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Meaning and Interpretation of Igbo Body-Parts Based Idioms

Okoye, Adaobi Ngozi

Department of Linguistics

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: ifynoels@gmail.com,

&

Mmadike, Benjamin I.

Department of Linguistics

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: bendamag@yahoo.com

Abstract

The traditional view of idioms suggests that they are expressions with arbitrary meanings. The cognitive linguistics view however, has it that the meanings of idioms can be interpreted by some cognitive operations. This study, using Igbo idioms pertaining to body-parts, attempts to ascertain the cognitive operations that apply in Igbo idiomatic meaning interpretation. Data for the study were extracted from Igbo textbooks and analysed based on the cognitive linguistics framework. The study shows that the figurative meanings of the selected body-part idioms are generally achieved by

conventional knowledge, metaphor and metonymy. It equally reveals that conventional knowledge is a basic tool in idiomatic meaning interpretation as it can solely account for the meaning of an expression. Finally, it can be concluded that a single cognitive mechanism or a combination of two or more of such mechanisms can be employed in the figurative meaning interpretation of Igbo body-parts idioms.

Key words Conventional knowledge, Idioms, Metaphor, Metonymy.

Introduction

All languages make use of idioms and these idioms function as a natural reflection of customs, cultural belief, social conventions and norms (Yagiz & Izadpanah, 2013). From the traditional point of view, idioms are seen as fixed expressions whose meanings are arbitrary and therefore, cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituents. The cognitive approach to idioms however, claims that the meanings of idioms, rather than being arbitrary, are motivated and as such, provide insights into how thoughts are structured in the human mind. The approach further highlights the essential role of metaphor and metonymy in linking different domains to the meaning of idioms. Langlotz (2006), who works within this framework, explains that an idiom is motivated if the speaker can comprehend the relationship between the literal expressions and the idiomatic meaning. He further explains that the speaker recognizes this link by constructing conceptual or image schematic correspondences between the two meanings of the expression.

Following from the above, this study examines a number of Igbo idioms pertaining to body-parts to ascertain the cognitive operations that apply in their meaning interpretation. The next section of the paper is the literature review. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of some Igbo body-part idioms in the third section. The fourth section summarizes and concludes the study.

Literature Review

For our review, we provide an overview of some theories of idioms in 2.1. Studies on idiomatic expressions will be discussed in 2.2 followed by the theoretical background to the study in 2.3.

On Theories of Idioms

Over the years, the nature of idioms has caused researchers to theorize on how this linguistic element should be handled. These theories are examined in this section beginning with the configuration hypothesis proposed by Cacciary and Tabossi (1988) in Havrila (2009) which suggests that idioms be grouped together with other memorized strings such as parts of poems, titles of songs, lyrics or any other sequence

of words represented and distributed in the lexicon. The hypothesis further emphasises the compositional nature of idioms, which assumes that idioms are not treated as long words but rather as configurations of words.

The lexicalization hypothesis is another theory of idiom proposed by Swinney and Cutler (1979) that provide an account of how people understand familiar idioms. According to this hypothesis, when people encounter idioms, two operations namely linguistic processing and retrieval from phrasal lexicon are engaged in, in a bid to understand the idiom. The hypothesis further claims that familiar idioms are understood more quickly because the access to stored idioms operation is completed first before the linguistic operation which usually include syntactic and semantic processing.

Sprengr, Levelt and Kempen (2006) cited in Havrila (2009) propose the super lemma theory. The model suggests that an idiom has its unitary idiomatic concept that activates the individual lemmas it is composed of, but that the lemmas are not exclusively bound to one idiomatic meaning. Thus, an idiomatic expression is represented in the lexicon and activated by a superlemma that relates to a specific lexical concept which in turn activates the single lemmas comprising the superlemma. They opine that the concept of 'dying' for instance will activate the superlemma *kick the bucket* which subsequently activates the individual lemmas *kick*, *the* and *bucket*. In addition, the concept of 'dying' can activate any other superlemma such as *to bite the dust*, or *to breathe one's last*, and those will compete for production in the actual speech the same way as simple lemmas do in the case of non-idiomatic speech.

The cognitive approach to idiom posits that metaphor and metonymy are relevant to the understanding of idiomatic expressions. The importance of the cognitive approach has to do with the analysis of idioms as structures that are understood in terms of cognitive mechanisms. The study of language generally within this view, involves the description and analysis of patterns of conceptualization. The approach also recognizes background knowledge as being essential in meaning interpretation in the minds of language speakers. Those who hold this view include Lakoff and Johnson (2003), Kovecses (2005), (2010) and Langlotz (2006) among others.

Studies on Idioms

A considerable number of researches have focused on studying idiomatic expressions. According to Fillmore, Paul and O'connor (1988), an idiom is an expression endowed with a specific interpretation by the speakers of a community. They distinguish between encoding and decoding idioms. Encoding idioms are those that can be understood by speakers of a language without having prior learning e.g. *answer the door*. On the other hand, decoding idioms are expressions that need to be learned beforehand in order to understand their meaning, e.g. *kick the bucket*.

Adopting the three circles approach, an approach developed to assess the extent of the dominance of English in other countries, Adeyanju (2009) attempts a classification of Nigerian English idioms with the aim of determining the idioms that could be regarded as standard and non-standard. He classifies idioms that are stable in formal usage as standard while those that do not satisfy the criteria are classified as non-standard idioms. The idioms that belong to the standard category have the same semantic sense with the native English idioms but are structurally different from their exact native English idioms, while the non-standard subsumes idioms restricted to colloquial usage as well as fairly recent Nigerian English idioms. The examples of the standard and non-standard Nigerian English idioms are shown in 1 and 2 below:

1. Standard Nigerian	English idioms
Idiom	Meaning
To take in	to become pregnant
Son of the soil	an indigene of a place
Kola	a bribe
2. Non-Standard Nigerian	English idioms
Idioms	Meaning
To eye a person	to seduce
Sweet sixteen	a lady looking younger than her age
To be in soup	to be involved in a big problem
Woman wrapper	one who is excessively fond of women
Aso rock	a heavily fortified and impenetrable building.

In a study on the Nigerianization of idioms, Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993) notes that the Nigerian user of foreign idioms apart from converting their verbal picture to resemble what will make meaning in his social and cultural environment, also strips the idioms of particles that are considered unnecessary for the speech performance demand of his culture. Instances provided by the author to buttress this claim are shown in example 3

3a English:	Don't take the law into your own hand
Nigerian user:	Don't take laws into your hands
b English:	He believes in gaining advantages by hook or by crook
Nigerian user:	He believes in gaining advantage by hook or crook

c English: Out of the frying pan into the fire

Nigerian user: From frying pan to fire.

Nwachukwu (1993) further notes that where the crucial word in an idiom does not invite the imagination of the Nigerian user, he simply removes or modifies them as shown in the examples in 4

4 a. English version: Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander

Nigerian version: What is good for the goose is good for the gander

b. English version: Don't drag someone else name through the mire

Nigerian version: Don't drag someone else name in the mud.

The examples in 3 show instances of omissions of articles considered irrelevant by the Nigerian user. In 4a, Nigerian version, the word 'sauce' is replaced with 'good' while in 4b, the word 'mire' in 4a, is replaced with 'mud'.

Egudu (1975) in his study on Igbo idioms observes that negative expressions for positive attributes are a very significant aspect of idiomatic expression in Igbo. He exemplifies as follows

5. Idiomatic expression	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
a.O delu aju akwukwo brilliantly	He wrote a bad book	He passed the examination
b.O mere ya n' mgbawa isi	He broke his head in	He did something excellently well
	(doing something)	
c. Ego na-agba ya ara	Money has made him mad	He is extraordinarily rich
d.Akwa gbara oku n' ahia taata well in the market	Cloth was burnt in the market today	Cloth sold very today

(Culled from Egudu 1975, p. 175-180)

The example in 5(a) describes what is naturally good as bad, 5(b) describes an excellent performance in terms of destructive action, in 5(c) a virtue is described in terms of a defect while ,5(d) describes a happy situation in terms of a sad incident.

Okodo (2012) posits that idioms are expressions that have agreed meaning from culture to culture. Using data from the Igbo language, Okodo claims that idiomatic meanings are analytically realized from the meanings of the individual words in the expressions. His examples are shown below:

6. Idiomatic expression	Literal meaning	Agreed meaning
a. O moro nti n'azu	He grew ears behind.	He is disobedient or heady
b. O gbara isi akwara	He developed nerves on his head	He is unyielding and disobedient
c. O tara isi mbe	He ate the head of a tortoise	He does not feel pain

Nwoye (1992) in a study of Igbo body-based metaphors posits that they are the vehicles through which the Igbos' conceptualize and concretize their world. He further explains that body-based metaphors mediate a structural correspondence that is achieved by associating human traits such as strengths, frailties, wickedness and beauty with certain parts of the body.

Adopting the cognitive approach to the study of idioms, Al-Amouudi (2013) applies the conceptual metaphor theory to the analysis of Arabic hand idioms. The study shows that the meanings of most Arabic hand idioms are motivated by metaphor. Two examples from the study are as follows:

7a Idu tawila

His hand is long

He is a thief

b. Min id li id
from hand to hand
of low value

With regard to the example in 7(a), Al-Amouudi posits that the concept of reaching evoked by the concrete image of the long hand (which stretches beyond boundary) represents robbery in the target domain. In the case of the idiom in 7(b), the metaphorical mapping is based on the idea of something being circulated till it loses its supposed worth.

In a similar study, Al-Adaileh and Abbadi (2012) investigates the pragmatic implications of conventional body-based idioms in Jordanian Arabic. Their study shows that the metonymic idioms that include such body parts as head, face, eyes, hand and tongue predominantly have negative meanings, idioms involving such body parts as hair and nose express both positive and negative meanings respectively, while idioms based on mouth and neck are found to convey only positive meanings.

Galal (2014) applies the conceptual metaphor theory to English- Arabic idioms with the aim of ascertaining the relevance of the theory to idioms of equivalent linguistic form and different conceptual foundations. That is, idioms that literally

appear to be the same but actually differ conceptually as a result of difference in culture. The study reveals that the main source of difference between the idioms is ascribed to cultural encoding, which is evident at the specific level cultural metaphors. He also notes that although English and Arabic share such metaphors as HEART IS CONTAINER, HEART IS A MOVABLE OBJECT, THE HAND STANDS FOR PERSON etc., that the primary metaphors are differently manipulated by each culture along various cultural parameters. An example from that study is the idiom 'have/keep one's ear to the ground.' which according to Galal implies listening in English but humiliation in Arabic.

Following from Galal's (2014) study, it appears that such idioms of equivalent linguistic form but different conceptual foundation can be seen in Igbo and English languages. For instance, the Igbo idiom 'ikukọ isi na isi ọnụ' and the English idiom 'bang their heads together' appear to be the same but they are different because in the expression Ọ *kùkòrò isi na isi ọnụ* n'nzukọ ahụ, the italicized means to instigate argument (in a disorderly manner) between people but in English, it means to force people to stop arguing and behave in a sensible way.

The section that follows gives an overview of some mechanisms that aid meaning interpretation of idiomatic expressions.

Theoretical Background

This section explains metaphor and metonymy as cognitive tools which are employed in meaning interpretation of figurative expressions. Conventional knowledge is also discussed as it also accounts for the meanings of figurative expressions.

Cognitive linguists (Lakoff and Johnson (2003), Kovecses (2008), (2010)) maintain that metaphor as a cognitive tool is central to thought and language. In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain.

A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains in which one domain is understood in terms of another. Kovecses (2010) defines a conceptual domain as any coherent organization of experience. He further avers that the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called the source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood is the target domain.

Conceptual metaphors according to Lakoff and Johnson (2003) are metaphorical concepts cognitively constructed by mapping a concrete source domain into a more abstract target domain. This concrete source domain according to them is usually created to facilitate access to an abstract entity. They further distinguish between primary and complex metaphors noting that primary metaphors arise

spontaneously, are usually universal across cultures and also provide a superstructure for our systems of complex metaphorical thought and language while, the complex metaphors differ significantly from culture to culture.

Dobrovolsky and Piirainen (2005) note that idioms based on the same conceptual metaphor often reveal semantic differences. Exemplifying with the English idioms *spill the bean* and *blow the lid off*, they opine that the two idioms activate the same metaphors which are MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL ENTITIES. The difference however arises from the corresponding mental images. Whereas *spill the bean* evokes the image of an accidental action, *blow the lid off* evokes the image of an observer who makes effort to look into a container.

BODY IS A CONTAINER, LIFE IS A PATH, THE ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER and other metaphors exist. However, some of these metaphors are shared by different cultures while some are culture specific.

Kovecses (2008) suggests that the causes of metaphor variation across cultures can be grouped into two large classes which are differential experience and differential cognitive preferences or styles. According to him, on one hand, many of our metaphors vary because our experiences as human beings also vary while on the other hand, our metaphors vary because the cognitive processes we put to use for the creation of abstract thought may also vary.

Another tool that is central to language and thought, which is also a mechanism for idiomatic meaning construction is metonymy. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) assert that conceptual metonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition. In conceptual metonymy, a part of an item or something closely associated with it stands in for the whole item.

Kovecses (2010) sees metonymy as a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain. He further provides three kinds of general metonymies which are THE WHOLE FOR THE PART, THE PART FOR THE WHOLE and THE PART FOR THE PART. With regard to the part for whole metonymy, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain that there are many parts that can stand for the whole. However, it is usually the case that the part we pick out determines the aspect of the whole we choose to focus on. If we consider these examples, *we need some good heads on the project* and *we need some good hands on the project*. Though both are instances of part for whole metonymy, the focus on head, shows that we need intelligent people while the focus on hand refer to hardworking/competent people.

Distinguishing metaphor from metonymy Lakoff and Johnson (2003) posit thus “*metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another and*

its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand in for another” (37).

Conventional knowledge is also employed in the meaning interpretation of idiomatic expressions. According to Kovecses (2010), conventional knowledge refers to information shared by people in a given culture. This shared knowledge includes the knowledge we have about parts of our body and their functions as well as other activities that unite people in and across cultures.

Abbas and Younis (2009) view conventional knowledge as an unconscious process. Their claim being that the process of recalling the knowledge for idiomatic interpretation is usually done unconsciously. They further aver that context also aid the interpretation of idiomatic phrases.

In the section that follows, we examine some Igbo body part idioms to ascertain how their meaning interpretation is achieved.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

For the data presentation, the citation forms of the idioms are shown, followed by their literal and figurative meanings. The tone marking convention adopted here is as follows: Low tone is indicated with a grave accent [·], step tone is marked with a macron [–] while, the high tone is left unmarked.

- | | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| (8a) ibū | n’isi | |
| | to carry on head | Know off heart/spearhead a matter |
| i | O bù ùsòro omenàlà niīlē n’isi | He knows all customary rites off heart |
| ii | O bù okwu ahù n’isi | He is spearheading the matter. |

This idiomatic expression has more than one meaning but each of the meanings is specified in the context labeled i and ii. Different mechanisms motivate the meaning construction of the expressions. The meaning in context (i) is motivated by our knowledge about the head and the fact that the brain where thinking operations take place is located there. In addition, this head is a container which can contain things. With regard to spearheading a matter in context (ii), the meaning is motivated by the position of the head as the topmost part of the body hence it is this location of the head that maps into the person at the top of an issue. The head is also used to represent a person. The cognitive mechanisms involved in the meaning interpretation of the expression include THE HEAD STANDS FOR THE PERSON METONYMY, THE HEAD STANDS FOR CONTROL AND THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER METAPHOR.

- | | | |
|----------|--------------------|------------------|
| (b) igbā | isi akwara | |
| | to grow head roots | to be unyielding |

Ọ gbàrà isi akwarà

He is stubborn

This expression is used to describe an adamant person. The meaning of the expression is motivated by our conventional knowledge of taproots and the difficulties associated with trying to uproot them. Akwarà (taproot) in the concrete source domain maps into stubbornness in the abstract target domain. Another motivation in the meaning construction of this idiom is HEAD STANDS FOR A PERSON METONYMY because the attitude of a whole is ascribed to a part (the head). We can therefore, claim that conventional knowledge, metaphor and metonymy are at work as cognitive mechanisms in the meaning interpretation of the expression.

(c) isi inū ọkọ

Head on fire

to be brilliant

Isi nà ànu nwàtá à ọkọ

This child is very brilliant

This idiom is used to describe someone that is very intelligent. The head being the part of the body associated with reasoning stands for the whole person in the expression. The head in the idiom also stands for intelligence. Our conventional knowledge about the head as a vital part of the body together with THE HEAD STANDS FOR INTELLIGENCE and THE HEAD STANDS FOR A PERSON metonymies are employed in the meaning interpretation of this idiom.

(d) it̩k̩ ọsi ọnū

to put heads together

to deliberate (on an issue)

Ànyi gá ètikọ isī ọnū bànyere mkpesa ahù We will deliberate concerning that complaint.

This expression is used when diverse opinions are sought on an issue. Based on our conventional knowledge, we know that when people deliberate on an issue, they come up with different ideas which emanate from the head. These ideas are seen as physical entities stored in the head. Therefore, conventional knowledge, the metonymy THE HEAD STANDS FOR A PERSON and the metaphor THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER are used to achieve the meaning interpretation of the expression.

(e) ità isi m̩m̩ ọ

to spill/profane head spirit

to reveal a top secret

Ọ tàrà isi m̩m̩ ọ

He revealed a top secret

This idiom is equivalent to English ‘spill the bean’. In the meaning construal of this idiom, based on our conventional knowledge, the masquerade in its non-corporeal nature is not supposed to be subjected to profanity. Therefore, the revealing of a top secret is likened to profaning the spirit (masquerade). Furthermore, metaphor

metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS HOLDING IN THE HAND also acts as mechanism in the meaning construction of the expression.

- (j) inyē aka azụ
to give hand back to give bribe
O nà ènye aka āzū He gives bribe.

The meaning of this idiom arises from our knowledge of the hand and its function (HAND FOR ACTIVITY METONYMY) and also from the fact that most things done secretly (behind) are not ethical. The same motivation also accounts for igōsī azụ akā ‘to show the back of hand’ (to deceive).

- (k) inwē aka mkpụmkpụ
to have hand short
being in a state of insufficiency (especially money) Aka mkpụmkpụ ekwēghī yā
mèe ihe Ọ kwèsiri imē.

This expression is usually used to refer to someone that is unable to participate in an activity due to lack of money. It appears to be equivalent to the English *hands being tied*. The meaning is motivated by THE HAND STANDS FOR ACTIVITY metonymy. However, this hand is hindered by its insufficient size and as such it cannot gather enough.

- (l) isèrè aka na ụkwụ
to remove hands and leg to totally withdraw support
Ọ sèrè ukwu na aka yā ebe ha nò He totally withdrew his support from them.

The meaning of this expression is achieved our knowledge of the functions of hands and legs as part of the human body. Metaphor as a mechanism is also employed as the hand and leg in the concrete source domain corresponds to support in the abstract target domain.

- (m) ipū eze elū
to develop teeth up to indulge in a forbidden activity.
Nwokē ahụ pùrù eze elū That man indulged in a taboo.

This idiom is used for a person that engages in a sacrilege. Based on our conventional knowledge about the Igbo traditional belief any child that cuts the upper incisor first is considered evil and thrown into the evil forest. This forms the basis for the meaning of this idiom. In addition, it appears, based on the meaning of idiomatic expressions like obì ikō n’elū ‘the heart hanging up’, anya i dī n’elū ‘the eye being up’ among others that elū does not have a very ‘good connotation’ in Igbo. The meaning of the idiom is solely accounted for by conventional knowledge.

domain to give rise to the meaning of the expression. Therefore, conventional knowledge and metaphor are the mechanism in the meaning interpretation of the expression

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented some Igbo idioms relating to such body-parts as head, hand, eyes and teeth. The mechanisms employed in the meaning construction of the idioms presented have also been accounted for such that we have idioms whose meanings are based on a single mechanism such as conventional knowledge, for instance I pū eze elū (to indulge in a forbidden act) and ịnwū òkwà n'aka (to be very early).

There are also those that involve two mechanisms, for instance, idioms which are motivated by conventional knowledge and metonymy as in seen in inyē aka āzū and imē aka àbùò. We also have idioms in which three mechanisms namely metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge are employed in their meaning interpretation. Examples of such idioms include I bū n'īsī and itīkō isi ọnū, igbā isi akwara, etc.

It also appears that conventional knowledge is a vital mechanism in the meaning interpretation of the Igbo body part idioms. This is based on its ability to motivate the meaning of those idioms that both metaphor and metonymy cannot account for. Furthermore, the involvement of this shared knowledge in the meaning construal of most of the idioms attest to our claim.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the meanings of idioms are not entirely arbitrary but achieved through various cognitive mechanisms. We call for further research in this area (in idioms and other related expressions) so as to verify the claims made in this study.

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