

LEXICO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECT IGBO POEMS

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Abstract

Lexico-semantics is a subfield of semantics. It is the study of word meanings. It equally studies the relationships between the distinct senses and uses of a word. The units of analysis in lexico-semantics are lexical units which include words and sub-units such as affixes. In poetry, the poet is given poetic license to use words as he pleases. This brings about style and art to poetry. There is therefore the need to uncover the social and aesthetic dimensions of select Igbo poems by exploring the lexical choices of the poets. This research therefore understudies the lexico-semantics of some Igbo poems. The data for the study is got from anthologies of Igbo poems. Nine poems from different poets were selected based on brevity. The selected poems are “Abali, Utara Nti, Ihe Ukwu, Otii Otii Otii, Onwa M, Uchicha, Ezi Ihunanya, Ekwensu and Ugonwa”. The research is a qualitative one. Data analysis is based on the semantic theories of meaning. The research made the following findings: lexical patterning is used in Igbo poetry for the following effects: introduction of artistic ambiguity, concretization of abstract concepts, evocation of emotion, allusion historical events or forgotten aspects of Igbo culture and creation of emphasis. In conclusion, a major establishment of this study is that the choice of words used in a poem can shift the interpretation of the poem from its intended meaning. This means that the meaning of a poem could be diversified depending on the reader’s interpretation of the lexical items used in the poem.

1. Introduction

Poetry cannot exist without language. This means that language is the foundation upon which poetry stands. However, language use varies from person to person. This variation reflects in writing or works of art. Lexico-semantics is a subfield of semantics that studies how words or parts of a word are used to convey different meanings and effects. In poetry, the poet is given poetic license to use words as he pleases. This brings about style and art in poetry. There is therefore the need to uncover the social and aesthetic dimensions select Igbo poems by the exploring the lexical choices of the poets. This work therefore bridges this gap by examining the lexico-semantics of some Igbo poems. To achieve this, it looks at how words are used to convey meaning in the poems as well as the social and aesthetic implications of such words. Specifically, the study intends to examine how lexical patterning helps in the interpretation and understanding of Igbo poems, and highlight how the semantic use of words can affect the meaning of the poems.

This study has highlights the implications of lexical patterning in the understanding and interpretation of some Igbo poetry. Findings made in this research will be of immense help to poetry Igbo linguistics, especially semanticians and anybody interested in Igbo studies. The scope of this research is to examine the lexico-semantic properties of some Igbo poems in order to highlight how they help in the interpretation and understanding of the poems. The research is qualitative and as such involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts and/or experiences.

2. Literature Review

Stylistics

The linguistic study of different literary styles is called stylistics. This implies that styles are the product of social situation of a common relationship between language users. In his view, Chapman (1974: 10) says that,

Stylistics is a part of sociolinguistics – language studied in relation to society. Sociolinguists are interested in the effect upon language of speakers' groups according to ethnic, social, class or other divisions. Stylistic features may derive from more temporary associations as well, those which concern a speaker's working or leisure time only.

According to him, to say that literary language is more careful is another way of saying that it is more conscious in formation. Literature uses language as an artistic medium, not simply for communication or even expression.

Approaches to the Study of Style

In discussing how language theory and methods relate to the study of literature or literary texts, there is always an underlying assumption that a work of art is not properly understood and appreciated without an adequate description of the language in which it is written. This is because ordinary language use is the only empirical basis for describing and subsequently appreciating literature. Now, there are several linguistic approaches to the study of style, each uses a different methodology, which can be applied to the study of style in literary texts. As a matter of fact, the story of stylistics can be succinctly put as the quest for appropriate and adequate linguistic modal of analysing style in literary text. Three out of the several approaches will be considered here after which one will be adopted.

The first is the Formalist/Structuralist approach, which is rooted in the Prague school tradition, and has Jan Mukarovsky (1977:1), as a typical representative. In his article "Standard language and Poetic language" Mukarovsky, believes that foregrounding is of prime importance in the attempt to discover and describe the relationship between literary and non-literary texts. To Gomwalk (1985), the article makes three assertions to which he presents his disclaimers, the first point relates to the status of poetic language with regards to standard language. Mukarovsky (1977:1) sees poetic language as "an enduring structure having its own regular development". This implies that poetic language is an independent formation. He however acknowledges that a number of inter-connections exist between poetic language and standard language for him. Therefore, standard language is the norm and poetic language violates the expectation set up by the norm.

Gomwalk (1985) however argues that an accurate way to think of the distinction may be to seek it in terms of gradable differences in structure and functions rather than a distinction between two separate types of language, one deviant, the other normal, in addition, Hassan (1985:92) interestingly remarks: "today's deviation is tomorrow's norm". It is seen positively, as an extension of the resources of a language to meaning.

The second major point that Mukarovsky makes relates to the function of foregrounding in poetic language. In his view, the function of poetic language consists in the maxim foregrounding of an utterance. Gomwalk (1985) is however of the view that even when poetic language draws attention, it is not necessarily dictated by the overall function of the language form as carrier of cultural and ideological values.

Lastly, is the function of foregrounding with regards to communication in poetic language. According to Mukarovsky, what distinguishes the poetic function from the practical communicative function of language is that aesthetic function concentrates on the linguistic sign itself. Hence it is exactly the opposite of a practical orientation towards a goal which in language is communication. However, Halliday (1971) and Gomwalk (1985) are of the view that aside aesthetic considerations, communicative ones still remain crucial to the function and effect of poetic language. This implies that

foregrounding is stylistically relevant only if such foregrounding contributes directly to the total meaning of a text.

The second approach is the Transformational generative approach which is steeped in Chomsky's work on Transformational generative grammar together with Chomsky's inspired work in generative phonology. The Transformational-generative approach to stylistic analysis is lucidly surveyed in Ohman (1964, 1966), Thorne (1965), and Messing (1971). This approach to stylistics seeks to demonstrate the differences between a poet's grammar and underlying grammatical norms that are usually seen to be simply kernel sentence in a basic declarative form. A writer's style is thus described in terms of the particular transformational options selected by the writer from the underlying base. The motivation of this choice is usually well-formedness in relation to deviation. This is because Transformational generative position is that an adequate grammar for a text must be to generate all, only, well-formed sentences of such a text. This clearly reveals how the transformational generative grammarian perceives the relationship between the semantic level of language, on one hand, and the grammatical level, on the other hand.

The third is the Systemic functional approach, which according to Webster and Luckin (2005) has the Russian formalist and Prague Structuralist schools as its theoretical antecedents. This approach is mostly associated with what has come to be known as London School of Linguistics. A typical exposition of this approach is contained in Halliday's article, "linguistic function and literary style; an inquiry into the language of William Golding's *The Inheritor* (1971). Halliday begins by explaining that language is generally programmed to serve a variety of needs that users have. He also argues that the total network of meaning potential in language is actually composed of a number smaller networks, each one highly complex in itself but related to the others in a relatively simple way. Each network corresponds to one of the functions of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Each function defines a set of options or choices, all of which are meaningful, none meaningless, some of which will become more prominent than others. In applying the principles of the systemic approach to the study of literary texts, Halliday makes important points, some of which are considered below. The first relates to his redefinition of Mukarovsky's notion of foregrounding, which he defines as "prominence that is statistically motivated". Halliday uses the term prominence "as a general name for the phenomenon of linguistic highlighting whereby some features of the language of a texts stands out in some way". He argued that foregrounding must contribute to the total meaning of the work as a whole.

The other point concerns his distinction between prominence due to subject matter and prominence due to something else. He asserts that subject matter is a very important factor that determines literary style and this implies that there is a close tie between the choice of subject matter and the underlying themes of a literary work. This holds the implication that the functional use of language in a text is more often than not directly related to its subject matter.

In parallel with these developments from Halliday, Hassan (1985) has over a period of forty years, been producing theoretical and methodological statements about stylistics as an approach to the study of verbal art. Hassan's 1985 book, *Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art* are the most concentrated of these statements. In Hassan's novel for the functional operation of language in literature, three categories are recognised: Theme, Symbolic articulation and Verbalisation. Verbalisation is the part at which primary contact is made with the work. This is the wording of the text, and is the stratum of which analysis about the kind of linguistic patterns evident at each of the strata of language (i.e. semantics, lexico-grammar, phonology and phonetics) can be made. Halliday and Hassan (1976:97) define the stratum of theme as: The deepest level of meaning is in verbal art. It is what a text is about when disoriented from the particularities of text. In this nature, the theme of verbal art is very close to a generalisation, which can be viewed as a hypothesis about some aspect of the life of social man.

In between the stratum of verbalisation and the stratum of theme is the stratum of symbolic articulation. At this stratum, the meaning of language that she terms "first order meaning" is made in signs that have a deeper or "second order meaning". Hassan (1985)'s view on foregrounding is that it has to display consistency. There are two aspects to this consistency: consistency in terms of semantic drift and

consistency in terms of textual location. While semantic drift refers to the manner in which an ensemble of features takes the reader towards “the general kind of meaning”, consistency of textual location, refers to some significant part in the organisation of the text as a unity”. Hassan (1976) is of the view that attending to the foregrounding meaning is the procedure by which claims about the deepest level of meaning in text that is, its theme can be made. In the same line, Leech and Short (1981:27) agree that style and stylistics include the basic vocabulary of literary ethics (metaphor, figurative words, antithesis, irony, rhythm) which cannot be explained without recourse to linguistic notion. Therefore, the meeting ground of linguistic and literary studies is where stylistics lies. In this vein also, Leech and Short (1981:27), see style in relation to the well-known Saussuren distinction between *langue* (that is the code of system of rules common to speakers of language) and *parole* (the particular uses of this system by speakers or writers in particular circumstance) thereby referring to style as *parole*.

Linguistic Stylistics

Linguistic stylistics focuses on linguistic theory. “It is about doing stylistic analysis in order to test or refine a linguistic model- in effect, to contribute to linguistic theory”, (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010 in UK Essays, 2015). Linguistic stylistics was introduced as a complementary approach to literary criticism where the linguistic study of texts was absent. It is different from literary criticism in that while literary criticism rests solely on the subjective interpretation of texts, linguistic stylistics concentrates on the ‘linguistic frameworks operative in the text’ (Ayeomoni, 2003:177). This gives the critic a pattern to follow, what to look out for in a text, and his point of view can be verified statistically.

4. Data Analysis

Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Select Igbo Poems

Lexical patterning plays a very important role in the understanding, interpretation and creative nature of Igbo poems. The poets use words to represent a concept other than what the individual words mean. This is called symbolism and imagery. They are used in Igbo poetry for the following effects.

In poem number (12) “*Uṭara Ntị*”, stanza 2, lines 1-5, the poet gives ‘*ilu*’ the position ‘*tilapia*, *osukwu*, *oji* and *utara*’ have in their various species. In the poem number (8), “*Oti*”, Ugwunnadi uses the title ‘*Oti*’ as a symbol for misfortunes or negative life incidents that could affect humans. This implies that what ‘*oti*’ is to person A is likely not to be what it is for person B. In other words the meaning of the word ‘*oti*’ is rendered ambiguous. Also in poem (9), “*Onwa M*”, the poet uses ‘*onwa*’, moon as seen in lines 1, 7 and 8 of the poem to represent pleasant events or occurrence that could be seen in people’s life or that people could hope for.

These lexical items could mean different things to different people and also could be interpreted as different things depending on the situation. This introduces artistic ambiguity to the poems. This means that the lexical items are not bound by their traditional meanings, rather they have several possible interpretations or meanings of an uncertain nature. The audiences by this are made to think deeply and explore different possible interpretations of the poems.

Igbo poets also carefully select lexical items to imagery in the minds of their audience. In poems (1), “*Abali*”, of verbs ‘*na-eji*, *anaghi achi*, *alakpuola*, *na-ehikwa*’ in lines 1-4 creates imagery in the minds of the audience as they will imagine these actions which is performed by humans on a daily basis. In poem (8), “*Oti*”, lines 1,2,6,8 9 and 10, we see verbs the verbs, ‘*tiri*, *asula*, *akalara*, *ewutele*, *ga-abia*, *afuro*’, which makes the audience see ‘*Oti*’ in their mind’s eye. In poem (9), “*Onwa M*”, the following verbs are used to image the activities in the minds of the audience: ‘*lee*, *putakwa*, *no*, *eso*, *ga-achota*, lines 2,4,5 and 6. The use of verbs to create imagery in Igbo poems helps the audience to associate the actions to their day to day activities thereby relating to the poems. This pattern is also observed in “*The Meghai*” where the poet painted pictures in the mind of the audience in lines 4-6,

“A naghị ahụ ike okuko
Agbụsị gbaa nwata,
Yaa choọ oche”.

The lexical items in the above lines were carefully chosen by the author to help the audience relate with the theme of the poem and think deeply concerning what and who the poet could be addressing.

Other examples equally abound in *Ugonwa*, lines 1, 3-7: *nọ, weta, wepu, bu, hụrụ, mụrụ, kwuru*, and *kwuo*; *“The Meghai”*, lines 2,3, 5 and 6: *emefena, ekughi, gbaa, chọọ*; *“The Ukwu”*, lines 1-4: *huchaa, hunyere, kwochaa, kwonyere, taa*. These various forms of the verb word category are used to create clear pictures of the activities in the minds of the audience. This in turn aids better and diversified understanding and interpretation of the poems. Furthermore, in *“The Ukwu”*, lines 1,3,5, the poet used *ngele* (stream), *osimiri* (river) and *anyim* (ocean). Considering the sizes of these bodies of water, they could be interpreted to mean lower class, middle class and the upper class respectively symbolising the economic classes in the society where the rich keep getting richer and the poor continues to be poor.

In *“Utara Nti”* lines 1-4, Emenanjo uses the verbs, *wepu ichere, wepu ata* and *foduru* are used to create imagery in the minds of audience since the words are active category, verb. In *“Mbe Nwaliiga”*, lines 2-5, we see the use of the noun agent, *omesuru*, verbs, *anaghi ekewo, na-akaruchaa, lelia, na-agba*, to create pictures in the minds of the audience helps in deeper and better interpretation and understanding the poem. In the poem, *“Otii”*, lines 1-8, the action words, *tiri* and *asula* are used in imagery creation. Personification in poem (3) *“Ezi Ihunanya”* in lines 1-8 equally creates imagery thereby making the audience give diverse and deep interpretation to the poems.

There is also careful selection of lexical items to concretise abstract concepts. In *“Utara Nti”* stanza 2, lines 1-5, the physical things *‘asa, mpete’*, species of fish, *‘oji’*, *kolanut, ‘utara’*, a type of food were all used to concretise the abstract concept *‘ilu’*, proverb. In *“Onwa M”*, lines 1, 7 and 8, *‘onwa’*, moon is used to concretise an unknown positive event. Also, in the poem *“The Ukwu”*, *‘ngele’*, stream, *‘osimiri’*, river, and *‘anyim’*, ocean are all physical things used to make differentiation between low and high positions concrete and relatable. In *“Abali”*, lines 1-5, the lexical selection are used to paint a vivid and concrete picture of the abstract concept *‘ilu’*. The concrete nouns, *tilapia, osukwu, mpete, oji* and *utara* are used to concretise the abstract noun *‘ilu’* and to show its high ranked position in language and cultural expressions. Equally, careful selection of some lexical items to bring about personification helps to concretise the subject of misfortune and bring it to life thereby enhancing the understanding and interpretation of the poem.

Specific emotions could be evoked by the lexical selection of the poet to create symbolism and imagery. For instance the poem title *“Abali”* by Ihechukwu Madubuike and the lexical selection of the body evokes sad and gloomy emotions. Also the lexical choice of the poet in *“Otii”* evokes the emotions of sadness, anger and frustration. See lines 2, 4, 6, 8-10. Comparing this with the poems *“Utara Nti, Onwa M, The Ukwu”*, we observe that the emotion of joy, hope, excitement, determination is evoked by the use of such lines as *‘asa n’azu, mpete na mma’*, *‘O ga-achota m’*, *‘anyim taa elu, taa ala’* respectively.

Looking at the lexical choices in some Igbo poems, allusion is made to historical events or forgotten aspects of Igbo culture. This is exemplified in *“Mbe Nwaliiga”* by Jude Ezeuchegbu. In lines 2, 3, 4 6, allusion is made to the fictitious place, *Iduu*, signifying a faraway land, the culture of pounding yam in the barn, fetching water from the stream and palm wine tapping. In *“Ilu”* by Nolue Emenanjo, lines 1, 3, 5-8 the Igbo traditional professions, farming of different sorts is foregrounded. This creates imagery in the minds of the audience and makes the poem relatable. Another example is in *“Abali”* by Ihechukwu Madubuike where in lines 3-5 he makes allusion to the Igbo culture of observing and reading the natural elements and making interpretations of situations based on how these natural elements present.

The poets’ use of repetition and ideophonic lexical items creates emphasis and deepens the effect of words on the audience. This is observed to foreground the theme of the poems. Instances abound in poems like *“Otii”*, lines 1,3,5 and 7. *‘i tiri’* and *‘ihe’* are repeated, in lines 2 and 4 *‘asula ude’* is repeated. In the poem, *“Ekwensu”*, the repetition of the adjective *‘ajo’* in different forms shows that the central theme of the poem is the negative portrayal of the subject of the poem, *Ekwensu*. In *“Ugonwa”*, lines 3 and 4, *afọ* is repeated, and in lines 6 and 8, the verb, *‘huru’* is repeated. In the poem *“Ilu”*, lines 1-4, the verbs, *wepu* and *foduru* are repeated. Another example is in *“Onwa M”*. The lexical items *onwa* and *m*

are repeated in lines 1, 7 and 8. The repetition of these nouns, pronouns and verbs creates emphasis and foregrounds the theme, subject and actions in the poems. Equally, the selection of ideophonic lexical items helps to create emphasis in Igbo poems. See “Ihe Meghaji”, line 5, “Ihe Ukwu”, lines 1-4, “Uchicha” lines 2, 5, 6 and 12, and “Abali”, line 1.

The first course of this study is to investigate the impact of lexical patterning and paralinguistic features on Igbo poetry. Findings indicate that poets use words to represent a concept other than what the individual words mean. This is called symbolism and imagery. They are used in Igbo poetry for the following effects: introduction of artistic ambiguity, concretization of abstract concepts, evocation of emotion, allusion historical events or forgotten aspects of Igbo culture and creation of emphasis.

5. Summary of Findings

The research sets out to investigate the lexico-semantic properties of select Igbo poems. The general aim of the study is to investigate impact of lexical patterning on the understanding and interpretation of Igbo poetry. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how lexical patterning help in the interpretation and understanding of Igbo poems, the impact of the choice of words on the audience. The data set is made up of poems from some Igbo anthologies. The study made the following findings:

1. Poets use certain words to create artistic ambiguity. This was seen in poems like “Otii Otii Otii, Onwa M.
2. There is the creation of imagery in the minds of the readers by the careful selection of words by poets for such effect.
3. In “Ihe Ukwu”, there is a serious symbolism through the use of various bodies of water to symbolise the economic classes in the society where the rich keep getting richer and the poor continues to be poor. This is observed in “U tara Nti” by E. N. Emenanjo.
4. Lexical items are used to concretise abstract things.

6. Conclusion

This work adopted qualitative research approach to analyse the lexicon of some Igbo poems. This study set out to explore how the use of words by Igbo poets can affect the understanding and interpretation of Igbo poems. It is aimed at understanding the implications of lexical usage of a poet to the audience. The research has accomplished this as it reveals the creation of artistic ambiguity, imagery and cultural allusion with the use of words. This work has, therefore, contributed to the body of knowledge in linguistics and literary studies. It will benefit semanticists, and Igbo literary scholars including teachers of language and literature.

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Appendix

(1) Abali

Isi kpuru ebe dum

Anyasi na-eji ka unyi

Eluigwe anaghị achị ma ị
Kpakpando – anya abalị - alakpuola
onwa na anyaanwụ na-ehikwa ụra
egwu dị ebe dum.

Ihechukwu Madụbụike

(2) Ekwensu

Ọ bụ gị bụ na ụwa adighi mma.
O me ajọ ihe.
O duba mmadụ na njọ
Enyi ndị njọ.
Weta isi bịa were isi bụ ọrụ gị.
Ihe ọma dị anya n'ebe ị nọ.
Ọkụ ebeebe na-eche gị na ndị otu gị.
Onye ọjọọ ka ị bụ.

Nkechinyere Okediadi

(3) Ezi Ihunanya

Ị naghị akpa oke.
Ị juputara na mgbaghara.
Ị bughị ezenwanyị mmiri weta isi
Were isi.
Ị naghị ekwo ekworo.
Ị bụ ngozị nyere ndị niile chọtara gị.
Otụtụ mmadụ ji ego achọ gị,
Ma ha ahughị gị,
Ezinaulọ chọtara gị na-enwe udo na ọñụ.

Nkechinyere Okediadi

(4) Ihe Ukwu

Ngele huchaa,
Ọ maghị hunyere osimiri.
Osimiri kwochaa,
Ọ maghị kwonyere anyịm.
Anyịm taa elu, taa ala,
Ọ maghị buru anyịm.

Asonye Ụba Mgbemena

(5) Otii! Otii!! Otii!!!

I tiri nwata ihe
Sị ya asụla ude?
I tiri onye ohi ihe
Sị ya asụla ude,
I tiri onye ara aka,
Sị ya akalara ahịa?
I tiri nwunye m ihe
Sị ya ewutele m?
Onye ka ị ga-abịa nso
Ahụ aforọ ya?

Ifeanyi Ugwunnadi

(6) Ọnwa m

Lee ọnwa ahụ,
Ọ putakwa.
N'ote aka
Ka ọ nọ ugbo a.
Ma ọ gafu eso m
Ọ ga-achota m
Ọnwa m
Ọnwa m ka ọ bu.

J. C. Maduekwe

(7) Ugonwa

Mgbe i nọ n'afọ
I di ka i bu onye ọcha
E weta nke a, mba!
E wepu nke a, mba!
Iwu gi siri ike ndobe
Afọ bu gi hụrụ ihe
Afọ mụrụ gi gbaliri
Mgbe anya hụrụ gi
I buru Ugonwa
Onu kwuru njo, wee kwuo mma
Nkechinyere Okediadi

(8) ỤCHỊCHA

Ahụ gi bu nke ọla edo
I bituru mma aka
Ọ anụ na-esikari gi n'onwu,
Ya puta kowaa
A bia n'idi garagara,
Oke izizi kwaa gi
Nke abuo adiwara gi
Ma ọ di ihe ndi mere
Gi bu aturu anya mbu
Isi ekere uwa gi
Na a daa ma ekulinwughị gi
Emebola ike gi na mma gi,
Meekwaa ka i buru apa.
Goddy Onyekaonwu

(9) Ụtara Nti

E wepu ata di n'okwu
Ihe foduru ya bu ilu
E wepu ichere di n'okwu
Ihe foduru ya bu ilu

Ilu bu tilapia na-enweghi ogwu.
Osukwu di n'akwu
Asa n'azu, mpete na mma
Oji di n'osisi
Utara nti

E. N. Emenanjo