On the Concept of Language Creativity: Insights from Igbo

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Abstract
This study investigates the evidence of language creativity observable in contextual and everyday use of the Igbo language. The thrust of this paper is in two folds. First, it discusses creativity as an artful use of language vital for generating meaningful but novel and sometimes, ungrammatical constructions in the language. Such constructions include words, phrases, and sentences such as *jérí jérí* 'walkabout', *kọ́rị̣́ kọ́rị̣́* 'talkative', *tìé yā ìchàkà* 'deal with him', *ńgábásị̣* 'influential, wealthy' amongst others. It is observed that these constructions may start off as part of an idiolect. Some of them however, infiltrate the main stream of language use and overtime, become standardized. Second, this paper discusses how some commonly used utterances resulting from linguistic creativity may violate Grice's (1968) conversational maxims but remain meaningful. The data for this study are obtained from the speakers' spontaneous language in everyday conversations both in spoken and written forms. The collected data are analysed using a descriptive approach.

1.   Introduction
According to Syal and Jindal (2010, p.286), semantics is the study of the construction and understanding of the meanings of words and group of words (clauses, sentences). In other words, semantics is concerned with the description of the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and with the manner in which the meaning of words and sentences is used and understood. The knowledge of a language involves the recognition and relation of meaning between words and sentences and also, the recognition of the words and sentences that are meaningful or meaningless in a language.

In Linguistics, a sentence is usually said to be meaningful when the sentence (or part of a sentence) conforms to the rules defined by a specific grammar of language. The grammaticality or ungrammaticality of sentences in a language is decided based on the grammar of such language. According to Denham and Lobeck (2010, p. 9), when we talk about the grammar of a language, we mean a set of rules a speaker knows that allows him or her to produce and understand sentences in the language. The intuitive competence that a native speaker has of his language, enables him create novel words or manipulate existing words in his idiolect. The constructs resulting from his creativity can in turn, be understood by other native speakers with the aid of their intuitive competence, even if the constructs are unfamiliar or deviate from the norm. This is in line with the fact that the native speaker of a language has 'semantic competence' which helps in recognizing that certain utterances, whether words, phrases or sentences are meaningful even if they do not obey the grammatical rules of the language or meaningless, even if they obey the rules of the language.

This paper focuses on the study of constructs that arise from the idiolects of Igbo native speakers and how some of these constructs become entrenched in language use overtime, such that they are seen as the norm. This paper also discusses how some of the identified constructs resulting from the linguistic creativity of Igbo native speakers violate Grice's (1975) conversational maxims. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 deals with the review of relevant literature. Section 3 deals with the presentation and analysis of language data. The summary and conclusion of the research findings is given in section 4.

2.   Literature Review
Speakers of a language not only have complex knowledge of meaning that allows them to interpret words and sentences, assigning them meanings, but this knowledge also gives speakers the ability to recognize anomaly. Knowledge of meaning is therefore just like syntactic, morphological and phonological knowledge. In this way, we know what is grammatical and what is not, but lack of grammaticality does not always preclude language users from coming up with some kind of interpretation. To some extent, this is evident in understanding child language, even though the

grammatical rules the child employs deviate from those of adult grammar (Syal and Jindal 2010, p.156). A grammatical sentence is therefore a possible sentence in a language. An ungrammatical sentence is one that is impossible in a given language, one that a native speaker of that variety would never utter naturally. However, it is worthy to note that a sentence may be well formed or grammatical, yet meaningless. In other words, the well formedness of a sentence has little or nothing to do with its meaning or its acceptability.

Linguists' primary interests are distinguished by the attention they pay to the analysis of meaning in the context of everyday speech, by their comparative interest (comparing the way meaning is structured in a range of languages, and how meaning changes over time), and their attempt to integrate meaning with the other components of general linguistic theory (especially with GRAMMAR). These emphases characterize the linguistic study of meaning; 'SEMANTICS' (Crystal 2008, Pp.298-299).

2.1   Language Creativity

Creativity is considered an essential human trait. Chomsky (1966) asserts that the creative principle in language is anchored on the idea that creativity distinguishes human beings from both animals and machines, and that it enables humans to respond in novel and appropriate ways to novel situations. All human languages permit their speakers to form indefinitely new and long sentences. In other words, even though our conversations or speeches usually follow rules, we are experts at manipulating these rules, maintaining them, violating them and sometimes ignoring them just to express meaning. This is to say that meanings seem to be stable but do depend upon speakers, hearers and contexts. A speaker of any language is capable of producing an unlimited number of sentences, conveying different intentions, different moods, messages e.t.c. In other words, language makes it possible for its users to be able to express new ideas, produce and comprehend new sentences which they have never said nor heard before. This characteristic of human language makes it both open-ended and a complex system. Our creative ability is not only reflected in what we say but also includes our understanding of new or novel sentences (Yul-Ifode 2001, p.8, Ndimele 2002, p.2, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2007, Pp. 8-9).

However, generative creativity as proposed by Chomsky (1966) is quite limited. The generative view sees linguistic creativity as recursive, that is, the ability to combine finite elements to generate infinite patterns following the rules of grammar. Gay (1980) refers to rule and structural based creativity as weak creativity. In this work, creativity is not used in the rigid sense of the generative tradition.

According to Zawada (2006), linguistic creativity is the ability of speakers to create and name novel concepts either by creating completely new lexical items or by using existing lexical items in a novel way. This can be achieved through procedures that are metonymyical or metaphorical. In linguistic creativity, the speaker can create new meanings to already existing words, phrases and sentences or create new words for already existing meanings. Many linguistic innovations that could lead to language change emanate from the idiolects of native speakers with recourse to linguistic creativity.

The scope of creativity could be multidimensional, from the lexical to the discourse level. To buttress this fact, Zawada (2006) distinguishes between language as a product, that is, a cultural object that is described in grammars and dictionaries, and language as a process or an activity. As a process or an activity, language is viewed as an interpersonal act of communication between human beings. The latter view appears more applicable to the concept of linguistic creativity.

A number of motivations have been identified as underlying the art of creativity in language use. They include conceptual inexpressibility, pragmatic and social motivations. Conceptual inexpressibility entails the need for speaker to fill a language gap by expressing ideas that are not available in his repertoire of meanings. Pragmatic motivation for creativity manifest in indirect speech acts for reasons such as politeness or avoiding sensitive issues. For instance, one can inform others about their belief in an indirect way by for example, referring to marijuana as weed or grass (see Gerrig & Gibbs 1988). Social motivation for creativity is evident in scenarios where there is need for expressing group solidarity. Members of a particular group can introduce terms peculiar to the group alone.

2.2 Meaningfulness vs Meaninglessness
According to Palmer (1981, Pp. 8), an individual's meaning is not part of the study of semantics. There are however, reasons for an individual's divergence from the normal pattern. This is made obvious when compared to the generalised 'normal' patterns. This becomes a case of 'meaning' versus 'use' or as some philosophers and linguists have suggested, between 'semantics' (sentence meaning) and 'pragmatics' (utterance meaning). An utterance can in fact be meaningless; equally, an utterance can deviate from expected meaning but still be meaningful. Semantics at the level of linguistic analysis, attempts to analyse what makes words, sentences and utterances meaningful or what makes them meaningless. According to Ndimele (1997, Pp.79-80), a construction is said to be meaningful if the proposition it expresses is true. If the proposition it expresses could not be true, then it is meaningless. The meaningfulness and meaninglessness of an expression depends on the speaker's knowledge or belief about the world. This is to say that the speaker's knowledge of the world affects his choice of words.

Meaninglessness is essentially a function of the incompatibility of certain semantic properties of certain words. However, a meaningless expression does not necessarily have to be grammatically odd. According to Syal and Jindal (2010, p.156), an utterance is meaningless if: it is not logical, i.e. if it is tautological (circular, not communicating anything). Examples:
1).   'Monday came before the day which followed it.'
 This is a circular statement which tells us nothing and so is said to be tautological. It is contradictory (a false and absurd statement)
2)   My unmarried brother is married to a spinster.
This sentence is contradictory and so false and absurd. This contradiction cannot be resolved unless the sentence is changed.it does not correspond to real world knowledge (factual absurdity)
3).   My uncle always sleeps, standing on one toe.
 Again this statement is untrue because it does not correspond to what we know about the real world. Here, we talk of factual absurdity. This kind of absurdity can be resolved by imagining a possible world in which it could be true.' It violates some rules of lexical or grammatical combination.
4)   The man were making dog barkings and killing woman baby.
This sentence is very meaningless because the rule of lexical and grammatical combinations is violated. Syal and Jindal (2010) however, observe that sentences made up of nonsense words have some kind of meaning. They are not always devoid of sense. For example:
5)   She yarped that canzosspleeked the bantoids.
                  (Adapted from Syal and Jindal 2010, p.286)
In their analysis, whatever the canzos are, it can be said they are doing something to the bantoids, and whoever she is, she is yarping about that. It can also be said that there is more than one canzo, more than one bantoid, and that the yarping and spleeking happened in the past. Some meaning is derived from this sentence based on the information got from the syntax and morphology of the words in the sentence, even though it is not known what any of the words really mean.
6)   The stone spoke to us angrily.
                  (Adapted from Ndimele 1997, p. 89).
This sentence is meaningless because the semantic properties of stone are incompatible with the properties of the verb speak. It is well formed but nonsensical. However, there are some sentences that are understood by the speakers of the language even though they are not well formed according to the rules of the syntax. **Examples:**
7)   *The boy quickly in the house, the ball found.
8)   .*Disa slept the baby.

In as much as the speakers of this language know that there is an incorrect word order, they could probably assign meaning to such sentences thus:
9)   Immediately the boy entered the house, the ball was found.
10)   Disa put the baby to sleep.

Summarily, the overriding idea in the above section is that the art of creativity in individual speakers generate ungrammatical but meaningful constructions or grammatical but meaningless constructions. It is the sometimes ungrammatical but meaningful utterances in form of words, phrases and sentences that could be understood by other native speakers aided by their intuitive competence despite the perceived ungrammaticality or novelty as the case may be. Also, it is the meaningful but ungrammatical constructs that have the likelihood of being normalized overtime or not.

2.3 Conversational Maxims

An utterance is said to be meaningful if the cooperative principles that operate in speech communication are adhered to. These principles include the different maxims involved in conversation. Maxims of conversation is a term derived from the work of the philosopher H.P. Grice (1913, p.88), and now widely cited in pragmatics research. These maxims are general principles which are thought to underlie the efficient use of language and which together identify general cooperative principles. These include:

i. **The maxims of quality;** this states that speakers' contributions ought to be true-specifically, that they should not say what they believe to be false, nor should they say anything for which they lack adequate evidence.

ii.**The maxims of quantity;** this states that the contribution should be as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange, and should not be unnecessarily informative.

iii**. The maxims of relevance;** this states that the contributions should be relevant to the purpose of the exchange.

iv).**The Maxims of Manner;** this states that the contribution should be perspicuous in particular, that it should be orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity. (Palmer 1981, p.173, Crystal 2008, p.298).

The violation of any of these maxims results to ambiguity or generation of implied meaning. When meaning is considered beyond the level of the sentence, it launches us to the level of discourse thus;

- Word meanings change over time, meanings broaden and narrow and sometimes become more positive or more negative.
- Words have many nonliteral or figurative meanings which are often quite complex and abstract, but we understand and use them effortlessly in speech and writing every day.
- The various ways in which we construct meaning out of words tells us something about how we think and about how we understand the world.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

Bearing in mind the co-operative principles which underlie efficient use of language and depict the notion of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, let us analyse some of the Igbo words or sentences obtained from the idiolects of some native speakers, either in their full form or in their context and usage. In analyzing these sentences, an aspect of sentence meaning and utterance meaning is considered; where sentence meaning is the literal meaning of a sentence regardless of context. Utterance meaning is the meaning of a sentence in context, where the speaker intention and hearer interpretation contribute to meaning (Syal and Jindal (2010, p.323).

Consider the following examples:

jerijeri 'walkabout'→je 'go'
11)   a.   Chioma ana   ejeghari, jeri jeri
                 Chioma AUX go about walkabout
                 'Chioma is always on the move'

kọri kọrị 'talkative' → kọ 'narrate' (story)'
          b.   I   na-akọka kọri kọrị
                 2SG HAB-tell talkative
                 'You are always talking'

Examples 11a-b are created using the word formation strategy of reduplication. This is a productive process in the native speaker's idiolect as she is able to replicate this pattern in her usage of verbs in

general. The reduplication of verbs in this manner is used by the speaker to denote the excessiveness of an activity. The use of this construct is peculiar to the speaker but its meaning and context of usage is clearly understood by other native speakers.

ngabasi 'wealthy, influential or well rooted'
12)   Nwoke a nwere   ngabasi
         man   this has   wealth/influence
'This man is wealthy or influential'
The lexical term *ngabasi* is used to connote wealth, influence, or the well rooted nature of an individual. This term which emanated from an idiolect is now common in Igbo songs, comedy skits and drama. It is relatively a creative innovation that is gradually becoming entrenched in everyday language use of many native speakers.

13)   Okotoligba!
This is an exclamatory remark used to express shock or surprise over a new piece of information. Overtime, its use has become more common and mainstream.

14)   Tie   ya   ịchaka
         beat him vessel rattle
         'Deal with him'

15)   Tie   ya   mmanwụ
         beat him masquerade
         'Deal with him'
Examples 14 and 15 have a figurative meaning. They encode subtle means of expressing the readiness and willingness to deal with someone. Their usage is still relatively restricted, especially (14).

16)   Gwụọ ya nju anya
         mix   him full eye
         'Confuse him'
Sentence 16 has a figurative meaning. It encodes a mild way of expressing the intention to trick or confuse someone.

aka nchawa 'sucessful/progress'
17)   O   nwere aka   nchawa
         He/She has   hand brightness
         'He/She is successful'
The lexical term *aka nchawa* is a creative innovation that emanates from an idiolect but has since become standardized. It found its way into the mainstream Igbo language use via music in the early 2000s' and has since become entrenched in daily language use. It is created using the word formation strategy of compounding. It denotes the concept of success, progress or favour.

3.1   Pragmatically motivated remarks and utterances in Igbo
These remarks are somehow peculiar to particular individual(s) in such a way that when another person is using it, he or she would sometimes refer to the person who has it in consistent usage or from whom it originated. The meanings of these responsive remarks are got from the situation at hand and equally, from the tone of the speaker. Some of these utterances when given a literal interpretation in some context used may look awkward and meaningless because it does not follow or have any link with the speech uttered by 'A'. They are however, meaningful and informative even though they violate some of the conversational maxims.
Examples:
18)   Ana m anụ
         'I am hearing'

This is usually used in a sarcastic way to mean the negative of the utterance. Speaker 'B' uses it when he or she disagrees with speaker 'A's'utterance. It is a pragmatically motivated utterance or remark used to express disbelief in what the speaker is saying, albeit, in a subtle way. It appears to violate the conversational maxim of quality which states that speakers should not say what they believe to be false.

19)   Okwu e!

 'speech or word!'

This is an utterance made to show that the concept introduced by 'A' is quite impossible or unrealistic.

20)   A na-akọcha

         'Just keep narrating'

This is a sarcastic remark made by 'B' when 'A' is saying what seems to be unheard of or unreasonable.

21).   Otu a ka ọ dị.

'This is how it is'

A remark of affirmation made by 'B' to the speech of 'A' in mockery or not.

22)   Mụ ka ọ na-agwa

         'It is me he or she is talking to'

A sarcastic remark made by 'B' when he/she is not interested (or ready) in listening or doing what 'A' said or what 'A' is saying'. It violates the maxim of manner which states that utterances in conversations should be devoid of ambiguity.

23)   Onye e mee ya.

         'Who does it'

This remark is used by 'B' to show that what 'A' said is difficult and so may not be done by his/her audience. It is evident that some of these utterances have one thing in common; they are subtle ways of expressing disbelief, disagreement or refusal of speaker A's statement or request ((see 18-22). Their usage is therefore pragmatically motivated.

24)   Gbowam   'exactly'

25)   Kpam   'exactly'

26)   Ozugbo   'immediately'

27)   Ọ ginịdị?   'what exactly is this'

Examples (24)-(27) are exclamations used to depict a firm or mockery concession to the speech of 'A'. Whether it is a firm or mockery remark, is dependent on speaker 'B' and the context. Example 28 usually, is a response from speaker 'B' that shows that the speech of 'A' calls for excitement.

28)   Ka ọ pụọ

         'Let him/her go out/ alight'

 In specific contexts, sentence 28 is used to mean 'let me go out/alight'. The construction *ka ọ pụọ* 'Let her/him go out/alight' originates from the idiolects of bus conductors in urban and semi urban areas of Igbo cities. It is typically used to call the attention of the bus driver whenever a passenger wants to alight from the bus. Over time, the construction became entrenched in daily language use such that passengers use it to refer to themselves in the absence of a bus conductor whenever they need to alight from a bus. Although it is grammatically unacceptable to use the 3rd person singular pronoun ọ 'He/She' for the speaker, native Igbo language speakers use it anyway. This is an example of an innovation being grammatically unacceptable but yet, meaningful and normalised.

4.   Conclusion

 This paper has discussed the concept of language creativity as it applies to Igbo. It is observed that linguistic creativity in idiolects (that is, speech habits peculiar to an individual) can lead to innovation, and in some cases, language change, especially at the lexical level. Over time, some of the created innovations may find their way to mainstream language use and become entrenched and standardized. Motivation for language creativity in Igbo is linked to linguistic, social and pragmatic reasons. It is also observed that some pragmatically motivated utterances appear to violate some of the conversational maxims proposed in Grice ((1975).

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