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## The Semantics of Metaphorical Extensions in Igbo

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### Abstract

The semantics of metaphorical extensions defines and describes the meanings of certain expressions/statements that are uttered figuratively that is to say, metaphorical expressions whose meanings can only be indirectly derived. In other words, the semantics of metaphorical extensions discusses the literal meanings of the indirectly articulated utterances. This paper looks at different metaphorical expressions in Igbo and endeavours to explain their actual/literal meanings. Igbo language uses a lot of metaphors and idioms to express certain utterances. The objective of the paper is to explicitly explain in a literal manner certain expressions that are metaphorically used in the Igbo language. Data for the paper are sourced from the Ọnịcha variety of Igbo. Many of such expressions and their explicit meanings are collected from competent native speakers through interactions with them. Findings reveal that different metaphorical expressions may have the same semantic and literal meanings in the actual usage. For instance, the expressions: óbì fèlù yà àzù (the heart is at his/her back) /óbì jòlù yà njọ (the heart of him/her is bad) and áfọ jòlù yà njọ (the stomach of him/her is bad). The three utterances say exactly the same thing even though they are differently expressed and they all mean that the person is a wicked person.

**Key words:** Semantics, metaphorical, extensions, literal, analyses.

### Introduction

The paper - 'Semantics of Metaphorical Extensions in Igbo' attempts a descriptive analysis of the literal meanings of different metaphorical expressions used frequently in interactions in the Igbo language. Before proceeding to the analysis, the key terms in the topic will be explained.

Crystal (2008, p. 428) defined semantics as a major branch of linguistics devoted to the study of meaning in language. Kreidler (1998, p.3) in Omega (2013, p.5) defined linguistic semantics as the scientific study of all aspects of meaning encoded in natural languages from the meaning of individual words to the meaning of words grouped into phrases and clauses in context within the lexical and grammatical structure of specific languages. Lyons (1981, p.15) opined that the scientific study of language is the greatest concern of all the disciplines with an interest in meaning. Crystal (2008, p. 98) discussed conceptual metaphor as a theory associated with cognitive semantics in which metaphor is seen as a process of understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another. He argued that a typical metaphor is a mapping between a better-known, more concrete conceptual domain (the source domain) and the conceptual domain which it helps to organize (the target domain). For instance, following the above argument by Crystal, the Igbo expressions: *áfọ jọlụ yà 'njó; óbì fẹlụ yà àzụ and óbì nà-é'nú ' yá ínú* literally mean that the person referred to is wicked and the meaning is derived from the fact that the terms: *ínú*(bitterness), *àzụ* (back) and *'njó* (bad) connote negativity in the context in which they are presented above. *Áfọ* (stomach) is regarded as the seat of human internal organ where everything in human beings both intentions and behaviour are enclosed. In some contexts, *áfọ* can be generic and include the heart to express all the internal organs of man and in some it is separated as in *óbì fẹlụ yà àzụ* where it is separated and *óbì* expressed differently as heart. In the above expressions, it is observed that the stomach is bad, the heart is at the back (instead of normally being in front) and or the heart is bitter, it means that everything about the heart in the person is negative; hence the person is described as a wicked person. Expressing the views of Aristotle on metaphor, Ortony (1979, p.3) describes metaphor as implicit comparisons based on principles of analogy; a view that translates into what, in modern terms is generally called the comparison theory of metaphor. According to Jerrold M. Sadock as recorded in Ortony (1979, p.46):

The study of metaphor specifically would not be a proper subject for synchronic linguistics because the basis of metaphor is a kind of indirection that is shared with nonlanguage behaviour. Whatever might be unclear about the way metaphor is used and understood, I take it for granted that the underlying principles governing metaphor

are of a general psychological sort and are thus not specifically linguistic. While the intellectual faculties that are involved might be prerequisites to speech, they are independent of it.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Igbo language makes frequent use of metaphors in discourse. Metaphoric expressions are easily understood by competent native speakers but for nonnative speakers, such expressions/statements can lead to ambiguity. This paper therefore descriptively analyses metaphoric statements in the Igbo language to provide explicit meanings of such expressions to non-native speakers who may come across them.

### **Objective**

The objective of the paper is first to present some of the metaphorical expressions in the Igbo utterances and secondly, to explicitly explain the literal meanings of such utterances/statements which are used in a metaphoric way in discussions.

### **Method**

As many metaphoric expressions, as possible have been elicited from competent native speakers of the dialect. The expressions are arranged according to their structural forms. For instance, some metaphoric expressions are realized as statement in active form while some others are realized in the passive form or even as ergative construction. The literal meaning of each of the recorded metaphorical statements is discussed and analyzed.

### **Literature Review**

Maduka (2002, p.34) discussed metaphor first as an analogy between two things though dissimilar in form but which share certain attributes in common when subjected to comparison. Secondly, he describes metaphor as a special type of analogy which is contrasted with *simile*. He used the concepts namely: tenor, vehicle and ground developed by I. A. Richards to clearly explicate the term *metaphor*. By tenor he meant what the poet sets out to express; vehicle the mental picture he evokes to communicate and ground the attribute which the tenor shares with the vehicle—the sustaining link of the comparison.

Ortony (1979, p.2) stated that knowledge of reality whether it is by perception, language, memory or anything else arises through the interaction of that information with the context in which it is presented and the knower's preexisting knowledge. He related two alternative approaches to metaphor—metaphor as an essential characteristic of the creativity of language; and metaphor as deviant and parasitic upon normal usage to a more fundamental and pervasive difference of opinion about relationship between language and the world.

According to Black (1978, p.185), the author of a metaphor says something although he will also typically be alluding to, suggesting and evaluating other things. When a statement is metaphorical, the sentence used, part only of which consists of a word or words used metaphorically, is not intended to be taken literally. He remarked that a metaphorical statement usually implies literal statements of resemblance and comparison including allied *as-if* statements and other unstated implications. Black opined that to be able to produce and understand metaphorical statements is nothing to boast about. He argued that the familiar skills which children seem to acquire as they learn to talk are perhaps no more remarkable than our ability to tell and understand jokes.

Following Black in Ortony (1979, p.7), Rumelhart believed that metaphor plays a crucial role in language acquisition. He observed that in applying old words to new objects or situations, children engage in a kind of metaphorical extension. He further explicated that the extensions sometimes become consistent with conventional uses of the word and when that happens, it is perceived that the child has learned something more about the word's application. When however, the extensions do not become part of the conventional uses, the adult may attribute error to the child. The interpretations of some of the words in metaphors are different from their interpretations in literal contexts because some metaphors permit us to see aspects of reality that they themselves help to constitute and something new is created whenever a metaphor is understood.

Commenting on the recognition of metaphor, Black as recorded in Ortony (1979, p.5) argued that recognizing something as metaphor depends first on our knowing what it is for a statement to be termed metaphorical and secondly on our judgment that a metaphorical interpretation is preferable to a literal one. He concluded by saying that metaphors are recognized as such by users of the language in particular contexts and therefore he places metaphor in the domain of pragmatics instead of semantics, claiming that its study is broader in scope than would be the case were it to be just a problem in semantics.

### **Data Presentation and Analyses**

The data should be presented in two forms:

- A. those uttered as statements/deep structure realizations and
- B. those uttered as passive/surface structure realizations.

The following are uttered as statements/deep structure realizations:

**(A) Analysis of Data Expressed as Statement or Deep Structure Realizations:**

- i) Ó /bùtèlù /ísí / úkwà /n'úkwú/ 'úkpáká 'he/she collected breadfruit head  
he/she/ carried/ head/breadfruit/ from castor oil tree'  
in tree/castor-oil

In the above expression, the native speaker implies that the person concerned got an unmerited favour. This is because breadfruit is a very precious and scarce commodity while castor-oil bean seed/tree is a very common product. To have fetched breadfruit from a castor-oil tree is to make impossibility possible. Therefore, the metaphorical expression literally means that he/she obtained an undeserved favour.

- ii) Ó / chì/ úchè/ n'áká 'he/she hold thought in hand'  
he/she/ hold/ thought/ in hand

The above expression literally means that he or she is anxious, upset, worried or in great distress. Normally when somebody is worried, the heart which Igbo language sometimes glosses as *úchè* or *óbì* beats faster and appears as if it can be held with hand. The metaphorical representation above therefore describes someone that is burdened, worried or even fearful.

- iii) Ó / gbà áká/àlì /òjì 'he/she climbs iroko tree with bare hands'  
he/she/ empty hand/ climbing/ iroko

This expression can be illustrated with different examples. In the first instance, an iroko tree is such a massive tree that it is impossible for a human being to climb it without support i.e. without a ladder or any type of external aid. It is therefore unimaginable for someone to climb it without ladder. For instance, an applicant or a dependent who has no work and no money makes a budget to celebrate his/her birthday with a lot of money. The expression literally means embarking on a project without adequate preparation.

- iv) Ó / jì/ ó'nú/ ègbú/ ójì 'he/she cuts down iroko tree with mouth'  
he/she/ hold/ mouth/ cut/ iroko tree

The above expression depicts someone who claims to do what is above his/her capacity. It literally means that he or she cuts down iroko tree with his/her mouth. The expression shows that the person is a very boastful person i.e. someone who arrogates to himself/herself the powers that he/she does not possess. For instance, a medical student (doctor in training) who claims that he/she could carry out surgical operation alone because he/she has attended clinical classes for one month. Another example can be drawn from an apprentice who claims to do better than his/her instructor or a loafer

who goes about chasing/deceiving young girls and telling them he is a director of different companies and that his goods are awaiting clearing at the wharf. His intention is simply to take advantage of these girls. Typical examples of the above metaphorical expression are seen in the campaign promises of Nigerian political aspirants during election campaigns.

- v) Ó/ jì/ áká/ ènwúdé/ á'gú 'he/she catches a lion with bare hand'  
he/she/ hold/ hand/ catch/lion

This metaphorical expression describes someone who can achieve a great output with little or no input. It literally means 'to catch a lion with bare hands'. Knowing what a lion is, catching it with bare hands is a herculean task. Therefore, when someone does or achieves a great feat, it is referred to as catching a lion with bare hand. However, it depends on the context in which the statement is made, if it is made in the context where a person achieves a feat without demanding a lot from other people, then the expression is made in the positive sense. But, if it is expressed in the context where a person claims that he/she did this and that for many people and for different organizations without proof, such statements can be referred to as catching a lion with bare hand.

- vi) Ó/ jì/ ísí/ èbú/ ànì 'he/she carries a land on head'  
he/she/hold/head/carry/land

The metaphorical expression above describes a very greedy person. It literally means that he/she carries land on his/her head. Common knowledge shows that land can never be carried by anyone. The expression therefore depicts someone who is exceptionally greedy, insatiable, rapacious and selfish. Illustration could be drawn from one person who is a doctor by profession but cannot allow other professionals to do their own. The doctor could not send his children to school because he would not want to pay fees. He tries to teach them at home, he does not employ house helps to help in housekeeping; he/she would not want to pay tailors for sewing for him/her because he/she knows how to sew. All these are the guise to accumulate wealth and in Igbo, such a person is described as 'carrying the land on one's head'.

- vii) Ó/ jì / úkwú /èjé / 'Abá 'he/she goes to Aba on foot'  
he/she/ hold/ foot/ going/Aba

The above metaphorical expression describes one who is immune to long trekking/suffering. It literally means going to Aba on foot. Aba is a commercial city in Abia State in the Southeast Zone of Nigeria and people travel from other States in Nigeria to the city to buy divers materials. To travel from any part of the Eastern States

to Aba is a long distance and cannot be done on foot. Even to travel from one part of Abia State where Aba is situated to another is a very long distance. Therefore, to metaphorically say that one goes to Aba on foot is to say that the person is embarking on a long wearisome trekking that is almost impossible.

vi) O/ jì/ ísí/ kòté/ èbù 'he/she attracts a wasp with his/her head'

he/she/hold/ head/ attract/wasp

The expression above is used to refer to a situation where someone attracts problem to him/herself. When one does not do what he/she is supposed to do at the right time, the consequences of such a neglect (or denial) rest on the individual concerned. For instance, if a child or an adult joins a bad company and in the course of their relationship, an unpleasant incident that demands punishment occurs, that child or adult is to bear the consequences of whatever punishment that may ensue and it is in this context that the metaphorical expression can be adequately used. It literally means that the wasp attacks whatever head that attracts it. In other words, anybody that invites a problem should bear the consequences of his/her action.

vii) O/ tàlù / ntú 'he/she chewed nail'

he/she/chewed/nail

The above metaphorical expression 'he/she chewed nail' depicts excessive suffering. Nail is a piece of iron and therefore cannot be eaten or chewed. This can be illustrated with a situation where somebody is very poor and at the same time inflicted with sickness. The same person may have many other challenges including court cases with nobody to help in arresting the situation or providing a solution. The expression literally means untold hardship and extreme suffering.

viii) O/ tàlù/ ákú 'h/she chewed palm kernel', etc.

he/she/ chewed/ palm kernel

The above expression is uttered metaphorically to refer to permanent stain that may no longer be removed. For instance, a white cloth stained with oil or ink may not be completely washed out and even when removed with bleach, the colour may not be as white as the original white. In that case, it is said that the cloth has eaten or chewed kernel. It can also be applied to edible things such as yam which has changed its colour and is no longer edible.

N/B Many of the statements presented above can also be uttered as fixed-form expressions which could be used as formulaic expressions such as the following:

-Ó jì úkwù èjé 'Ábá. (statement)

- Ò jì úkwú èjé 'Ábá. (fixed-form expression)
- Ó jì ó'nú ègbú ójì (statement)
- Ò jì ó'nú ègbú ójì (fixed-form expression)
- Ò gbà áká àlì ójì (statement)
- Ò gbà áká àlì ójì (fixed-form expression).

The difference in the two sentences above lies in the tone level of the first two words. The low tone normally used in question formation is used here in the fixed-form expressions as evidenced in the example above.

### (B) Analysis of Igbo Metaphorical Expressions Uttered as Passive and or Ergative Constructions

Having analyzed some Igbo statements expressed metaphorically, we will in what follows deal with some examples of those uttered passively and or sometimes as ergative constructions:

The following are uttered as passive/surface structure realizations and sometimes as ergative constructions:

- áfó jòlù yà 'njó
- áfó tàlù yà 'mmí'lí
- Áká sìlì yà íké
- Áká bìlì yà n'`ànì`
- Anyá á'díró yá 'mmá
- Ányá á'díró yá n'`ùnò
- Anyá dì yá n'`é'nú
- Anyá dì yá n'`ìlò
- Anyá fùlù yá ífẹ́/ndí 'mmúó
- Anyá jùlù yá ó'yí
- Anyá zùlù yá àrù
- Ílé dì yá 'nkó
- Ísì á'díró yá 'mmá
- Ísì mébìlì yá
- Ísì yásàlù yá

- Óbì fèlù àzú  
 -Óbì jòlù yà 'njó  
 -Óbì tàlù yà 'mmí'lí  
 -Óbì nà-énù 'yá ínú
- Óbì kàlù yà àkà  
 -Óbì sili yà íké
- Óbì kò yà n' é'nú
- ò'nù kàlù yà àkà  
 -ò'nù dì yà 'nkó
- ò'nù lùlù yà n'ókwú  
 -úkwú tòlù yà n'ànì

**The following metaphorical expressions describe the state of wickedness in a person:**

- |   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| i. -áfò/ jòlù/ yà/ 'njó<br>Stomach/be ugly/he/she ugly            | 'his/her stomach is ugly'         |
| ii. -áfò / tàlù/ yà / 'mmí'lí<br>Stomach/dried/his/her/ water     | 'water dried in his/her stomach'  |
| iii. -óbì/ fèlù/ yà/ àzú<br>Heart/ turned/ his/her/ back          | 'his/her heart is at his/her back |
| iv. -óbì/ jòlù/ yà/ 'njó<br>heart/ be ugly/ he/she/ ugly          | 'his/her heart is ugly'           |
| v. -óbì/ tàlù/ yà/ 'mmí'lí<br>heart/ dried/ his/her/water         | 'water dried in his/her heart'    |
| vi. -óbì/ nà-énù/ 'yá/ ínú<br>heart/ is bittering/ him/her/bitter | 'his/her heart is bitter'         |

The above six expressions have almost the same semantic interpretation in the language and they are glossed the same way to literally say that the person is wicked. Instead of saying outright that the person is wicked, the Igbo language uses the heart (óbì) and the stomach (áfò), two internal organs in the body to describe the goodness or badness of a person. The two organs are used interchangeably for this kind of expression in the language depending on the intension of the speaker. The degree of wickedness is dependent on which expression that is used by the speaker. For instance, the

expressions: *áfọ̀ tàlù yà* ‘mmí’lí; *óbì fẹ̀lù yà àzú*; *óbì tàlù yà* ‘mmí’lí and *óbì nà-é’nú yá ínú* depict extreme case of wickedness. Using any of the above expressions means that the person is exceptionally wicked and is capable of planning great mischief. The other two expressions: *áfọ̀ jòlù yà* ‘njọ̀ and *óbì jòlù yà* ’njọ̀ simply mean that the person is wicked.

- vii. -*áká/ sìlì /yà/ íké* ‘his hand is strong’  
Hand/ be strong/him/her/power

The above metaphorical expression can be interpreted in two ways:

- it can be used to express a situation of a person who is materially stable (wealthy)
- it can also be used to describe an experienced person (in driving, cooking or in any endeavour).

In the first interpretation, the expression is usually applied to somebody who is well established and well to do, who can materially take care of himself and some others around him. It literally means that the person is self-sufficient.

In the second interpretation, it usually applies to degree of experience acquired over time either in a profession as in someone who has been a driver for many years or in other life’s endeavours. In this case, it means that the person is well experienced in that particular profession or trade.

- viii. *áká/ bìlì/ yà/ n’ànì* ‘his/her hand embraced land’  
hand/embraced/ his/her/in land

The above metaphorical expression cannot find its adequate equivalent in English. It can be glossed as: *he/she was paid in his own coin* i.e. the evil he designed for others came back to him/her. In other words, he did not succeed in executing the mischief he/she planned.

- ix. *Ányá/ ’ádíró/ yá ’mmá* ‘his/her eyes are not good’  
eye/ be not/ his/her/ good
- x. *Ísí/ ’ádíró/ yá/ ’m’má* ‘his/her head is not good’  
head/ be not/ his/her/ good
- xi. *Ísí/ mébìlì yá* ‘his/her head is spoilt’  
head/ spoilt/ his/her
- xii. *Ísí/ yásàlù/ yá* ‘his/her head is scattered’  
Head/ scattered/ him/her

The above four expressions mean that the person is mentally sick. Literally the expressions say that the eyes of the person are not good, the head is not good, the head is spoilt and the head is scattered. Igbo language uses some parts of the body namely: the eyes, the heart, the hand and the head to metaphorically express the state or disposition of a person. All the expressions above could be regarded as synonyms because they have the same semantic interpretation in the language even though both the head and the eye are involved in the expression.

- xiii. *Ányá/ 'ádíró/ yá/ n'únò* 'his/her eyes are not in the house'  
 eye/ be not/ his/her/ in house
- xiv. *Ányá/ dī/ yà/ 'n'/'é'nú* 'his/her eyes are up'  
 eye/ be/ he/she/ in/ up
- xv. *Ányá/ dī/ yà/ n'/' iló* 'his/her eyes are outside'  
 eye/ be/ he/she/ in/ outside

The above group of expressions can be taken as synonyms because their semantic interpretation in the language is almost the same. Each of them can be used to describe somebody who is wayward, reckless or careless. The first and third expressions are particularly used to describe a wayward person while the second expression is suitable for describing a careless person. The first expression in the group can also be expressed in another way using the head for its description. For instance, *ísí á'díró 'yá 'ná únò* 'his/her head is not in the house'. Therefore, whether it is the head or the eyes that are not in the house, it simply means that the person is nonchalant, carefree unperplexed or even wayward.

- xvi. *Ányá/ fùlù yà/ ífè/' ndí/ 'mmúó* 'his/her eyes saw things/spirits'  
 eye/ saw he/she/ thing/ some/ spirit

The above expression means that he/she suffered exceedingly. It depicts unspeakable suffering. The person so much suffered that that his/her experienced could be compared to seeing a ghost. That is probably why the same expression such as: **ányá fùlù yà 'm'múó** could also be used to mean the same thing.

- xvii. *Ányá/ jùlù/ yà/ ó'yí* 'his/her eyes are cold'  
 eye/ be cold/ he/she/ cold

The semantic interpretation of the above utterance is that his/her eyes are cold which means that the person is timid or shy. It depicts somebody who is neither bold nor forceful. A person with this type of character is usually fearful, faint-hearted and cowardly.

- xviii. *Ányá/ zùlù/ yà/ àrú* 'his/her body is filled with eyes'  
 eye/ complete/ he/she/ body

The above expression is used to describe a person who is very active, sharp, vigilant, watchful, wary, circumspect and alert. Igbo language uses the eye as the mirror for every part of the body and whichever part that does not function normally is regarded as the malfunction of the eye hence the above expressions involving the eye.

- xix. *Óbì/ kàlù/ yà/ àká* 'his/her heart is ripe'  
 heart/ be ripe/ he/she/ ripe

- xx. *Óbì/ sìlì/ yà/ íké* 'his/her heart is strong'  
 heart/ be strong/ he/she power

The two metaphorical expressions above are synonyms since their semantic interpretations are almost the same. The expressions are used to describe somebody who is strong willed, determined, bold and courageous.

- xxi. *Óbì/ kò/ yà/ n'è'nú* 'his/her heart is hanging in the air'  
 heart/ hang/ he/she/ in/ up

The above expression can be regarded as the contrast of the expressions xix and xx above. While the former (xix, xx) describes the state of settled, confident and determined mind, the latter (xxi) describes a confused, anxious and worried state of mind.

- xxii. *Ọ'nú/ kàlù/ yà/ àká* 'his/her mouth is ripe'  
 mouth/ be ripe/ he/she/ripe

- xxiii. *Ọ'nú/ dì/ yà/ 'nkọ* 'his/her mouth is sharp'  
 mouth/ be/ he/she/ sharp

- xxiv. *Ílé/ dì/ yà 'nkọ* 'his/her tongue is sharp'  
 tongue/ be/ he/she/ sharp

The above metaphorical expressions have almost the same semantic interpretation and they are glossed the same way to mean someone who is eloquent, outspoken or even flippant. The first two can refer to eloquence and outspokenness while the last one can stand for flippancy.

- xxv. *Ọ'nú/ lùlù/ yà/ ná/ ókwú* 'he/she is influential'  
 mouth/ reached/ he/she/ in/ talk

The above metaphorical expression describes a person who in a community can contribute to decision making for the welfare of the members. In other words, it

describes a person who is an influential member of the community. It literally means that the person has the ability to contribute to the welfare or otherwise of the community where he/she belongs.

xxvi. Ụkwụ/ tọlụ/ yà/ n' / ànị 'his/her feet was stuck to the ground'  
feet/ stuck/ he/she/ in/ ground

The above metaphorical expression describes an extreme case of humiliation. Its literal semantic interpretation is that his feet were stuck to the ground not out of sickness or any ailment but out of depression. The cause of the expression can as a matter of fact be interpreted in two ways:

- a) The feet were stuck to the ground as a result of the condition of the sick person one came to visit or the state of the relations around him/her who could not help themselves.
- b) The feet can also be said to be struck to the ground as a result of the depression arising from the shame he/she brought to him/herself and to other members of the community.

### Conclusion

This paper has presented some of the metaphorical expressions used in utterances in the Ọnịchá variety of the Igbo language. A number of expressions used as data were elicited from competent native speakers and they were grouped according to the structure in which they are used in the language. For instance, some of the expressions are uttered as statements while others are uttered as passive or ergative constructions. From our findings, it was observed that some of the metaphoric expressions uttered as statements can also appear as fixed-form or formulaic expressions in the Igbo language. This is achieved by replacing the high tone on the first element on the metaphoric statement by the low tone.

The paper also observed that different metaphoric expressions can pass for synonyms in the language because their semantic interpretations are almost always similar. The paper grouped and analyzed together those expressions that have the same semantic interpretations.

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