POLYSEMY AND MEANING EXTENSION IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH

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Abstract
Polysemy and meaning extension are vital processes in the evolution of New Englishes, especially in multilingual and postcolonial contexts where English adapts to reflect local realities. Nigerian English (NigE), one of the most vibrant African varieties of English, demonstrates semantic innovations that go beyond the norms of Standard British or American English. This study investigates how polysemy—the coexistence of multiple related senses in a word—and meaning extension operates in Nigerian English. Drawing on data from Nigerian newspapers, social media discourse, and spoken interactions, the study identifies and categorizes words that have acquired extended meanings in everyday Nigerian usage.The analysis reveals that Nigerian English employs polysemy across four major domains: cultural extensions (e.g., chop meaning "eat" or "embezzle"), pragmatic extensions (e.g., sorry used to express empathy; go-slow for "traffic jam"), institutional extensions (e.g., defend meaning "to present a thesis"), and metaphorical extensions (e.g., scatter meaning "destroy" or "excite"). These findings underscore that semantic extensions in Nigerian English are not random deviations but systematic adaptations that arise from the need to encode cultural practices, accommodate indigenous linguistic influences, and enhance communicative efficiency. The study adopts a descriptive approach in analyzing the data. It concludes that polysemy and meaning extension enrich the expressive capacity of Nigerian English, affirm its sociolinguistic legitimacy, and highlight the creativity of Nigerian speakers in localizing a global language.
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1. Introduction

Ofoegbu (2012) defines language as "the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Nweke (2021) posits that as human beings, we communicate our ideas using language. 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 (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as man's means of communication. That it is only humans that communicate with language. Nweke (2024) says communication involves the practical skills of listening and expressing thoughts. Again Nweke and Okeke (2023) submits that in writing and in speech, language is put together to communicate meaning for a particular purpose. Ofoegbu and Udoye (2011) posit that humans use language to communicate emotions and feelings which are reflected in their everyday language use.

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. Nweke (2024) opines that Language is an important tool in the society and thus, in its multifunctional ways, plays crucial roles in human life. It is fundamentally a communicative tool characterised by taking systematically into account the speaker's and hearer's side, and the communicative needs of the speaker and of the given language community. That is, it involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding. 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. Nweke (2024) emphasizes that there is recognition of a relationship between language and society that has existed from the very beginning. 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. 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. Nweke and Okeke (2025) articulates that Language in its multifunctional ways enables us to participate in communicative acts with other people; to take on roles and to express and understand feelings, attitudes and judgments; relates what is said (or written) to the real world and to other linguistic events.

The English language, as a global medium of communication, has undergone extensive localization in contexts where it interacts with indigenous languages and cultures. Nigeria, with its vast linguistic diversity of over 500 indigenous languages (Bamgbose 1991), presents one of the most dynamic contact zones for English. Introduced during the colonial period and subsequently entrenched as the official language of governance, education, and media, English in Nigeria has evolved into a distinct variety known as Nigerian English (NigE). Scholars such as Bamgbose (1995), Jowitt (1991), and Kperogi (2015) have consistently argued that Nigerian English is not simply a deviation from Standard British English but a legitimate linguistic variety shaped by local realities.

One of the most striking characteristics of Nigerian English is the way words acquire new or extended meanings that reflect uniquely Nigerian experiences. This process is best captured through the concepts of polysemy and meaning extension. Polysemy refers to the existence of multiple related meanings within a single lexical item, while meaning extension involves broadening the semantic range of a word to accommodate novel contexts. Both processes are universal features of language change, but in Nigerian English, they occur with remarkable frequency and creativity due to factors such as cultural reinterpretation, pragmatic necessity, and language contact.

For example, the word "chop''", which in Standard English means "to cut roughly," has in Nigerian English extended to mean "to eat" and metaphorically "to embezzle." Similarly, "go-slow", which in its literal sense implies moving at a gradual pace, has been redefined to specifically denote a traffic jam, reflecting the realities of Nigerian urban life. Institutional usages such as defend (to orally present a thesis or project) further show how Nigerian English innovates within academic and administrative contexts.

These examples highlight that polysemy and meaning extension in Nigerian English are not linguistic "errors" but legitimate processes of semantic innovation. They serve communicative needs, express cultural identity, and enrich the vocabulary of Nigerian English in ways that Standard English cannot always capture. Yet, despite the prominence of these features, relatively few studies have focused on systematically documenting and analyzing polysemy and semantic extension as central aspects of Nigerian English.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how Nigerian English users extend the meanings of existing words across cultural, pragmatic, institutional, and metaphorical contexts. By drawing examples from print media, social media, and spoken discourse, the paper demonstrates how these semantic innovations reflect the dynamic interplay between English and Nigeria's sociocultural environment. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in World Englishes, semantics, and sociolinguistics, and affirms Nigerian English as both a creative and legitimate linguistic variety.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Polysemy in Semantics

Ofoegbu (2022) defines Semantics as the study and analysis of meaning and the meaning of a word is the idea a word conveys in the heart or mind of the speaker or hearer. Polysemy has been a central concern in semantics because it demonstrates the flexibility and dynamism of lexical meaning. Again Ofoegbu (2018), asserts that semantics deals with how meaning is encoded in language, especially in words and polysemy, and how semantic relations or creativity are realized in communication. Ofoegbu (2011) says that some words have peculiarity of polysemy approved by usage and having a meaning other than its logical or grammatical one. Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), demonstrate how words derive their meanings and how they are structured around lexico-semantic, choices that are carefully selected to achieve polysemy in language use. According to Lyons (1977), polysemy is the phenomenon where a single lexical item develops multiple but related senses. For instance, the word "head" in Standard English can mean a body part (the head of a man), a leader (the head of department), or the top of an object (the head of a table). Lakoff (1987) and cognitive semanticists argue that polysemy is best explained through radial categories, in which a prototype meaning extends into other domains through conceptual metaphors and metonymy. This view suggests that polysemy is not accidental but systematic, reflecting how human cognition maps relationships between concepts.

2.2 Meaning Extension and Semantic Innovation

Closely linked to polysemy is the process of meaning extension, whereby a word broadens its semantic range to accommodate new communicative needs. Palmer (1981) explains that semantic extension is a natural outcome of language use, particularly in multilingual and contact environments. Traugott and Dasher (2002) note that extension often occurs through grammaticalization and metaphorical shifts, where concrete senses develop abstract or figurative uses. In contact varieties of English, meaning extension is especially common because speakers use available English words to capture indigenous cultural concepts that may not have direct equivalents.

2.3 World Englishes and Lexical Innovation

The framework of World Englishes, developed by Kachru (1992), provides a lens for understanding semantic extension in Nigerian English. Kachru's model situates Nigeria in the "Outer Circle," where English is institutionalized and localized to meet communicative needs. Scholars of World Englishes emphasize that features

like lexical innovation, code-switching, and semantic extension are natural outcomes of nativization rather than signs of "error" (Bamgbose, 1995; Schneider, 2007).

Research on other varieties shows similar trends. In Indian English, words like batchmate (classmate from the same cohort) and prepone (to move an appointment earlier) demonstrate meaning extension (Kachru, 2005). In Singapore English, terms like chop (to reserve a seat) and send (to escort someone home) illustrate localized polysemy (Platt & Weber, 1980). These examples confirm that semantic innovation is a shared feature of New Englishes.

2.4 Nigerian English and Semantic Change

Nigerian English has been described as one of the most creative and vibrant African Englishes (Bamgbose, 1995; Jowitt, 1991; Kperogi, 2015). Scholars note that semantic change in Nigerian English is influenced by three main factors:

Contact with indigenous languages, which leads to calques and semantic transfer. For instance, the widespread extension of sorry to express empathy mirrors pragmatic norms in Nigerian languages such as Yoruba and Igbo.

Sociocultural adaptation, where words are redefined to fit Nigerian realities. For example, go-slow reflects traffic congestion common in Nigerian cities.

Institutional and administrative adaptation, where words acquire meanings tied to education, governance, and politics, such as defend for "presenting a thesis" or long-leg for "influence."

Adegbija (2004) highlights that such innovations are not errors but pragmatic strategies to enrich communication. Bamiro (2006) further emphasizes that semantic extensions in Nigerian English are evidence of "domestication," where English is appropriated to express Nigerian identities and worldviews.

2.5 Gap in the Literature

Although much has been written about the phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic features of Nigerian English, relatively fewer studies have provided a systematic account of polysemy and meaning extension. Existing works tend to cite examples in passing without analyzing them thematically or linking them to theoretical models of polysemy. This study fills that gap by offering an empirical analysis of polysemous words in Nigerian English, categorized across cultural, pragmatic, institutional, and metaphorical domains.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive approach of data analysis by Ofoegbu (2022) was employed to summarize and interpret the collected data. Since the goal is to identify and analyze instances of polysemy and meaning extension in Nigerian English, the approach will focus on how the words are used on a daily basis.

3.2 Data Sources

Data for this study were drawn from three main sources in order to ensure a balanced representation of written and spoken Nigerian English:

a. Print Media (Newspapers and Magazines): Articles from national dailies such as The Guardian (Nigeria), Punch, and Vanguard published between 2020 and 2024 were examined. Newspapers were selected because they provide formal yet locally grounded usage of Nigerian English.
b. Social Media Platforms: Twitter (now X), Facebook, and WhatsApp conversations were analyzed. These platforms were chosen because they capture informal, everyday Nigerian English expressions and slang that often spread rapidly among users.
c. Spoken Discourse: Informal conversations among students and lecturers at a Nigerian university (pseudonymized for ethical purposes) were recorded and transcribed. Spoken data are crucial because many semantic extensions in Nigerian English occur in oral interaction before appearing in written texts.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

A total of about 150 lexical items showing evidence of polysemy or meaning extension were identified. After removing repetitions and irrelevant cases, about 50 key lexical items were selected for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis followed a four-stage process:
a. Identification: Words that deviated from Standard English usage but showed systematic meaning extension were flagged.
b. Categorization: The items were grouped into four domains—cultural, pragmatic, institutional, and metaphorical—based on the contexts of their use.
c. Semantic Mapping: Each item was analyzed in terms of its base (Standard English) meaning and its extended Nigerian English meaning(s). Where applicable, conceptual metaphors or cultural transfer principles were used to explain the semantic link.
d. Interpretation: The significance of each meaning extension was discussed in relation to Nigerian sociocultural practices and communicative needs.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability, two independent coders familiar with Nigerian English were asked to review the categorization of selected items. Inter-coder agreement was recorded at 85%, which was considered acceptable. To enhance validity, examples were cross-checked across multiple sources (e.g., a word appearing both in social media and newspapers) to confirm that the extensions were not idiosyncratic.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

For the spoken and social media data, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants. Social media posts were anonymized, and only publicly available data were analyzed to comply with ethical standards of digital linguistics research.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Cultural-Based Extensions

Nigerian English reflects cultural norms, kinship structures, and everyday realities by extending meanings of English words.

i. Chop → "eat; embezzle." Example: He chopped three plates of rice at the wedding; The politician chopped government money.
ii. House → "extended family unit." Example: My house is very big, we are more than twenty people living together.
iii. Outing → "child dedication ceremony." Example: We are preparing for the baby's outing this Sunday.
iv. Toasting → "wooing someone," not "giving a speech." Example: That boy has been toasting her for weeks.
v. Madam → "wife" or "woman in charge." Example: My madam is not at home now; please come back later.
vi. Cousin → "any distant relative." Example: He is my cousin, though we are not directly related.
vii. Senior → "elder sibling." Example: I will wait for my senior brother to return before eating.
viii. Mallam → "shopkeeper" or "gatekeeper." Example: The mallam at the gate sells recharge cards.
ix. Bush → "uncivilized behavior." Example: Stop eating with your hands like that, you are behaving bush.
x. Half current → "out of fashion." Example: Your style is half current; nobody wears that anymore.
xi. Carry last → "be left behind or fail." Example: Nigerians don't like to carry last in anything they do.

4.2 Pragmatic Extensions

These extensions arise from Nigerian discourse norms, politeness strategies, and communicative efficiency.

i. Sorry → empathy, not only apology. Example: Sorry for the heat, the fan is not working.
ii. Go-slow → "traffic jam." Example: I came late because of the go-slow on Third Mainland Bridge.
iii. Drop → "alight from a vehicle." Example: Please drop me at the next bus stop.
iv. Do me well → "treat me fairly." Example: Abeg, do me well and reduce the price.
v. Well done → greeting, not praise. Example: Well done, madam, I see you are cooking.
vi. Shift → "move aside." Example: Shift small, let me sit.
vii. Dash me → "give freely." Example: Dash me that pen if you don't need it.
viii. I'm coming → "wait, I will be back," not literal motion. Example: I'm coming, let me get water.
ix. Enter → "board a vehicle." Example: I entered the bus going to Oshodi.
x. Branch → "stop by casually." Example: I will branch your house after work.
xi. Carry me → "give me a lift." Example: Please carry me to the junction.

4.3 Institutional Extensions

These are entrenched in Nigerian academic, bureaucratic, and political contexts.

i. Defend → "present a thesis." Example: She defended her project last week and passed with distinction.
ii. Long-leg → "influence or connection." Example: He got the job because of long-leg, not merit.
iii. Invigilate → "supervise exams." Example: The lecturer will invigilate the test tomorrow.
iv. Write exam → "sit for an exam." Example: I am writing my exams next week.
v. Register course → "enroll for a course." Example: Have you registered all your courses this semester?
vi. Carry over → "repeat a failed course." Example: He carried over Mathematics last year.
vii. Result is out → "results released." Example: Our department announced that the result is out.
viii. NEPA → metonym for electricity. Example: NEPA has taken light again.
ix. WAEC → shorthand for secondary school certificate. Example: She passed all her WAEC papers.
x. School father/mother → "senior mentor in school." Example: My school mother helped me adjust in boarding school.

xi.   Assignment → extended to mean "any project." Example: The governor gave the minister a new assignment to handle security.

4.4 Metaphorical and Figurative Extensions
These reveal the creativity of Nigerian English speakers through metaphorical thinking.

i.   Scatter → "destroy," "amaze." Example: The children scattered the whole place; That performance scattered the audience with excitement.

ii.   Flash → "call briefly and hang up." Example: Flash me when you reach home.

iii.   Dash → "give freely." Example: He dashed me five hundred naira for transport.

iv.   Carry → "be pregnant." Example: She is carrying her second baby now.

v.   Load → "recharge airtime." Example: I need to load card before calling you.

vi.   Package → "present oneself attractively." Example: He packaged himself well for the interview.

vii.   Hammer → "suddenly become rich." Example: That musician hammered after releasing one hit song.

viii.   Run → "manage" or "operate." Example: She is running a small business from home.

ix.   Fire → "do something with intensity." Example: The students fired questions at the guest speaker.

x.   Wash → "flatter excessively." Example: He kept washing her just to get her attention.

xi.   Bounce → "reject or ignore." Example: She bounced him when he tried to talk to her.

5. Implications
The analysis demonstrates that Nigerian English extends meaning systematically to meet communicative needs. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these extensions reflect the nativization of English (Kachru, 1992; Schneider, 2007). Pedagogically, awareness of these meanings is essential for English language teaching in Nigeria, so that learners understand both global norms and localized usage. Culturally, the extensions affirm Nigerian identity and creativity in global English.

6. Conclusion
This study has shown that polysemy and meaning extension in Nigerian English occur across cultural, pragmatic, institutional, and metaphorical domains. Far from being errors, these innovations demonstrate systematic, creative, and culturally embedded processes of language adaptation. Nigerian English enriches the expressive capacity of the English language while reflecting local realities, thereby affirming its place within World Englishes. Future research should expand corpus-based investigations and explore cross-varietal comparisons among African Englishes.

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