

## SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF AREA NAMES IN NNEWI METROPOLIS

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the semantic analysis of area names in Nnewi Metropolis. It aims to identify the semantic meanings of these area names as understood by Nnewi native speakers, as well as the intended meanings within the framework of referential semantics. The data were obtained from interviews with native speakers from the four major villages in Nnewi: Umudim, Otolu, Uruagu, and Nnewichi. The theoretical framework adopted for the study is the referential theory of meaning. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the area names. Twenty participants who are natives of Nnewi Metropolis and who have spent the greater part of their lives in Nnewi were interviewed to represent the research population. The results of the study show that area names in Nnewi Metropolis characteristically derive most of their names from an eponymous ancestor (ancestral links) rather than from directional features. It can be concluded that the historical narratives behind some of these area names helped the researcher determine their accurate morphological and syntactic structures as found within Nnewi Metropolis.

**Keywords:** Area names, Semantic meaning, Igbo, Nnewi, Native Speakers

### **1.0 Introduction**

The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or other imposed) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities but may have issues with the labels others place on them.

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. Ofoegbu (2022) 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. He also opines that it captures all aspects of human thoughts and endeavors. Language is what is spoken or written and it consists of words in meaningful and agreed order (Ofoegbu & Usar, 2017). Again Ofoegbu (2025) posits that Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures and that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication.

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 semantics 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 binominals as conveyed in the minds and hearts of Igbo native speakers.

Semantics is the study of meaning in language. Ofoegbu & Usar (2018) opine that semantics studies and analyses meaning in language, particularly how words, morphemes and expressions convey meaning. Area names also

represent the identity of the nation. By studying area names, we can get information about the history, beliefs, lifestyle, culture, and social structures of societies. From this point of view, research related to Uzbek place names should be carefully conducted not only in Nnewi Metropolis.

People from different professional backgrounds may be drawn to the study of some kind of geographical names. To language experts, focusing on the genealogical aspects of specific names or in the taxonomy of languages in general, toponyms contain a treasure of ancient language elements. More so, recurrent name elements are known to store information on the history of settlement and land reclamation, the economic activities of original settlers and political developments (Uluocha 2015). Ofoegbu (2011) says that some words have peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage and having a meaning other than its logical or grammatical one.

Batoma (2006) identifies that, names are given in particular languages whose morphology, syntax and semantics inform their meaning to a great extent. This implies that understanding place names (habitation names) hinges on taking a critical look at the internal structure of the word(s) and the syntactic structure that constitute the name besides sociolinguistics, sociocultural, historical and ethno-linguistic domains. Toponymic research contributes greatly to the understanding of the history of a people. It reveals people's identity, history, social and political relations. This makes this study very important owing to the fact that not much work has been done as regards place names in Igbo. Most place names today are what could be termed 'Linguistic fossils'. Although they originated from our ancestors as descriptions of places in terms of topography, appearance, situation, use, ownership, or other association, have generally lost their linguistic meaning over the course of time. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the antiquity of places (Helleland,2006).

Nnewi is located about 15 miles south of Onitsha and has a population of about 958,000. The city spans over 1,076.9 square miles (2,789 km<sup>2</sup>) in Anambra State. As of 2005, Nnewi Metropolitan Area and its satellite towns are home to nearly 2.5 million residents. The names themselves likely reflect ancestral origins or ancestral territories, as the Nnewi community grew from various descent groups that migrated from other regions, such as Benin, Agbaja, Abatete, Ikenga, and Ndoni. Nnewi is an industrial city and the second-largest city in Anambra State in southeastern Nigeria. The city is known for producing a diversified range of transportation entrepreneurs from transporters, to spare parts dealers and manufacturers.

Nnewi is the only town in Nnewi North LGA. It has four villages (sub-towns) that make up the one-town local government, which includes; Otolo, Uruagu, Umudim and Nnewi-Ichi. The traditional ruler of Nnewi- Igwe of Nnewi -presently is Igwe Kenneth Orizu the 3<sup>rd</sup> of which this royal family is from Otolo Nnewi, and for this reason, is regarded as first among equals of the four villages. This research examines the semantic meaning of area names in Nnewi Metropolis.

### **1.1 Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this research generally is to investigate the meaning of area names in Nnewi Metropolis and to see how these areas get their names and meanings. To achieve the aim of this study, research is directed towards the following objectives

1. To identify area names in Nnewi Metropolis names and how they are constituted (syntax)
2. To examine the meaning of these areas names (semantics) in relation to the history and society that form these place names.
3. To examine the relationship between the constituent and meaning of these area names.

### **2.0 Literature Review**

Kostanski (2009) defines toponyms (place names) as names to denote or identify human habitation (cities, towns, villages etc.) and political boundaries (states, municipalities etc.). They identify and respect culture, heritage and landscapes, and therefore offer much to cartographers, historians, genealogists, linguists, language planners and tourists. Weiner (1991pg. 45) emphasizes that place names act "as mnemonics for the historical actions of humans that make places singular and significant". Basso (1990 pg.144) explains that because of the inseparable connection of toponyms to specific localities, toponyms may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life.

A place is known to the outside world through its identity. The travellers visit places by their names in the course of their journey. Place names of a region speak about the geographical and historical peculiarities revealing cultural identities of the people. Place names do speak when there is no history. Place names narrate their interesting characteristics. Hence a place name is an expression of the name giver's thought process. (Padhi&Jena 2015).

Ebeogu (1993) in his study, 'Onomastics and Igbo Tradition of Politics' explains the traditional naming in Igbo as it relates to place names. He this using the morphological process of prefixation to show the common ancestry of Igbo toponyms. In his words, he posits that:

These names begin with prefixes like "UMU"-(children of- /offspring of-), "NDI"-(people of-), "MBA"-(clan of-), "ANI"/"ALA"-(land of-) or "AMA"-( settlement of-)...., ...these communities trace their origin to a common ancestry. Ebeogu (1993 pg. 82).

He also further explains that most and virtually all Igbo communities and clans even without the presence of such prefix as discussed and shown above share the same characteristics explained above. Showing that the inclusion of the prefixes; "UMU", "NDI", "ALA", "AMA", etc. is a descriptive feature and even without that visible feature, the patriarchal Igbo naming system of places exists in virtually all Igbo toponym .

Onukawa (2012) in his study entitled "Directional toponyms in Igbo; a preliminary study", he sought to explain the derivation of place names in Igbo using two major criteria; the sun (position of the sun) and topography (upwardness or downwardness of the soil or land). This He did explaining that using the sun and topography was a major form of deriving names for places in Igbo a there were no time piece at the time these places were named. On the sun based directional toponyms, he explained the Igbo cardinal form to have four Igbo descriptions for North, South, East and West with the following diagram.

Onicha/Ama  
Ihite + Aba/Ikenga  
Owerre/Mbaaja

The north being Onicha/Ama, the east being Aba/Ikenga, the south being Owerre/Mbaaja, and the west being Ihite.

Onwukwe and Nwaeze (2017) in their study, "Ethnographic Study of Toponyms in Ngwa: Preliminary Notes", explain the sub-directional toponyms in Ngwa. They used the Key Informant Interview method to gather data which they analyzed descriptively. They identified sub-directional toponyms for the four-cardinal sun-based directions namely: Itu (north), Asa (south), Abayi/Ahiaba (east), and Osusu (west) in Ngwa. In their study, they were able to explain assumptions made in explaining non-directional toponyms i.e. toponyms with ancestral links. Establishing the ancestral linkage between Ngwa toponyms, they exemplified with Nsulu in Isialangwa South having about twenty-one communities in it. One of their major findings is that the ancestral linking nominal in Ngwa toponyms are different from the contemporary politically-demarcated entities called autonomous communities in Ngwa and that toponyms in Ngwa exhibit antonymic relationships in the aspect of position of settlement and seniority in settlement as well as ancestral linkages between them.

### 3.0 Theoretical Framework

Referential theories view meaning as the relationship between expressions in language and objects in the real world. According to referential theory, the meaning of a word is the object it refers to. A word's meaning can be traced to the physical object it points to. Referential theories define meaning as a mental label that allows humans to identify and indicate objects in reality. The relationship between a word and its referent, or the object it describes, is what gives words meaning according to referential theories. The meaning of the given word is considered the pointer to the selected object in the real world

Referential theories define meaning as a label in human consciousness used to identify and point out objects in the external world. As a label, meaning usually emerges through observation and inference. According to this theory, therefore, the meanings of lexemes or vocabularies can be determined through their physical referents.

Semantics is the point where geography, linguistics, and mapmaking intersect, leading to the question of finding the appropriate linguistic form for a specific entity. When dealing with syntax and meaning and their interrelatedness, however, the issue is not simply one of right or wrong, but rather what makes sense and what is relevant (Meiring, 1993).

In Igbo place-naming practices, another prominent feature is the influence of topography and natural elements such as mountains, valleys, farmlands, and plateaus. These features are clearly reflected in toponyms such as Enugu, derived from Enu-ugwu (meaning "hilltop" or "mountain top"). The role of topography in area names is also explained by Udoh (1971), who highlights the use of the two epithets ani and enu, meaning "downward" and "upward," respectively.

### 4.0 Methodology

The data for this research was gotten from Igbo grammar books, seminar papers, articles, journals, natives of Nnewi sampled from the communities that make up Nnewi Metropolis and the researcher's native introspection was consulted.

The research was conducted in the four villages (Uruagu, Otolu, Umudim, and Nnewichi) that made up Nnewi Metropolis. Simple random sample technique was used to select the area names. Twenty participants who are natives of Nnewi Metropolis and who have spent greater part of their lives in Nnewi were used to represent the

research population and they were interviewed. The researcher identified the meaning of area names in Nnewi Metropolis from the collected data. Also the researcher's intuitive knowledge of the town as a native speaker was applied.

### 5.0 Semantic Analysis of Area Names in Nnewi

Igbo toponyms are majorly constructions of two nominal (N1 and N2) which occur associatively. These syntactic units could be broken into further morphological items. This levels up to the morphological concept of prefixation or suffixation of the toponyms in Igbo (Meirng 1993). In many Igbo toponyms, if not all, they bear an explanation of either natural characteristics, settlement location, occupation or eponymous ancestry etc. Nida (2008).

Semantic analysis of area names in the Nnewi Metropolis reveals the central role of traditional kinship and settlement in its naming conventions, with the four autonomous quarters of Nnewi North (Otolo, Uruagu, Umudim, and Nnewichi) being key components of the city's historical identity. It is very important to note that the ways in which man names rivers, valleys, mountains, towns and other environmental entities reflects how he thinks and lives and what his psychological disposition and sub conscious mind produces in his daily contact with universal semantic domains like entities, events, abstract concepts and their relationships. The analysis are as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> Nominal + 2<sup>nd</sup> Nominal = Area Name

1. Nne + ewi = Nnewi

Mother+ rabbit = Mother rabbit.

The toponym "Nnewi" was adopted in appreciation of the role played by rabbits in a time in history of the town ( Ijezie, 1987).

2. Ana + Edo = Anaedo

Land of Gold. Edo is the supreme deity and goddess of Nnewi (Ike, 2024)

3. Nnewi + ichi (nzu) = Nnewichi

Mother+ rabbit+ chalk = Mother rabbit chalk

Nnewichi was made out of chalk inside a pot which Chukwu (God) gave the goddess of Edo.

4. Edo + oji = Edoji

Gold + iroko tree = Gold of the iroko tree

Descendants of this family have the custom of dedicating all their iroko trees to Edos' shrine.

5. Ebele + ogo = Ebeleogo

Mercy + in-laws = Mercy of the in-laws.

Adeniyi (1999) as cited in Onukawa (2012) explains that 'some place names may be introduced by explorers as they encountered good and bad fortunes in their travels', he (Onukawa) also gave some source of Igbo place names to include records of memorable event (wars), reference for aspects of social customs and belief of people and before and even descriptions of the physical environment and natural features. The name Nnewi was adopted by the natives due to the role played by the rabbit in the history of the town.

The following toponyms have ancestral roots in Igbo. These toponyms are basically products of affixation (especially prefixation) as explained by Ebeogu (1993). Examples: Umudim, Umuele, Umuanuka, etc

1<sup>st</sup> Nominal + 2<sup>nd</sup> Nominal = Area Name

6. Ụmụ + enem = Umuenem

Children/ descendants of Enem

7. Ụmụ+ dīm = Umudim

Children/ descendants of Dim

8. Ụmụ+ Dīm̄kwa = Umudimkwa

Children/ descendants of Dīm̄kwa

9. Ụmụ + Ele = Umuele

Children/ descendants of Ele ( one of the four deities in Nnewi).

10. Umu + anuka = Umuanuka

Children/ descendants of Anuka

11. Ndị + Ojukwu = Ndiojukwu

People/ descendants of Ojukwu

12. Ndi + mgbu = Ndingbu

People/ descendants of Mgbu

13. Ụmụ + ezena = Umuezena

Children/ descendants of Ezena

14. Ọtọ + lo = Otolo

Base/ foundation + Belonging to/ of = Base of

The area was named "Otolo" because it is the foundation" or "the base of the community." In the context of Nnewi, Otolo is often considered the central or founding quarter, and the Obi of Otolo is regarded as

the paramount ruler of Nnewi. The name "Otolu" reflects the quarter's significance in Nnewi's history and cultural heritage.

15. Mba + nagu = Mbanagu

Community of Nagu . “ Mbanagu” reflect the family lineage of “ Nagu ”.

16. Uru + agu = Uruagu

Descendants of Leopard. “ Uruagu ” one of the autonomous community of Nnewi adopted the name because they are descendants of fierce warrior.

Umu” according to Ebeogu (1993) is a prefix that creates an ancestral connotation/link. In most cases, the occupation of the eponymous fathers was sometimes used to name a place instead of using their personal names. Though this phenomenon is not too common in the general Igbo place naming practice, it stands out in some communities of the Igbo society.

1<sup>st</sup> Nominal + 2<sup>nd</sup> Nominal = Area Name

17. Oko+ ofia= Okofia

Great + Forest .

18. Okpuno + Eze= Okpunoeze

Choosing one of the King/ selected one belonging to the royalty.

19. Obi + uno = Obiuno

Heart + house = The heart of the house.

20. Aka + mmili = Akammili

Hand of the river. The area “ Akammili ” was named because it is located near a river.

The above is a schema explained by Onukawa (2012 pg. 37) as a toponym reflecting direction of position i.e. direction associated with position in other words when the directional nominal occurs before the positional nominal.

On the other hand, if the nominal that occurs first is the positional nominal, then the toponym interprets as position associated with direction. In Nnewi culture, names often reflect family lineage, community affiliation, or notable characteristics.

## 6.0. Discussion of the Findings.

It is important to note that area names in Nnewi Metropolis bear a characteristic feature of deriving most their names from an eponymous father (ancestral link) more than exhibiting directional features. It is very important to also identify the predominant use of ‘umu’ and ‘edo’ in Nnewi ancestral toponyms. Area names might reflect the quarter’s history, cultural identity, or ancestral heritage.

## 7.0 Conclusion

From the study, it can be observed that Nnewi Metropolis overtly represents Igbo culture in the naming of both places and people. The study of African names and naming practices—including town names—has been crucial in recovering and reconstructing African heritage. According to Batoma (2006, p. 2), “a major trend in African Studies today consists of using traces of African culture embedded in African names and naming practices to recover or reconstruct African heritage.” The emphasis is often placed on two categories of names: ethnonyms and toponyms. Although this study does not focus on the historical foundations of these settlements, historical information was sometimes essential for determining the morphological and syntactic structures of the area names. The historical narratives behind some of the habitation names helped the researcher identify their accurate morphological and syntactic forms. In Nnewi culture, names frequently reflect family lineage, community affiliation, or notable characteristics.

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