kins and peers)
- *Iwe na onuma* (anger and bitterness)
- *akụ na uba* (wealth and plenty)

Examples 3:

- Mgbe Ukamaka huru ite ofe ya agbaala uka,iwe na onuma juru ya afo.
- Enyi abou ahu na-eji egwu na amu eme ihe obula.

Enmity/Rivalry

This category of binomial is used when referring to a situation whereby there is always rivalry amongst people or when people are at enmity. This set of people, never stay together without being at logger head. There is always a clash between them.

Binomial expressions showing enmity/rivalry are:

- A. *Ebu na anu* (wasp and bee)

- B. *Ihe na ọchịchiri* (light and darkness)
- C. (fight and wrestle)
- D. *ỌỌgụ na mgbakochi na udummiri* (dry and rainy season)
- E. *Agwo na akpi* (snake and scorpion)
- F. *Ọhia na ụzọ* (bush and pathway)
- G. *Ọkụ na mmiri* (fire and water)
- H. *Okwu na ụka* (talk and discussion)
- I. *Nsị na aja* (poison and sacrifice)

Examples 4:

Mama Ngozi na Mama Nkechi bu noo agwo na akpi mgbe obula ha biara nzuko umuada.

- Ime ka dokita gbaa nwata ahu ogwu na-abukari ogu na mgba.

Everybody

This form of binomials is mainly used in the society when referring to everybody in question. They emphasize that no one is to be left out. Therefore, when it is being related to the society, it suggests that everyone is involved; big, small, mighty, male, female, children etc, there is no exception. Binomials showing this type of relationship include:

- *Ọha na eze* (crowd and king)
- *Okoro na agboghọ* (bachelor and spinster)
- *Mmuo na mmadu* (spirit and human beings)
- *Ewu na okukọ* (goat and chicken)
- *Ukwu na nta* (big and small)
- *Enyi na ogo* (friend and in-law)
- *Ikwu na ibe* (kins and peers)
- *Oke na nwunye* (male and female)
- *Nwoke na nwaanyi* (man and woman)
- *Nze na ozọ* (the noble and titled)

Example 5:

- Ewu na okuko biara ije ahu.
- Gọmentị na-akpọku ọha na eze n'igba mbọ na-erubere iwu obodo isi.
- Mmadu niile so na ndi a kporo oriri, ma oji na ocha.

Totality

When referring to an entirety of something, this group of binomials is used to show that everything is involved.

Binomials that fall into this category include:

- *Nta na imo* (odds and end)
- *Akụ na uba* (wealth and plenty)
- *Ukwu na aka* (leg and hand)
- *Onwa na kpakpando* (moon and star)
- *Ochie na ohuru* (old and new)

Examples 6:

- Nkechi gwara Adaku.ochie na ohuru mgbe ha na-ako onu.
- Omenuuko bu nwoke aku na uba ya bu aturu tawa n'obodo anyi.
- Ihe ihere Okonkwo mere nne na nna ya mere ha obara mgbali elu, n'ihi na Okonkwo but ukwu na aka ha.

Everywhere/Entirety

Binomials found under this category often times are used to refer to an entirety of a place. It shows that nowhere is left out; everywhere is inclusive. Binomials that can be grouped into this category include:

- *Elu na ala* (up and down)
- *Ugwu na ndida* (hills and mountains)
- *Ezi na ụzọ* (outside and road)
- *Ezi na ama* (Outside and open space)
- *Eluigwe na ụwa* (heaven and earth)
- *Ọhia na ụzọ* (bush and road)

Examples 7:

- Elu na ala megide ndi na-ebu anyi agha.
- Ajo onodu obodo anyi a metutara ewu na okukọ.
- Gaanu n'ugwu na ndida kowaputa uru ahuike baara mmadu.

Superiority/Nobility

Binomials that are found under this category are used when referring to superior or noble beings. They are not just ordinary people. They have higher powers than others. Sometimes, they could be spirit beings or mere mortals. Often times, they are a symbol of nobility. They include:

- *Mmụọ na mmadụ* (spirit and human being)
- *Chi na eke* (creative force and creator)
- *Nze na ọzọ* (the noble and the titled)

Examples 8

- Ndi nze na ozo putara n'igwe na mmemme iwa ji obodo anyi.
- Mmuo na mmadu mara nkeoma na nwaanyi anaghi ari elu nkwa.

Urgency/Seriousness

Some situations are matters that should be treated with seriousness or a matter of urgency. This set of binomials show that it's a matter of seriousness or urgency that is being talked about. They include:

- A. *Ọnwụ na ndụ* (dead or alive)
- B. *Ọsọ na ije* (running and walking)

Examples 9:

- *Ụdị ọsọ Okenta na Udemgba gbara mgbe ndị uwe ojii na-achụ ha bụ nke ọnwụ na ndụ.*
- *Ọnọdụ nwaanyi ahu meruru ahụ nọ na ya n'oge ugbu a bụ nke ọnwụ na ndụ.*
- *We're oso na ije gaa Burundi ngwa ahia gi tupu ndi ohi ebukoro ha*

From the above categories and examples, we can see that binomials exist in the Igbo language and these binomials can be group into different categories based on context as seen above.

Findings

Binomials, as we can see, exist in the Igbo language. These binomials are said to be expressions of two words joined by a conjunction. The Igbo language has a multiplicity of them as seen above.

This research work finds out that there are two types of Binomials; the reversible and the irreversible binomials. These reversible binomials are those types of binomials that can be changed if the two expressions are on the same form or class when placed on the same syntactic level. On the other hand, we found out irreversible binomials are those binomial expressions that cannot be uttered with or exchanged.

Furthermore, Binomials as an expression, has its meaning when standing as an alone as a singular unit, but when in relation with the native speakers, a different meaning is obtained.

These meanings are found in different life situations such as when one is happy, sad, in a close/friendly relationship, in an urgent situation, when in enmity, in totality, everywhere, everybody, etc.

Conclusion

Meaning can be viewed and understood in different ways because a word may have one meaning when standing alone and yet convey a different meaning depending on its context of usage. Therefore, this study investigates the semantic analysis of binomials—that is, the meanings derived from binomial expressions in the Igbo language as they relate to Igbo society. The objectives of the study are threefold: first, to explain what binomials are; second, to identify and classify their various types; and third, to analyze binomials from the perspective of native speakers. Based on these objectives, the study established several findings. It was found that binomials are expressions in which two words share a form of connectivity through the use of conjunctions. This connectivity is evident in both reversible and irreversible binomial types. The study also reveals that the combination of two words in the Igbo language carries important cultural and semantic implications, contributing to the richness of speech in various social and communicative contexts. In conclusion, the study successfully achieved all its objectives: it defined binomials, identified their types, and analyzed their meanings within Igbo society. The findings are significant to students and communicators, as they provide a source of diverse linguistic expressions suitable for specific contexts. To researchers, the study serves as a foundation for further linguistic investigation. Overall, this research contributes to the growth and enrichment of the Igbo language by highlighting the semantic depth and cultural value of its binomial expressions.

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