



## **POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY IN THE IGBO LANGUAGE**

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**Abstract:** *Lexical relation is a profitable way to analyse the meanings of words in language. This lexical relationship may appear in terms of similarities and differences in meaning; nearness or multiplicity in meaning, etc. This study, 'Polysemy and Homonymy in the Igbo Language, is an attempt to explicitly explain this relationships. Hence, the aim of this work is to explain what polysemy and homonymy are and to find out polysemous and homonymous words in the Igbo language. It will further, distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. In addition, this work will bring out the similarities in polysemy and homonymy. The study used the descriptive method in the data analysis. The data contained in the study consist of sample sentences from the language of study, indigenous Igbo speakers and also the researchers' intuitive knowledge of the language played a major role in the generation and analysis of data. It was discovered that polysemy and homonymy both refer to words that have the same form in spelling and pronunciation; these lexemes have two or more meanings. In the same vein, the discovery showed that in polysemy, these meanings are related even though it does not obtain the same way in homonymy. This study will benefit lexicographers, linguists and scholars as they try to expand the scope of their knowledge.*

### **Introduction**

In language, words exist whose meanings may arise from the relationships they have with other words. The analysis of the meaning of such words is based on lexical relations or sense relations. Sense relation is a concept that has to do with ordinary linguistic meaning of an expression. It is all about the decontextualized meaning of the



expression which is abstracted or obtained from other uncountable usages or of the particular expression. It is concerned with the system of linguistic relationship existing between words or lexical items.

Sense relations in language are as follows: synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, polysemy, homonymy, homophony, etc. In the Igbo language where such sense relations of words abound, it is possible for the sender and receiver alike not to precisely understand the communication bearing of such relations. The role of social change which communication plays may not be appreciated because of not being able to interpret the lexical or sense relations. It is on the basis of this among other things that this study concentrates on “Polysemy and Homonymy in the Igbo Language: A Conceptual Analysis”.

According to Ndimele (2005:56), polysemy is a meaning relation whereby a single lexical item has several (apparently) related meanings. That is, the several meanings of a polysemous word must belong to a common semantic field. He further says that an interesting fact about a word which is polysemous is that one of its several senses is central, while the other senses or meanings are mere figurative or metaphorical extensions of the core sense. For instance, the central sense of the word foot is ‘part of the body’; all other sense such as ‘foot of the mountain’, ‘foot of the bridge’ and ‘foot of the bed’ are mere metaphorical extensions of the core meaning.

On the other hand, homonymy according to Finch (2000:165), is a relationship which exists between words which have the same form but unrelated senses. He further says that homonymy may have the same phonological or graphical form, or both.

One of the objectives of the study is to explain Polysemy and Homonymy. Another objective is to find out words that are polysemous and homonymous in the Igbo language. Again, the study seeks to establish the distinction between polysemy and homonymy. Additionally, the work researches for the similarities between the two semantic concepts. The research method is descriptive. To execute these objectives calls for a good organization of the research work. In the light of this, our work is divided into different subheadings as follows: the concept of polysmy; the concept of homonymy; theoretical framework; polysemous words in the Igbo language; homonymous words in the Igbo language; the differences between polysemy and homonymy; the similarities in these sense relations, then the findings and conclusion.



## Literature Review

Polysemy as a sense relation has been defined by different scholars. Ndimele (2005:56) says that polysemy is a meaning relation whereby a single lexical item has several (apparent) related meanings. Polysemy, according to Finch (2000:173), is a sense relation in which a word, or lexeme, has acquired more than one meaning.

Following Agbede (2015), it is when a specific word has more than one meaning that it is seen as a polysemous word. An example is the word “plain” according to *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* (2010), the word “plain” can mean something clear. It can also mean honest or direct. “plain” can likewise imply ‘not decorated or complicated, simple’. “Plain” can mean something without marks, or a pattern on it. The word “plain” can also be used to stress or lay emphasis on something that is ordinary. Still, it can be used to refer to a woman that is not beautiful or attractive.

Further still, Agbede (2015) maintains that polysemy is all about a set of different meanings associated with a word. According to him, whenever there is a possibility of different interpretations of a word, such a word is seen as being polysemous. On his part, Ogbulogo (2005) holds the view that polysemy is only obtained when one form of a word, whether written or spoken has many meanings which are related by extension. The views of Agbede and Ogbulogo of polysemy are different ways of saying the same thing. For example, head can mean ‘part of the body’ and also ‘a leader’. The word ‘foot’ has three meanings: the one ‘of a person’, ‘of a bed’ and ‘of a mountain’. All these really show that polysemy is a matter of varied interpretations associated with a single word. Ndimele (1999:56), therefore, is right by saying that Polysemy “...is a meaning relation whereby a single lexical item has several (apparently) related meanings”. The implication of this is that the multiple meanings which a polysemous word has is an indication that they share a common semantic field. Crystal (1987:106), refers to polysemy as cases where a lexeme has more than one meaning, for example, ‘chip’ can mean a piece of wood, food or electronic circuit. People see no problem in saying that the word ‘chip’ has several different meanings in English. For Akmajian, Demer, Farmers and Harnish (2006:237), polysemy is often defined as the property of having more than one related meaning. Thus, ‘table’ can mean a certain kind of furniture or it can be the act of putting an item at a meeting or hold (she tabled the motion). Anozie (2007:114) holds that polysemy is a situation where a lexeme has multiple meanings. From these definitions above, we can say that polysemy is a lexical relation that has one form with different related meanings.



Homonymy as a sense relation has been looked into by different scholars. Crystal (1997a:185) defines homonymy as ‘a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but differ in meaning’. Words which have the same form but different meanings are referred to as homonyms of each other. According to Finch (2000:165), homonymy is a relationship which exists between words which have the same form but unrelated senses. He further says that homonyms may have the same phonological or graphical form or both. In the same vein, Palmer (1987:93) says that homonymy means a situation where there are several words with the same shape. Ogbulogo (2005:31) is of the opinion that Homonymy is a situation when one word form (written and spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings. Anozie (2007:114) in same vein sees homonymy as a situation where two or more different lexical items have the same shape but mean different things. From the above definitions of different scholars, we can say that homonymy is a semantic concept that refers to words in the same form but have different meanings and origin.

### **Polysemy in the Igbo Language**

It is evident that polysemy as sense relation exists in the Igbo language. In this section, we will be looking at some polysemous words present in the Igbo language. These polysemous words have related meanings. Just like Emenanjo (2015:301) rightly says, ‘polysemy is the property of a single word having distinguishable but related senses’. Below are some examples of polysemy in the Igbo language:

1. ókwú (trouble) - Nnamdi na-achọ okwu  
(Nnamdi is looking for trouble)  
ókwú (word) - Enweghi okwu m ga-agwa gị ugbua  
(I have no word for you now)
2. ólú (neck) - Olu na-egbu ya mgbu  
(Her neck is paining her)  
ólú (voice) - Olu ya tọrọ ụtọ  
(She has a nice voice)
3. Ụtọ (tasty) - Nri ahụ dị ezigbo ụtọ  
(That food is very tasty)  
Ụtọ (interesting) - Akwụkwọ ahụ tọrọ ụtọ  
(That book is interesting)
4. buru ibu (fat) - Nnamdi buru ibu  
(Nnamdi is fat)



- buru ibu (big) - Nri e nyere ya buru ibu  
(The food given to her is big)
5. Òchá (Fair) - Amaka na-acha ocha  
(Amaka is fair)
- Òchá (clean) - Akwa ya dị ocha  
(Her cloth is clean)
- Òchá (innocent) - Aka ya dị ocha  
(She is innocent)
6. Ùlò (house) - Okeke ruru ụlò  
(Okeke built a house)
- Ùlò (village) - Nna m gara ụlò  
(My father travelled to the village)
- Ùlò (home) - Anyị nwere oḅia n'ụlò anyị  
(We have a visitor in our home)
7. Ósísí (wood) - Osisí e jiri wee ruo oche a esighi ike  
(The wood used in making this chair is not strong)
- Ósísí (tree) - Osisí ahụ na-enye ndo etu o si adi mma  
(That tree gives shade in a good way).
8. àlà (floor) - Ala ahụ na-ajụ oyi nke ukwu  
(The floor is very cold)
- àlà (land) - Nna m zutara ala n'akukụ ụlò ụka anyị  
(My father bought a land beside our church)
- àlà (down) - Kusaa nwa ahụ n'ala  
(Put that child down).
9. éfù (zero) - Efu abughị onuogu n'Igbo  
(Zero is not a number in the Igbo language)
- éfù (in vain) - Mbọ niile o gbara bu ihe efu  
(All his efforts were in vain)
10. m̀fé (easy) - N'oge ugbua, ihe adighizi mfe n'obodo anyị  
(At this time, things are no longer easy in our country)
- m̀fé (light) - Udaume mfe di anọ n'onuogu  
(Light vowels are four in number)

From the above examples, it is seen that polysemous words exist in the Igbo language. These words have several meanings that are closely related just as seen above. There is a core meaning which others derive their meanings from.





7. àkù (wealth) - Inwe akù dī mkpa  
(To have wealth is important)
- àkù (insect) - Akù na-atakasị akwa ya  
(Insects are destroying her cloths)
8. ímē (pregnant) - Nwunye ya dī ime  
(His wife is pregnant)
- ímē (to do) - Ime ihe ọma na-ebute ngozi.  
(Doing good things brings blessings)
- ímē (inside) - Nne m nọ n'ime ụlọ  
(My mother is inside the house).

### **Differences between Polysemy and Homonymy**

There are differences between polysemy and homonymy. According to Emenanjo (2015:302), some difficulty exists in trying to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. He further says that how do we know whether or not we have a single word with different senses and not that the different senses constitute different words that would happen at the same time? Indeed, if there is any distinction at all between polysemy and homonym, it will be resolved by several criteria none of which will be sufficient by itself. Therefore, polysemy and homonymy are lexical sense relations, and as such they are in the same semantic field. Often times, people see them as the same sense relation but there is a distinction between them. The distinction between polysemy and homonymy can be seen as follows: In polysemy, meanings of words are closely related while there is no form of relationship between the meanings of words in homonymy. There is the existence of a core meaning in the in polysemous words, but same cannot be said of homonymous words.

### **Similarities in Polysemy and Homonymy**

From the similarities and illustrations given above, it is evident that polysemy and homonymy have some features such as:

- They deal with individual words that have different meanings.
- They are both an aspect of semantics which is sense/lexical relations.
- Polysemous and homonymous words have the same form i.e, they are spelt alike and are pronounced alike



## Findings

As seen in this work, it is evident that polysemy and homonymy as sense relations exists in the Igbo language. It can be said that polysemous words have the same form with different meanings but these meanings must be related for it to be called polysemy. The work also finds out that in these related meanings, there is a core meaning while the other meanings are metaphorical. On the other hand, homonymy as a sense relation has the same form with different meanings that are not related in any way.

## Conclusion

The existence of polysemy and homonymy in the Igbo language has been seen through this work. These lexical sense relations have same form with multiplicity of meanings that are closely related in polysemy. On the other hand, the meanings in homonymy are not related in any way. Due to the similarity in polysemy and homonymy, it is difficult for some people to identify the difference between polysemy and homonymy. It is now clear that through the relatedness of these words, the difference between these sense relations can be identified.

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