

## INTERCULTURAL EFFECTS ON SEMANTICS IN IGBO CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is about the intercultural effects on semantics in Igbo culture. The writer intends to find out how the mixture of Igbo culture with other cultures has influenced meaning in the Igbo cultural elements. This study was guided by triangular Relationship of Ogden and Richard (1923). In linguistics, semantics has to do with meaning; and this is the life of a language, because meaning leads to understanding and that is the base of communication which language stands for. Besides, meaning changes according to situations. In Igbo cultural setting, language is a mystery because every aspect of human life is pregnant with meaning; ranging from situations of life, objects, food and drinks, weather etc. An object can mean different things in different occasions. This paper strikes on the meaning hidden in Igbo cultural elements and how the mixture of pure Igbo culture with other cultures influenced the original meanings attached to these cultural elements. The following cultural elements served as footstool: Kola nut, palm wine, masquerade, wooden drum/metal gong, palmfrond, sound of animals and presence of some animals. At the end of the research, the result showed how modern ways of life, which came as a result of mixture in culture, erodes some meanings attached to the Igbo cultural elements. Solutions were equally proffered on how to protect good aspects of Igbo culture.*

**Keywords: Igbo Culture, Intercultural Effects, Language, Symbol, Semantics.**

### Introduction

In linguistics, semantics has to do with meaning and understanding of utterances or writings. It differs according to object, situation, community, etc. This means that an object or statement can have different meanings in different occasions.

In Igbo culture, language is a mystery. This stems from the Igbo understanding of the universe. The Igbo sees the world as a place for interaction between the humans and the spirits. So the living and the dead live and occupy the world. Language serves as the means of communication between the spirits and the humans. As such, language goes beyond verbal expression in daily conversation. There is communication at every situation. That is why they tied meaning to every aspect of life, like weather, movement of animals, position of the sun, beating of instruments etc.

However, in the modern time, there has been much interaction between the Igbo culture and other cultures of the world. This affected the original Igbo world view to a great extent. The importance attached to those elements of culture began to dwindle so as the meaning they express. It shows the level of intercultural effects in the semantics in Igbo culture.

This paper is set to examine the rate of influence modernity, brought about by intercultural activities, has over the meaning assigned to the Igbo cultural values and how to maintain the important aspects of Igbo culture and prevent them from going into extinction.

### **Conceptual Studies**

In order to do justice to this paper, there is need to look into some key concepts in this work. Understanding of those concepts will aid the researcher in the research and guide the reader in understanding this work better. The concepts include: Culture, Language, Symbols, Semantics,

#### **Culture**

Taylor (1871) defines culture as the umbrella term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in the society. This definition shows that cultural norms codify acceptable conduct in society. It is seen as a guideline for language and behaviour in a social group. It means that humans acquire culture through the learning process of inculturation and socialization which are manifested by the diversity of culture across societies.

Umezi and Ibeh (2020) define culture as a system that presents and represent the system of living of people in different places. This definition captures culture as the people's way of life, their beliefs, housing system, eating habit occupation etc.

Furthermore, Ilorah (2010) defines culture as the way of life of a people. This definition appears to be simple but it embodies a lot of meanings. The way of life comprises the results of group experience from the past up to the present time. His definition suggests that everything one does is influenced by the culture of the place where one is residing.

As it concerns this study, the researcher defines culture as the articulated method of living adopted by a particular group of people through which they give meaning to life and the events that happen in the world they found themselves.

#### **Language**

Campbell (2004) gave a definition of language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of utterances to communicate meaning. This shows that language is meant to pass message. Every statement in a language is meant to communicate something. So, language is a close structural system which consists of rules relating a particular sign to a particular meaning. It means that Campbell is stressing the fact that every language differ from the other through different signs that mean different things.

Furthermore, Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings.

The researcher, in this study, defines language as the generally accepted ways through which a group of people communicate among themselves and assign meaning to objects and events.

### **Symbol**

Udechukwu (2020) defines symbol as anything used to represent, express and stand for an event or situation. This definition sees symbol as short expressions for the identification of an object or situation. As such, symbols transmit messages as well as focus the mind on an idea. Nabofa (1994) defines symbol as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. This definition presents symbol as the outer projection of the inner meaning embedded in an object, person or event.

As it concerns this study, the researcher defines symbol as an external projector of the inner consensus meaning attached to an object by a group of people in their environment.

### **Semantics**

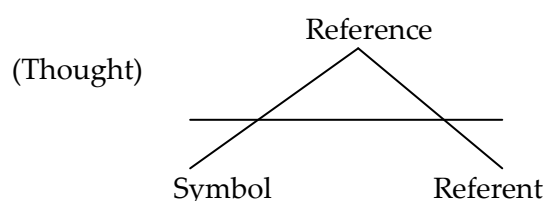
Syal and Jindal (2014) define semantics as the study of meaning in a language. This is a pregnant definition as they threw more light on that by emphasizing that language is used to express meaning which can be understood by others. But meaning exists in people's mind and people can express what is in their mind through the spoken and written form of language as well as through gestures, actions etc.

Ogbulogo (2004) defines semantics as the systematic and objective method of studying meaning in a linguistic field. This definition suggests that in semantics, there is every effort to remove speculations about meaning of words or utterances; despite the fact that it is difficult to get a static and stable meaning, because meaning, to a great extent, is determined by context and participants in a particular communication.

In this study, the researcher defines semantics as that level of linguistic analysis where meaning is analyzed for the proper understanding of utterances.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by triangular Relationship of Ogden and Richard (1923). They explained the meaning of a word with the help of a triangle.



The symbol is the spoken or written word; the reference is the information that the spoken or written shape of the word conveys to the reader/ hearer; and the referent is the thing or the object we talk about. The broken line means that there is no direct relationship between word and the object that it refers to. It is the human mind that links an object with the word used for that object.

## **Semantics in Igbo Culture**

Semantics as earlier stated is analysis meaning projected by signs and symbols. In Igbo cultural setting, different signs and symbols project a lot of meanings. As it concerns this study, the following will serve as the footstool: Kola nut, palm wine, masquerade, wooden drum/metal gong, palm fronds. Sound of some animals and presence of some animals. In order to get a good result, there need to look at the meanings hidden in these cultural elements before the mixture of Igbo culture with other cultures, the meaning they project in intercultural period and then from the changes, draw our conclusion.

## **The Nature of the Igbo Cultural Semantics in Crude Igbo Cultural Setting**

### **Kola nut**

In the original Igbo traditional setting, kolanut means a lot. As Umezi and Ibeh (2020) state that kola nut is the umbilical cord linking the Igbo language and the Igbo culture. Primarily, kola nut is a sign of welcome and hospitality in Igbo culture. When an Igbo receives a visitor and offers every other gifts outside kola nut, it is taken that he/she offered nothing to the visitor. Thus the Igbo say, "*kamaoji, o nyeghi m*" (even kola nut, he didn't offer me).

Furthermore, the number of robes in a kola nut broken in any occasion is pregnant with meaning. Kola nut carries a lot of respect as the Igbo people believe it is a symbol of unity between the living and the dead members of the Igbo community. The spirits speaks to the living through the number of robes which a kola nut bears in a single breaking in a particular occasion.

### **Palm Wine**

Palm wine is another semantic element in Igbo cultural setting. In Igbo cultural setting, palm wine speaks and means different things in different occasions. In the occasions like marriage ceremony, funeral ceremony, negotiations and agreements, it projects different meanings which are made visible through different gestures.

In marriage ceremony, palm wine is used to declare interest in marriage. It is equally used by the bride to show the public whom his husband is. As such, it seals the marriage covenant. The bride accepting a cup of palm wine from the father or his representative, sipping it little and handing it to the groom who finishes the wine, and the bride returns the cup to the father is the real sign of the seal of marriage agreement between the two families. Likewise it is used to separate already existing marriage.

Furthermore, in funeral ceremonies, the right of separation of the dead from the living is strongly manifested through the signs and symbols exhibited with palm wine. Palm wine is used to initiate and end the rite of passage in separating the dead from the living. In the funerals of renowned persons, stipulated kegs of palm wine must be provided in order to complete the rites, otherwise the whole ceremony would be null and void and of no effect.

In addition, in different agreements and covenants, semantic influence of palm wine cannot be over emphasized. Drinking of palm wine from the same cup is very symbolic. That single attitude seals a lot of agreements and covenants. As Umezi (2018) points out that palm wine

speaks in Igbo tongue, and it is understood by those who hears and understands the language of the Igbo culture.

### **Masquerade**

In Igbo cultural setting, the presence of masquerade is not just for social entertainment. The Igbo believe in the existence of two worlds, namely, the physical and the spiritual world. There is a strong bond between those in these two worlds. So, in Igbo cultural setting, masquerade signifies the presence of the spirits. As Arinze (1979) rightly defines masquerade as the embodied human spirit that appears on earth especially during festivals.

The Igbo believes strongly that masquerade is the embodied human spirit of a dead relative. That is why in Igbo land, any action performed by the masquerade is believed to have been done by the ancestors. As such it commands high respect among the Igbos. As Umezi and Ibeh (2021) remark that masquerade command a great deal of respect, as such it is used to maintain peace and order and to make and enforce laws in different Igbo communities.

### **Wooden drum/ Metal gong**

In the original Igbo cultural setting, wooden drum and metal gong are symbolic. As Udechukwu (2020) classifies wooden drum and metal gong as cultural symbols in Igbo cultural system, they stand as means of communication. Number of sounds at each beaten stands for different meanings; and the people are at home with that. Convoking of meetings, announcement of deaths, security alerts, etc all have their signals from the number of sounds of the drum/gong.

### **Palm Fronds**

Palm tree is one of the most sacred trees in Igbo cultural setting. In a special way, palm frond as a part of palm tree is the most sacred part of palm tree. In Igbo cultural setting it is pregnant with meanings at different occasions. Placing of palm frond on any object makes that object sacred, holding of palm fronds by warriors coming back from war symbolizes victory; in the same vein, holding of palm fronds high by enemies in war zone means surrender and sue for peace etc.

### **Sound of Some Animals**

The sound of some animals drives some meanings home to the minds of the Igbo people. Cock crow at dawn means the dawning of a new day. The crying of an owl in the day time is an indication of an omen like death of an important person etc.

### **The Presence of Some Animals**

In Igbo cultural setting, some animals are taken as totems. The presence of such animals in some places in different times strikes some semantic significance. The constant presence of animals like sacred snake, tortoise, soldier ants, etc in a person's compound is an indication of a divine call to the office of priesthood to a particular deity. It shows that somebody in that compound has been called to minister to the deity possessing that animal. As Arinze (1979) says that the presence of soldier ants or animals sacred to a particular deity in a compound is one of the signs of divine call to priesthood of that deity or call to be a diviner. As such it calls for divination in order to ascertain the mind of the gods. Besides, presence of vulture indicates bloody sacrifice taking place somewhere around.

### **The Nature of the Igbo Cultural Semantics in Igbo-Western Intercultural Experience**

The advent of Europeans who colonized Africa in General and Nigeria in particular had a great impact on the original Igbo culture. The presence of the Westerners in Igbo land gave rise to interaction of Igbo people with the Westerners. As people from different cultural background interact, there is always exchange of cultural experiences.

Besides, the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 resulted in merging the Igbos with other tribes irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. This gave birth to a country called Nigeria. This situation gave room for interaction between the Igbo culture and the cultures of other tribes in Nigerian, even that of the Europeans who colonized Nigeria. This resulted in adulteration of the original Igbo culture. As such, semantic element took another look.

In addition, travels and urbanization accelerated the mixture of Igbo culture with other cultures in the world. This experience brought about different views of the world and the realities surrounding human life and existence among the Igbos. This affected the original semantic views of the Igbos. As such, the original semantic attachments to some images of Igbo cultural elements began to erode; giving rise to another view of life and existence among the Igbos.

Analysis below shows how intercultural reality affected semantic influence in Igbo cultural life.

#### **Kola nut**

With the intercultural influence being witnessed in every part of Igbo land, the welcome tag attached to kola nut seed is gradually dwindling. Today any other edible can stand in place of kola nut without any apology. Things like biscuits, groundnuts any soft drink can stand in for kola nut. Even when the actual kola nut is presented and broken, the original cultural meaning attached to the number of robes in each breaking is no longer strictly observed.

#### **Masquerade**

In the intercultural era, masquerade is seen as the object of entertainment. The appearance of masquerade in events is mainly to entertain the people. As masquerades display every person including women and children pass at ease and spray money to the performing masquerade.

#### **Wooden drum/Metal gongs**

In Igbo modern world view, these are mainly seen and classified as Igbo musical instruments. There is no longer strong inner semantics attached to them. Urbanization and modernization have displaced the broadcasting function of these instruments and reduced them to mere musical instruments.

#### **Palm Fronds**

Palm fronds are seen as part of palm tree, by a modern Igbo man. As it stands now, there is not much cultural meaning attached to it. This is as a result of mixture of Igbo culture with other cultures of the world.

### **Sound of Some Animals**

The sound of different animals makes no deeper sense to the Igbos in the modern sense of living. There is no religious/cultural significance attached to it. It could be caused by some uncomfortable things to the animal in question. As such, it is devoid of inner meaning being projected.

### **The Presence of Some Animals**

Belief in sacred animals has drastically reduced in Igbo world view. As it stands now, movements and presence of animals have less significance. It could be seen as caused by conducive nature of the environment. Animals move and stay where they feel more secured in terms of feeding, shelter and life security. As such, modern Igbo man attaches less cultural or religious meaning to movement of animals.

### **Analysis of the Findings**

The findings of this study appear in two opposite periods and world views. The first is the original Igbo cultural world views regarding their environment and meanings attached to life; the second is the period of intercultural reality in Igbo life and experiences. There is need to access and analyze the two based on the cultural elements selected and get the proper result of the study and proffer recommendations where necessary.

### **The Place of Kola nut among the Igbo**

The findings of this study show that in the original Igbo cultural setting, the people placed a lot of meanings in kola nut. As the name stands, primarily it is a sign of welcome and hospitality among the Igbo people. It carries a lot of respect; as the Igbos believe it is a symbol of unity between the living and the dead members of the Igbo community. The spirits speak to the living through the number of robes which a kola nut bears in a single breaking in a particular occasion. Significantly, kola nut has no replacement as it stands as a symbol of welcome and hospitality.

However, the findings equally indicate that with the advent of Europeans which engineered the mixture of Igbo culture with other cultures of the world, the Igbo world view started to change. The change affected the semantic weight of kola nut. As it stands, in the world view of a modern Igbo, some other food items can stand in place of kola nut in events without any apology. Some younger generation Igbos do not know and do not care to know the meanings attached to the number of robes of kola nut when it is broken. In some places, even when the original Igbo kola nut is presented, the hierarchy and the process of the kola nut ceremony is not well observed.

These call for serious concern. It shows that the encounter of Igbo people with other cultures of the world has a drastic influence on the original Igbo world view where the meaning of Igbo life is housed. This is making the Igbos lose meanings attached to the fundamental cultural values.

### **Masquerade**

In Igbo cultural setting, the presence of masquerade signifies the real presence of the ancestors. The traditional Igbo believes that there is a serious bond unifying the living and the dead. This unity is physically expressed with the presence of masquerades.

However, as the Igbo people started mixing and interacting with peoples of different cultures, those cultures intermingled with Igbo culture and had a drastic effect on the core aspects of it. Today, modernity brought by intercultural influences has made the some Igbo people to reduce masquerade to a mere object of entertainment. The original meaning of masquerade has been lost in some communities in the ocean of modernity. In some communities in Igbo land, even women and children stay close to masquerades and even spray money on them as they perform in public. By and large, masquerades command little or no respect among the Igbos of this age.

### **Palm Wine**

The study shows that palm tree is a sacred tree in Igbo land. Likewise, palm wine is a sacred wine in the original Igbo cultural setting. The presence and use of palm wine in different occasions in Igbo land is pregnant with meanings depending on the occasion involved. The traditional Igbos use palm wine to convey messages in different occasions. The meaning lies on the occasion at hand. There are a lot of rules guiding palm wine right from the production stage, the type of container, the system of covering the container, carrying the wine, pouring it out of the container, sharing and drinking the wine. All these are procedural processes which convey a lot of meanings in different occasions. Palm wine is strong in different rites of passage, ranging from marriage ceremonies, and funerals. Absence of palm wine in any of these ceremonies makes it null and void.

However, the research indicates that in the modern time, on account of intercultural effects on the meaning of Igbo cultural realities, palm wine has been stripped of its symbolic garment as a sacred drink in Igbo cultural setting. Many Igbo people now take palm wine as one of the drinks served at events. As such, some of the rules observed in the respect of palm wine as a sacred drink are no longer observed. In some occasions, even women serve palm wine to men, and nothing wrong is felt about it. There are also cases of people manufacturing artificial palm wine. Besides, some of the rites of passage where palm wine is the *sine qua non*, like marriage ceremonies, funerals etc. manufactured foreign wines are used in place of palm wine and the people still felt the validity. This is an indication that the mixture of foreign culture with Igbo culture is of a negative effect in Igbo cultural life.

### **Wooden Drum/Metal Gong**

Wooden drum/metal gong has been veritable means of communication in Igbo cultural setting. The number of sound in each occasion symbolizes different things. Announcement of death, signaling of danger and carefulness of the people, convoking of meetings etc are communicated differently by means of the method of beating each drum/gong.

However, in this modern time, because of sophisticated means of communication, drums/gongs have lost their original semantic relevance. They are now regarded as ordinary musical instrument. This suggests erosion of the semantic picture of those instruments because of intercultural effects on Igbo cultural values.

### **Palm Fronds**

Palm fronds in original Igbo cultural setting posits the semantic picture of victory, peace and sacredness. In crude Igbo traditional setting, victory in war is indicated through raising of palm fronds by the victorious warriors.

In the modern period marked with intercultural activities, the original Igbo semantic picture of palm fronds has been lost. Today, palm fronds are just taken as part of palm tree with no religious/cultural significance attached to it.

### **Results and Recommendations**

From the findings of the study and the analysis of the findings, the following results emerged: The intercultural reality in Igbo land eroded the original semantics attached to certain Igbo cultural elements which project Igbo cultural values. This is evidenced from the fact that some cultural elements in Igbo cultural setting lost their original meaning on account of mixture of the Igbo cultural with other cultures of the world. Some key cultural elements used as objects of study all indicated loss of original meaning in the context of intercultural experiences.

In the first place, the original semantic picture of kola nut has been lost. As it stands now, any edible can serve as kola nut among the Igbos with no apology.

Besides, masquerades are seen as objects of entertainment in various occasions in different Igbo communities; whereas in the original Igbo cultural setting, they are seen as the embodied human spirits. They stand in for the ancestors in the land of the living.

Secondly, the result shows that palm wine, which was a sacred drink in the original Igbo cultural setting has lost its inner meaning among the Igbos. It is now served as normal drinks in occasions. Even women and children serve it. This is one of the effects of intercultural reality.

Furthermore, presence of animals in certain places is now taking as something usual. There is no inner meaning attached to it unlike in Igbo traditional setup, where spiritual powers are attached to such happenings.

In addition, the sounds of some animals do not present any inner meaning to the present day Igbos. This is because the original Igbo culture which assigned meaning to that has been eroded.

Equally, palm fronds that projected victory, peace and sacredness in the original Igbo culture have now lost its inner meaning. Some Igbos now takes it as ordinary part of palm tree.

### **Recommendations**

Having conducted this study to the end and having seen the result of the study indicating fully that intercultural realities effected meaning in Igbo cultural setting negatively, the researcher is recommending the following:

First, there is need for effective teaching of African/Igbo culture in secondary schools. This will help to infuse into the minds of the students the core Igbo life. When that is done, the students will be able to know the meanings Igbo people attach to life and different aspects of human living.

Second, there is need for preservation of Igbo cultural materials which project Igbo cultural values. When this is done, the future generation Igbo will see what they will lay hands on in the understanding of Igbo meaning of life.

Third, there is need to carry out more research on the core values of Igbo life and existence. This is to lay a strong foundation for the future generation of Igbo people to know the true history of the Igbo race.

## Conclusion

This study was successful. The researcher succeeded in bringing out the effects of intercultural reality on the semantics of Igbo culture. The result of the study shows that inter cultural reality had a drastic effect on the semantics of Igbo culture. The study on the selected items of Igbo cultural elements shows that the original meanings attached to those items in the original Igbo cultural setting have been eroded by the intercultural reality. The researcher equally offered some recommendations on how to restore the lost glory of the Igbo cultural elements.

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