

Semantic Shift: Insight from Nigerian Selected Afro Pop

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper focuses on the changes that occur to lexical items in terms of changes in the words that co-occur with it over time. Thus, the focus of the paper tries to ascertain the semantic shift in Nigerian pop music. The data was collected through listening to pop music of Flavour, Phyno, Zoro, etc. where instances of meaning shift were used in free flowing utterances. Adopting the Frame semantics approach, this paper observes that words can take on different meanings from earlier meanings as a result of use in a different context. Whereas the original sense is dropped, a new meaning is used instead depending on the frequencies of its use by the speakers in various contexts. Meaning-shifts can be neutral or it can shift from positive to negative or vice versa. For instance; the phrase 'gbàrà ànị' which literally means 'buy land' then shifts to become 'have sex', 'Adàzi nnukwù' which is a name of a town shift to become 'woman's buttock', gbachalu afiā' which literally means 'peeling market' shifts to 'smoke weed (Indian hemp)', etc. It is observed that through this study that semantic shift occurs as a result of consistent use of certain words in various contexts. In conclusion, it is noteworthy that context is a key factor in studying semantic shift.

Keywords: semantic shift, pop music, pragmatics, frame semantics

1.0 Introduction

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that deals with the meaning of entities. In the words of Abdurrahman (2019), semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Linguistic semantics deals with the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words and sentences of a language. Over the years, meaning of words has been changing.

The rate of semantic change occurs at utmost speed compared to other types of linguistic change. Words such as 'gay' has been seen changing its meaning from 'bright', 'cheerful', 'homosexual'. Likewise, the word 'presently' has been seen from 'soon' to 'now' and many more changes (Bright 1992:387). This research work focuses on studying semantic shift or change in some lexical items in selected Nigerian pop music based on the frame in which the words occur. Whereas, semantic change has been analyzed and written on over the years, there seem to be a gap on semantic shift of words when used in a particular context and not the meaning totally changing over the years but rather the meaning of the words shifting as a result of the context the lexical item is used in. Meaning shift or change in this research work isn't studied from the perspective of a diachronic study of historical linguists but from the angle of shift based on the context of use of a lexical item. More like a synchronic study, though focus is on context (context based, not history based).

The paper restricts its primary data to respondents in some selected Nigerian pop music. This work adopts Fillmore's theory on frame semantics, which is also known as 'Fillmorean Frame Semantics'.

1.1 Concept of Semantic Change

As we venture into the concept of semantic change, it is needful to understand what semantic is all about. As stated earlier, Abdurrahman (2019), opines semantics as the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Linguistic semantics deals with the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words and sentences of a language. Thereby, the concept of semantic change deals with 'a historical process in which conventional meaning of a linguistic expression changes its meaning and takes up a new one.

Semantic change primarily refers to changes in the meaning of lexical units, and may also encompass issues related to compositional semantics when strings of words are concerned as in compounds and collocations. According to Armelle (2013), semantic change is how word meaning evolves in time at the level of words and lexical units. Subsequently, in the words of Traugott (2003:196), semantic change

is as one of the innovative nature of language as a result of its constant state of flux. Trask (2015) names two types of semantic change as melioration and pejoration.

Concluding from the above review, an individual can conclude that the semantic meaning of words may change over time in order to function and accommodate the contemporary needs of the speakers/users that determine the change or shift.

Whereas, the review perceives change from a diachronic perspective, this paper tends to analyses meaning change, or rather better described as meaning shift of words based on their context of use and not based on their change over the years, in which they lose their old meanings and accommodate a new meanings, rather a shift analyzed here is such that the lexical item hasn't lost its old meanings but rather as a result of context of use, shifts to possess an entirely different meaning from its original connotation. It is actually, cases of meaning shifts of words that give rise to meaning change, where in the lexical item now totally drops its old meaning to accommodate an entirely different meaning, as a result of frequency of use in a different context which displays a meaning different from its original meaning.

Language deals with concepts strongly connected with experience, and as experience fluctuates according to many facts in time and space, words referring to such concepts fluctuate too. Although language changes are self-evident and very frequent, they are, at least synchronically, imperceptible and difficult to explain. G. Hudson (2000:392) argues:

"[...] it is rarely noticeable within one generation, but we are often aware those generations before and after ours speak differently, preferring forms and rules different from those we prefer and even having some different ones. Whenever a language at some point in time is compared with its descendant language even a few hundred years later, the change is obvious."

A linguist may describe a linguistic change case in great details, but may as well fail to construct a systemic frame for this change, especially in cases of semantic change. Unlike other types of linguistic change, like sound or spelling changes, semantic change is strongly linked to arbitrary cultural and social changes, thus making it very strenuous to predict the direction or depth of this change. We will concentrate in this paper on 'lexical' or 'lexemic' semantic change rather than grammatical /functional/syntactic change; that is the change in meaning of a word, understood to be a change in the concepts associated with a word. The study of semantic change (also semantic shift, semantic progression or semantic drift) can be seen as a part of etymology, onomasiology, semasiology, and semantics. We will discuss here with detailed examples two aspects of semantic change: change in denotation in which the meaning of a lexeme is 'extended' or 'restricted'; and change in connotation in which a word may be 'ameliorated' or 'pejorated'.

Ullmann (1962: 193-197) opines that semantic change is a consequence of various factors which include: Polysemy, ambiguous contexts, loss of motivation (severed etymological connection), vagueness, discontinuity in transmission and structure of the vocabulary.

Cook (2012:115) validates that "Semantic changes are subtle and always move unconsciously and unnoticed". In other words, language change as we observe is always unconsciously without our knowing which make them irresistible.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1.1 Change in denotation:

Humans naturally tend to generalize, and this affects their use of language. This is one of the causes of the semantic phenomenon known as semantic broadening (also termed extension, widening, and generalization). In this process, a specific feature of the word is dropped or the word is used outside its original specific context to refer to a more generalized concept or object. Take the word *acquit*, in the early 13th century, this word originally meant 'to quiet' or 'appease a claim', hence to satisfy a claimant and discharge the debtor (OED). Then by the end of the 14th century it started to suggest that no debt is found against someone to begin with (Hayes, 2012). This term was mainly connected with debts and claims until the seventeenth century; it was used in a broader meaning in some contexts though, mostly figuratively. Looking at the synonyms of 'acquit' like 'exonerate' and 'exculpate', we can see that 'acquit' is oldest word used in courts in official 'clearing' context; and this is probably the reason behind adopting it in its wider sense in courts.

Moron was first adopted and used by the American Association for the Study of the Feeble-minded in 1910 with a very specific meaning 'an adult person having a mental age of between eight and twelve' (OED); a *moron* was more developed mentally than an imbecile (IQ of 26 to 50) or an idiot (IQ of 0 to 25) (Hayes, 2012). All these terms were popularized by the above-mentioned association. Since most people are not aware of these technicalities, they started using them in a broader sense as an insult. Insulting is categorized by some scholars, like Grzega (2004), as one of the motives for semantic change.

Also, as seen in the word *Uka* which is said to originally bear the meaning of "to converse". With the coming of Christianity in the Igbo land, "Sundays" were referred to as the "day of conversation". As the strategy for converting Igbos was just through normal conversations. Thus the new converts who accepted the new creed, pushing aside their traditional beliefs were then referred to as *NdiUka*. Their place of worship "Church" became *UloUka*, that is, the house of conversation or reasoning. The first day of the 7th day cycle which makes up a week, was then set aside for conversations; thus "Sunday" became *UbochiUka* (the day of conversation).

The word *Uka* here shows clearly a case where as a result of a shift in meaning, an extension of meaning occurs, thereby *Uka* till date not just only refer to "church", it can also refer to conversation. (Egenti & Okeke, 2020)

Semantic restriction (also termed narrowing, reduction, and specialization) is the opposite of broadening. In this process, the meaning of a word is narrowed to refer only to a specific or limited part of its original denotation. For example, the word *Safari* come originally from the Arabic word *safar* which means 'travelling' generally. It comes from the verb *saafara* 'to travel', and it is used when talking about someone travelling regardless of the distance, it has to be relatively long though. Whether you are travelling from Cairo to Alexandria or to Paris; by foot, animals, or ships; we call it *safar* in Arabic. Then this word was adopted by East African countries to refer to hunting expeditions. When it entered English in the 19th century, it was still used mostly with this hunting denotation. With the accumulation of animal rights and similar pacifist organizations and the ban on hunting in most targeted areas, the 'travelling' and 'animals' senses are still borne in the word but mostly for sightseeing and scientific investigation rather than hunting. The OED does not trace back the older original meaning of Arabic word *Suffah*, from which *sofa* comes. It comes from the word *Saf* which means 'row' or 'line'. The commonest term in Arabic which By: Saher includes this word is *ahluS Suffah* which refers to a group of very poor new Muslims who went to Madinah (city of the Muslim Prophet) and they had to stay in the 'shaded area' of Nabawi Masjid 'the Prophet's Mosque' (Ibn Manzoor: 9, 194). Later when Muslims became prosperous, these simply shaded areas went to palaces and had some comfortable furniture in them. When sofas began to be made in the 18th century, the designers seemed to have purposely made it look like the oriental *Suffah* so to give it a luxurious touch.

2.1.2 Change in connotation:

Thus far we have been dealing with change in denotation. Now we shall move to the connotative change of the meaning of words. Some words undergo axiological or evaluative change in their meaning in the course of time; they may gain either a positive or negative connotation which did not exist in their original or previous uses. When a word is used to express negatively loaded values not inherent in its original meaning, we call this phenomenon pejoration (also termed deterioration or degradation). It is generally agreed upon that the frequency of pejorative cases is much higher than ameliorative ones (Kleparski 1986; Grygiel 2005; Trask 2015). In his classic *Essai de sémantique*, the French linguist Michel Bréal presents a much deeper psychoanalytic explanation for this process:

"The so-called pejorative tendency is the result of a very human disposition which prompts us to veil, to attenuate, to disguise ideas which are disagreeable, wounding or repulsive [...]. There is nothing in it all save a feeling of consideration, a precaution against unnecessary shocks, a precaution which whether sincere or feigned is not long efficient, since the hearer seeks out things behind the word, and at once identifies them (Bréal, 1897:100-101)."

Daft, Old English *gedæfte* 'mild' or 'meek', is of Germanic origin related to Gothic *gabadan* 'become or be fitting' (OED). 'Insulting' seems to be a strong pejorative force in English; we find similar cases

with *idiot* and *imbecile* which did not initially mean 'stupid'. In the fourteenth century, *daft* is used with beasts to mean 'innocent' or 'silly': in c 1325, *Body & Soul* 302 in *Map's Poems* 343 "Ne wuste what was good or il, But as a beest, doumbe and daft." (OED). In the next century, it is used to refer to people who are 'foolish' or 'wanting in intelligence' (OED) probably because gentlemen of that time were dull and did not do interesting or exciting activities (Hayes, 2012), so there is nothing more insulting than comparing them with uninteresting silly animals.

When the connotation of a word becomes better or neutralized after it was rather negative, we call this process amelioration. It is not as common as pejoration because the latter has more psychological, social, and linguistic drives. An interesting example of amelioration is *luxury*. It comes from Old French *luxurie* 'abundance, sumptuous enjoyment' (OED), and it denoted lechery and lasciviousness in the Middle Ages because the aim of sex then was procreation not enjoyment. Then it started to lose its negative connotation meaning simply luxuriance or abundance. By the mid seventeenth century, Chaucer's "*O foule lust of luxurie*" became Milton's "*All now was turn'd to jollitie and game, To luxurie and riot, feast and dance.*" (OED). It was not until the early 18th century that it took the current meaning and connotation connected with exquisite and opulent surroundings. Maybe one day if all belts have to be tightened, *luxury* will be pejorated again.

In the same direction of amelioration, a word sometimes does not become all the way positive or even neutral, but becomes less negative; in other words, it is softened. For instance, *naughty*, as we may guess, comes from *naught* 'nothing, zero'. It originally meant needy or poor (OED), then, in the 16th change in stylistic meaning: The style and context often cause words to shift their meanings, sometimes radically. Sometimes words are used ironically to mean the opposite. For example when you arrive at your door and discover that you forgot the keys in the office/market and say "Excellent!".

2.1.3 Frame Semantics

This work adopts Frame Semantics theory which was developed by Charles Fillmore (1977, 1981, 1987 & 2003). In an overview, a word may not be understood out its environment of usage. For example, for these words 'advocate or client' to be understood fully, the context or environment of law or legislation. When we talk about a frame, a picture of a close edged box pictured in the mind whereby every activities take place within the boundary of the box which can be liken as normal whereas activities outside the box becomes 'abnormal'. This abnormality can be likened to semantic shift because a literal meaning has been altered. A 'frame' plays a role in the description of linguistic meanings; it is a system of categories structured in accordance with some motivating context. Some words exist in order to provide access to knowledge of such frames to the participants in the communication process, and simultaneously serve to perform a categorization which takes such framing for granted.

According to Fillmore and Bake (2006:316) frame semantics is the 'study of how linguistic frames activate frame knowledge, and how the frame thus activated can be integrated into an understanding of the passages that contain these forms. This theory emphasizes the position that meaning arises in context, which means that the meaning of any word is generated rightly on context based. Furthermore, Fillmore vividly states that 'nobody could be said to know the meaning of any linguistic expression who did not know the details of the kind of scene which provided the background and motivation for the categories, therefore word meanings are said to be evoked by Frames' (Fillmore 2003:378)

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection Method and Analysis

The data collection method adopted for this research was primarily elicitation and observation method which was achieved through meticulously listening to some of the Nigerian pop music. There was a random sampling method in the course of selection; whereby few musicians who were said to be Igbo rappers were considered. Some of the pop singers includes; Flavour, Phyno, Zoro, etc.

Names of the music listened to includes;

- i. Iyilu ife by Phyno
- ii. Oso ga-eme by Phyno
- iii. Golibe by Flavour
- iv. Asai by Phyno

- v. Gbara anj by Dj Jmaster ft Phyno and Flavour
 vi. Fūwaa by Phyno
 vii. Mbada by Zoro

The needed data whereby semantic shift occurred were written down for analysis. The literal meaning and as well contextual meaning of the utterances were also stated. The collated data were analyzed using Frame Semantic approach by Fillmore (1977)

3.2 Tone Marking Convention

The study adopts Emenanjo (1978) and Green and Igwe (1963) tone marking convention which leaves the high tone (´) unmarked, but marks the low tone and the downstep tone with the grave accent (`) and macron (¯) respectively. For instance:

- akwà* 'cloth'
akwa 'cry'
àkwa 'egg'
àkwà 'bed'
irē 'to sell'

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Under this chapter, we will present and analyze the data. The raw data will be presented, the literal meaning and then the connotative meaning which occur as a result of meaning shift. The new meaning will be discussed.

Data Analysis using Frame Semantics

S/N	RAW DATA	LITERAL MEANING	FIGURATIVE MEANING (EXTENDED MEANING)
1	Nwa Otū , kà ànyị gbachara oḡwù	Onitsha guy, let us inject medicine	Onitsha guy, let us smoke weed
2	Gbachalụ afiā	Peeling market	Smoke weed (Indian hemp)
3	Ndịà à saa m̄ isī	These people have washed my head	These people have deceived me
4	Ndị ekē	People's python	The policemen
5	Kà m kòchalụ ugbō	Let me farm a bit	Let me have a bit sex
6	Ànyị gà-àgbanyere hā film	We will switch on the television for them	We will surprise them
7	Adàzi nnukwù	A town name	Woman's buttock
8	Nwannē bòchaa	Brother, slaughter	Brother, leave/disappear
9	Nwokē bụ afo anū	Man is animal's intestine	The man is a dullard
10	Nwannē sèwaa	Brother, tear and break	Brother, leave/disappear
11	Ndị nwā	People's child	Sex workers
12	Isi onye ocha adàgo	Head of a white man has fallen	Someone has been defrauded
13	Guys kwòwa ìkwòkìkwò	Guys should be grinding	Guys should be having sex
14	Nwa, akòna my way	baby, don't till/cultivate my way	Baby, don't leave/desert me
15	Anà àḡwọ àbàchà	People are mixing African salad	People are just masturbating
16	Ụmụ guys nà-àgbọ nchà	Guys are foaming soap	Guys are masturbating
17	Adàzi Enū	A town	Woman's breast
18	Mbada	Wide	Wealth
19	Asa mmā, iyìlù ife	Fine girl, you resemble something	Fine girl, you are beautiful
20	Nwannē, gbàra oḡwù gị	Brother, fetch your medicine	Brother, mind your business

	ńụọ	and drink	
21	Ụmụ asā nà-àpiakwa okū	Fine children are flogging fire	Fine ladies are having sex
22	Bèe m n'igwè	Cut me in iron	Call me on phone
23	Ànà m ànụkwanụ ifē	Do I hear something	I don't really care
24	Jèe gbàrà ànị	Go and buy land	Go and have sex
25	My guy jèrè Jamaica wèe gbuo ozū	My guy went to Jamaica and killed a corpse	My guy went to Jamaica and made much money
26	Nwa bù tomato Jos	Baby is Jos' tomato	Baby is much beautiful
27	Nwannē tịọ down	Brother throw down	Brother, come here
28	Ọ bughị all man bütèrè ike	It is not all men that brought strength	It is not men that made money
29	Your babe bù okporo	Your babe is road	Your girlfriend is an easy going/cheap lady
30	Ọsọ gà-ème, nwannē wàa	Race will start, brother break	Race will start, brother leave
31	Ọwu itè nà-ènye ọbàrà mgbalielū	Pot tread gives high blood pressure	Poverty causes high blood pressure
32	Baby nà sweet paw-paw	Baby is sweet paw-paw	Baby is very beautiful
33	Ụmụ nwā chọrọ onye nā-asa hā āfērē	Children baby want who will wash them plate	Ladies want who will have sex with them
34	Nwannē, pia tyre	Brother, flog tyre	Brother, leave here
35	My man, gbàwaa door	My man, break door	My man, leave/ get out

In sentence 1, we observe a semantic shift of the use of words *gbachara ọgwù* mean “minding one’s business”, thereby shifting from its original meaning of *inject medicine* because of the context (frame) of use. In sentence 2, likewise a shift occurs in the meaning of the words *gbachalu afiā* from “peeling market” to mean smoking (Indian hemp)” because of its context. In sentence 3, yet another shift occurs in the use of the words *saa m īsī* “wash my head” to mean deception. In 4 we notice a change in the sentence *ndi ekē* which literally mean “people’s python” to imply policemen. In 5, *kòchalu ugbō* shifts its meaning from “farming a bit” to mean “to have a bit sex”; in 6 likewise *àgbanyere hā film* which literally mean ‘to switch on the television for them’ to become *to surprise them*. In 7, *Adāzi nnukwù* shifts its meaning to mean “a woman’s buttock” which semantically means a name of a town. Sentence 8, *bòchaa* changes from “slaughter” in its meaning to imply “leave/disappear” in the context. In 9, we observe the meaning of *afọ anū* shifting from “animal’s intestine” to imply “dullard”. In 10, *sèwaa* shifts in its meaning of “tear and break” to imply “leave/disappear” as a result of the frame associated. In the context of use of *Ndị nwā*, its meaning shifts from “people’s child” to mean “sex workers” in sentence 11.

Likewise, in 12, another shift occurs in the use of the phrase *Isi onye ọcha adàgo* mean “Someone has been defrauded” instead of its original meaning of “Head of a white man has fallen”. In 13, *kwòwa ìkwòkìrìkwò* shifts in its original meaning of “keep grinding” to mean “having sex”. In 14, *akòna* my way shifts from its meaning of “don’t till/cultivate my way” to mean “don’t leave/desert me” in this frame. In 15, *àgwọ àbàchà* shifts in its meaning of “mixing African salad” to mean “to masturbate”. *Nà-àgbọ nchà* 16, shifts in meaning from “foaming soap” to mean “to masturbate”. In sentence 17, we observe the meaning of *Adāzi Enū* shifting from its original meaning of “a town’s name” to mean “a woman’s breast” in the context of use. In sentence 18, *Mbada* shifts in its meaning of “wide” to mean “wealth” as a result of the frame it was placed in. In 19 we notice a change in the sentence *iyilù ife* which literally mean “to resemble something” to imply beautiful. In 20, *gbàrà ọgwù gị ńụọ* shifts its meaning from “fetch your medicine and drink” to mean “to mind your business”; in 21 likewise *nà-àpiakwa okū* which literally mean ‘to flog fire’ to become *to have sex*. In 22 *Bèe m n'igwè* shifts its meaning to mean “call me on phone” which semantically means *cut me in iron*. Sentence 23, *Ànà m ànụkwanụ ifē* changes from “Do I hear something” in its meaning to imply “I don’t really care” in the context of its use. In 24, we observe the meaning of *Jèe gbàrà ànị* shifting from “go and buy land” to imply “go and have sex”. In 25, *wèe gbuo ozū* shifts in its meaning of “killed a corpse” to imply “made much money” as a result of the frame associated. In the context of use of *tomato*

Jos, its meaning shifts from “Jos’ tomato” to mean “much beautiful” in sentence 26. Likewise, in 27, another shift occurs in the use of the phrase *tùò down* mean “come here” instead of its original meaning of “throw down”. In 28, *bùtèrè ike* shifts in its original meaning of “brought strength” to mean “made money”. In 29, *okporo* shifts from its meaning of “road” to mean “easy going/cheap” in this frame. In 30, *nwannē wàa* shifts in its meaning of “brother break” to mean “brother leave”. *Òwu itè* in 31, shifts in meaning from “pot’s tread” to mean “poverty”. In sentence 32, we observe the meaning of sweet paw-paw shifting from its original meaning still “sweet paw-paw” to mean “very beautiful” in the context of use. In sentence 33, *Umù nwā chòrò onye nā-asa hā āfērē* shifts in its meaning of “Children baby want who will wash them plate” to mean “Ladies want who will have sex with them” as a result of the frame it was placed in. Likewise, in 34, another shift occurs in the use of the phrase *pja tyre* mean “leave here” instead of its original meaning of “flog tyre”. In 35, *gbàwaa* door shifts in its original meaning of “break door” to mean “to leave”.

It is noteworthy that from our data, we can say that meaning is not limited to semantics but is extended to pragmatics. As semantics is the literal meaning or in house meaning, pragmatics deals with context of use. In the words of Fillmore (1997), “meanings have internal structure which is determined in relation to the background frame or scene”. This statement is evidenced through the presented data whereby it is observed that lexical items changes based on the context of its usage. Thus, an individual should not end his or her knowledge of lexical items on semantic basis, but should be able to have understanding of the operation of pragmatics which describes items within context (i.e. schematized scenes, environmental set up).

In conclusion, Fillmore (2003), concludes this in his statement, that nobody could be said to know the meaning of any linguistic expression who did not know the details of the kind of scene which provided the background and motivation for the categories.

4. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This research focuses on the semantic shift in Afro Pop music, and with which Igbo and English languages are involved can be attributed as one of the many reasons for semantic change in languages and likewise semantic extension.

Semantic change is highly irregular in direction due to the irregularity of its causes. These causes are usually interrelated, and semantic change is rarely the result of one cause exclusively. Although it can be radical sometimes, semantic change rarely jumps to a far meaning; it is gradual and usually slow, which explains why it is very hard to notice synchronically. It is sometimes mainly the result of natural human tendencies as we saw in broadening and pejoration, and like the human tendency to measure things by body organs which is the primary cause of so-called metaphorical extension. It is also noteworthy that the rapid nature of lexical change in the music industry is quite alarming as many words have their meanings extended. To this regards, for several Igbo words to be mentioned in the public, the context must be efficiently brought into place, otherwise the public assume negative aspect of the semantic change which is orchestrated by the music industry. For instance, when words like *Adazi Enū* is mentioned in the public, young people tend to make caricature of it due to the shift which has occurred. It is not gainsay that change is a process and a constant variable; as what is neutralized currently may be ameliorated or pejorated in later time.

In conclusion, as time changes, the meanings of words change; which either expand or retract depend on the context or manner of use. Polysemy can also be attributed to semantic change as several words or lexical items will have multiple meaning.

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