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The Semantics of Body Part Idioms in Igbo

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Abstract

This work selected thirty idiomatic expressions in Igbo language that made use of some body part words. The body parts were analysed individually with their corresponding idiomatic expressions, bringing out the semantic notions they portray. Similar idiomatic expressions in two other languages (Hausa and Igala) are weighed with that of Igbo, extricating the similarities and differences while highlighting the uniqueness of Igbo culture in some areas and the commonness of human body part perceptions across languages. The idiomatic expressions discussed in this work show the richness, convenience, spices, and saltiness of idiomatic expressions, especially in Igbo language and culture. It also highlighted the relationship between the functions of our body parts and idiomatic use.

Keywords: Igbo language and culture, human body parts, idioms in Igbo, features of idioms, comparison of Igbo, Hausa and Igala idiomatic expressions.

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that one of the most important functions of language is to express human thoughts through a system of concepts. These concepts exist in association with language and make up a giant network with many interconnections. A good example of this interconnection involves metaphor. Metaphor is used not only in literary or poetic language but also widely in everyday conversational language. It is obvious that metaphor is utilized to express ideas sensibly and vividly, and it has great expressive power, conveying more of the

human feeling or attitude toward what is said than a non-metaphorical or direct way of expression.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Idioms and Culture

An idiom is generally a colloquial metaphor. It is a term that requires foundational knowledge to be understood within a culture where insider parties share common references. Idioms are often not useful outside of their local physical context. However, despite cultural gaps, some idioms are more universally used and easily translated than others—particularly those involving the human body, as their functions are universally understood. Language is a part of culture because it reflects what a society or community does or thinks. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions are highly valued by the Igbo people. As Chinua Achebe said in *Things Fall Apart*, proverbs are “the palm oil with which words are eaten.”

2.2 The Igbo Language and Culture

Language and culture are closely related, and language shapes culture. In Igbo society, proverbs and idiomatic expressions are euphemistic and used to enrich speech. They are indicators of cultural values and shared understanding.

3. Theoretical Framework

The framework used in this study is based on cognitive/conceptual and connotative theories of meaning. The cognitive model posits:

- Meaning as conceptualization.
- Perceptually determined understanding.
- Semantics based on spatial/topological objects.
- Image-schematic rather than propositional models.
- Transformation by metaphor and metonymy.
- Prototype effects in concept formation.

Connotative meaning attaches additional sense to the literal meaning of words or sentences, including physical, social, and psychological properties (Arua, 2012).

4. Significance of the Study

This study highlights the beauty and uniqueness of the Igbo language and its metaphoric creativity. It enhances learners' understanding of words related to body parts and supports translators by contrasting expressions across Igbo, Hausa, Igala, and English. It contributes additional knowledge to existing scholarly work on African languages.

5. Methodology

Thirty idiomatic expressions in Igbo that use body parts were selected and analyzed. Each body part was examined alongside its corresponding expression to derive the semantic content. Similar idioms in Hausa and Igala were compared to identify shared and unique elements.

6. Features of Idioms

Idioms are:

1. Conventional
2. Paradigmatically fixed
3. Transformationally anomalous
4. Formally combinatory
5. Semantically non-compositional
6. Composite (functioning as a unit)
7. Richer in meaning than literal expressions
8. Prone to misinterpretation due to polysemy
9. Institutionalized and resistant to change

7. Extensional Properties of Body Parts

Body parts are understood through:

- Ontological: bodily perception and cognition
- Experiential: emotions tied to bodily organs
- Metaphorical: using body part terms in figurative expressions
- Spatial: relating to position (e.g., face-off)
- Symbolic: gestures and physical expression
- Poetic: body as icon/model
- Extensional: connections between parts reflect broader meanings

8. The Semantics of Words Denoting Human Body Parts

8.1 The Head (Isi)

Represents authority, reason, cognitive processes.

Examples:

- *Onyelbuisi* – Who is the head?
- *Isiadighi gi mma* – You are insane
- *Isi buru m* – I was amazed
- *Isi okwu* – Main point
- *Onweghi isi* – Meaningless

8.2 The Eyes (Anya)

Symbolize love, boldness, greed, expectation.

Examples:

- *Anya adighi gi mma* – You are insane
- *Ahurum gi n'anya* – I love you
- *Anya ike* – Boldness
- *Anya ukwu* – Greedy
- *Olileanya* – Expectation

8.3 The Shoulder (Ubu)

Symbol of support and loyalty.

Example:

- *Isi na ubu* – Head and shoulder (leadership and followers)

8.4 The Face (Ihu)

Indicates frontality, appearance, favour.

Examples:

- *Onwere ihu oma* – He is favoured
- *Ihu ukwu* – Private part
- *Ihu akwa* – Print surface
- *Ihu mma* – Sharp edge
- *Nti na anya munyo* – Closeness
- *O metutaimi, o metuta onu* – Shared burden
- *Ikpe ma onu, agba ehuru* – Brotherly shame

8.5 The Hand (Aka)

Represents work, involvement, compatibility.

Examples:

- *Aka m adighi ya* – I am not involved
- *Aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu* – Hard work brings reward
- *O gbaji siri m aka* – I am incapacitated
- *Aka ekpe na-asa aka nri* – Mutual help

8.6 The Heart (Obi)

Seat of emotions, feelings, and virtue.

Examples:

- *Nee obi ike* – Be courageous
- *Obi kporo ya nka* – He is cruel
- *Obi nwayo* – Gentle
- *Obi oku* – Quick-tempered
- *Na chi obi* – Determined
- *Obi uto* – Happy
- *Obi ilu* – Sad
- *Obapu* – Shocked
- *Obi sara mbara* – Accommodating

8.7 Blood (Obara)

Used to denote kinship.

Examples:

- *Obu obara m* – My relation
- *Nwusi obara* – Shedding blood (killing)

9. Comparing Idiomatic Expressions Across Languages

A comparative table outlines common idiomatic expressions across Igbo, Hausa, and Igala languages, highlighting shared metaphorical uses of body parts, while noting culturally unique interpretations.

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