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## **Polysemy in Oghe Variant of Igbo language**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the concept and use of polysemy in Oghe Variant of Igbo language. Polysemy arises where one lexical item has two or more related meanings. There are some instances where polysemy brings about ambiguity which in turn distorts the meaning of lexical items. This study is based on literary meanings of polysemous lexemes in Oghe. There has not been a study of polysemy in Oghe variant of Igbo language to the best knowledge of the researcher. This prompted the researcher into investigating into this writeup. The objective of the study is to find out whether polysemy can exist in Oghe variety of Igbo without ambiguity. To achieve the objective of the study, the researcher collected lexical items from indigenes of Oghe. The use theory of Wittgenstein is used as the theoretical frame work of the study. It is found out among other things that polysemy can exist in Oghe variant of Igbo without ambiguity with the aid of use and context. The study will help to enrich the Igbo vocabulary as well as help lexicographers in the compilation of a standard Igbo dictionary.*

### **Introduction**

In the views of O’Grady and Archibald (2009: 195), “It is much more difficult to determine precisely what meaning is”. But it is not clear to us what sort of thing or entity that meaning is (Ndimele 1997:155 and 2001:6). That is to say that the definition of meaning

is not always easy to come by in the sense that one may have to explain meaning according to one's own point of view concerning an issue in question. Most often, a listener deviates from the speaker's point of view in terms of meaning, thereby creating another meaning entirely out of the subject matter (Polysemous words). That is the reason why the researcher chooses the use and contextual theory of meaning in the analysis of data. The use and contextual theory solves the problem of disambiguating polysemous words. This study is only interested in the literary meanings of the words used as examples and not the extensional or metaphorical meanings.

It is also to be noted that the community enriches their vocabulary by welcoming and adopting words from people and other dialects they come in contact with. To make the study clearer, the researcher highlights the meaning and some examples of homonyms and synonyms because they confuse people most of the time.

Oghe is a community in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu state. Nwozuzu (2008:117) groups it under Northern Group of Dialects (NGD).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study is the use theory of Wittgenstein (1933). According to Wittgenstein in his book titled *philosophical investigation* as cited by Ndimele (1997:26), the meaning of any linguistic expression is determined by the context in which it is used. The introduction of the use theory by Wittgenstein came up in order to overcome the problems posed by the referential and mentalist theories. In support of this, Anyanwu (2008:188) posits that, "the meaning of an expression is derivable

from the effect / effects, which the expression creates in the context where it is used". Akmajian, Dermers, Farmer and Harmish (2008:236) opine that "the meaning of an expression is its use in the language". Chomsky (1957:15) and Mba (1999:1) assert that what one uses language to do is what he knows about the language. This is to say that, the existence of every word in the society shows that it is useful. Therefore, any word in the society without use is meaningless. Such a word is not worthy to exist. Any thought people have for a word in their context is the meaning of that word for such people. A word that has two or more meanings has its meanings based on their uses, context and functions. Most of the times, already existing words are used to form new words, the words formed share related meanings either with similarities or differences, but the use of every context dictates the meaning of such words at every given time. The meaning of anything is the use it is put to. In other words, it is what each society makes of it that it is.

Ndimele (1997:55) and (2001:6) posits that in human language, words may not only have meaning properties in isolation, they often bear some meaning relations with each other. With this view, Ihejirika (2008:116) opines that, in the day-to-day speech and in formal writing, words have been known to have relations with each other either in the process of forming new words or to make full meaning in a sentence.

These assertions imply that no lexical relation exist in isolation. In lexical relations, words go side by side to manifest their meanings and these always occur by their work, use and context to disambiguate meanings.

## **Theoretical Studies**




### **Homonyms**

O'Grady and Archibald (2009:192) assert that homonym exists where a single form has two or more entirely distinct meanings. Okolo and Ezikeojiaku (1999:181) state that, what is crucial is that they (homonyms) must be pronounced the same way and they must have different meanings. Ndimele (1999:62) and 2001:118) quoting Cristal (1997:185) defines homonym as “a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but different meanings”.

The opinions of these scholars are pointing at different meanings but the same form. By this, it means, that their pronunciations must be the same thing; there should be no difference in pronunciations and spellings. Example of such homonyms in English language include: boys and boils, pens and pence, allowed and aloud, by and buy, bail and bale, meat and meet etc. With these explications, it is clear that homonyms and polysemy are not the same.

From traditional prescription, the distinction between polysemy and homonym is based on whether there are one or two lexical items involved. Lyone (1977:590) refers to them as two types of lexical ambiguity, and introduces some criteria for deciding when it is polysemy and when it is homonym. Ibarretxe (1999) as cited in Okeke (2015:75) posits that one criterion is etymological information about the lexical item in question. Lexical items with the same origin are considered as polysemic whereas if they have evolved from distinct lexemes in some earlier stage of the language, then they are regards as homonymous. This according to Okeke (2015:75) is not reliable because the history of a language does not always reflect its present state. For instance, in present day English (PDE) the lexemes pupils-student and pupil

– iris (of the eye) are not related according to English native speakers, but they are both derived from Latin. In Oghe Igbo variety, we have examples like:

1. Àgwà  Character  
beans
2. Mbà  no  
town, nation
3. Iyī  Oracle, shrine  
Curse

### **Synonyms**

According to Emenanjo, Umeh and Ugoiji (1990:59) “these are two or more words that have different spellings and sounds but the same in meanings”. Synonyms are words that are different in form but with similar or identical meaning (Palmer 1981, Okolo and Ezikeojiaku 1999:182, Ndimele 1997: 56 and 2001:162).

In Oghe, there are many synonymous words. That is to say that there are many words that have exact meanings in all ramifications and some that have similar meanings but deviate a little when used in sentences. Ndimele (1997:56) asserts that synonyms mean to have the same communicative effects in all contexts. But facts about human language revealed that there are quite a number of words which are synonyms only in particular context, not in all.

O’Grady and Achibald (2009:191) say that synonyms are words or expressions that have the same meaning in some or all contexts. Some examples of synonyms in Oghe are listed hereunder:

4.      àshì  
          ùgha      —→ lies  
          ile
5.      naa  
          òfu      —→ one  
          ngē
6.      naani  
                  —→ only  
          sọ̀sọ̀

### **Polysemy**

According to Ejele (2003:73) polysemy is seen “as variations of a single lexical item which are related semantically and morphologically having the same pronunciation and spelling/graphic form”. Example: face “front part of the head and “front part of the clock”.

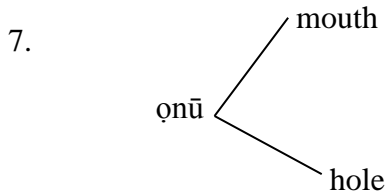
O’Grady and Archibald (2011:192) asserts that, “polysemy occurs where a word has two or more related meanings”. Example: “shining” and intelligent.” Huford and Heasley (1983:123) say that polysemy is a lexical relation where a word has several very closely related senses.

Ndimele (1997:60) and 2001:166) also posits that polysemy is a meaning relation whereby a single lexical item has several

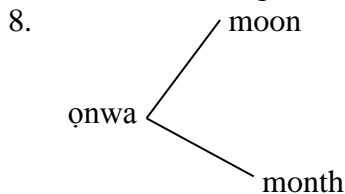
(apparently) related meanings. Examples are: ear “part of the body” and “part of plant”. Head “leader of a group”, part of the body” and “part of a coin”.

The views of all these authors as one can see are that the several meanings of a polysemous word must have a central relationship in their meanings. That is, what is binding them must be from a single origin. Again Finegan (2011:200) notes that two words are polysemous if their meanings are the same or related. Palmer (1981:105) opines that the different way of attempting to establish polysemy rather than homonymy is to look for a central or core meaning. Ejele (1996:124) writes that polysemy is a term used to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different but related meanings whereas the several meanings of polysemous words must be related.

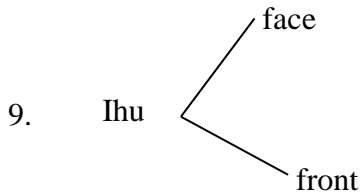
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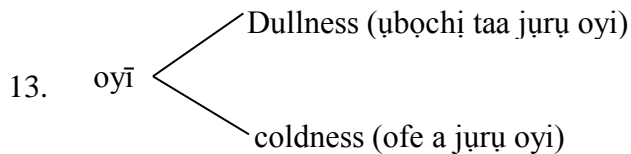
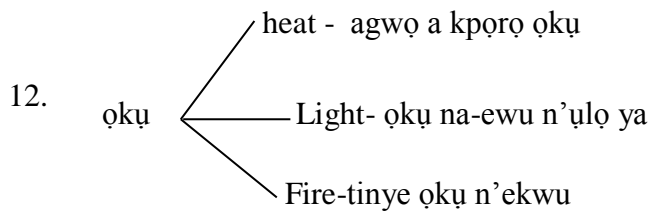
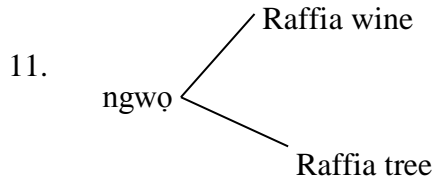
Ọnụ as part of the mouth, through which food enters the body. Also, through the mouth (ọnụ), one removes the discomfoting substances. So something can enter or come out from the mouth. In the case of ọnụ (hole), animals gain entrance or exit through holes. The central meaning of ọnụ is entrance and exit.



In Igbo setting, moon is used to count days (28 days or 30 days) that lead to a month. It is clear that *Ọnwa* (moon and month) have close related meanings, that is, they are from the same semantic field.

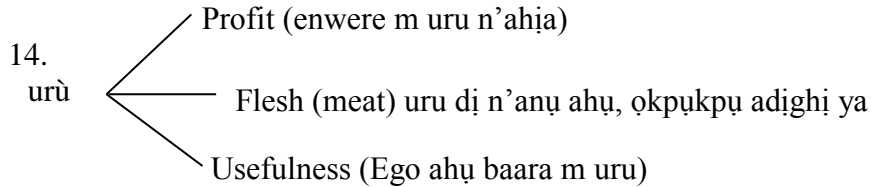


‘Face’ is the frontal part of the head, while ‘front’ is the part or side that faces forward. The polysemous word is from the same central core (face)

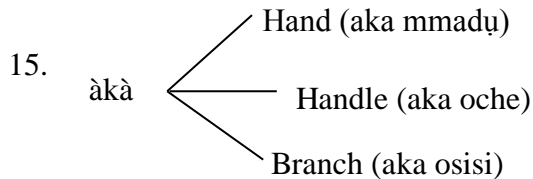




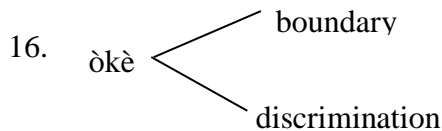
In the dialect under review *oyi*, (dullness) is usually attributed to human beings and weather while *oyi* (coldness) is attributed to food, water or objects.



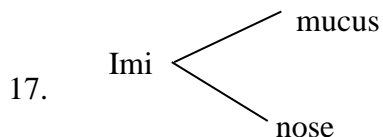
They are differentiated through context and use but the core meaning is 'gain'



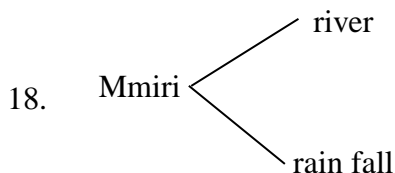
The above are used for either holding or gripping.



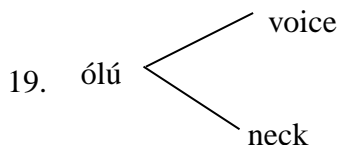
The concept of demarcation or referring to demarcation



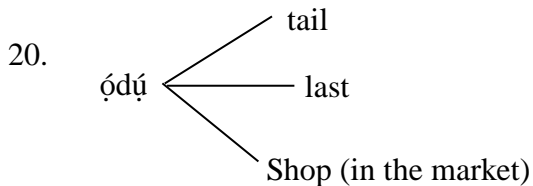
Mucus comes from the nose. The use in the context determines what is meant



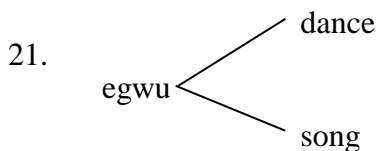
All have to do with the concept of water



The throat is inside the neck and it is the throat that brings out sounds produced during speaking and singing (voice). So, olu (voice) and olu (neck) are from the same core, one only differentiates them through use and contexts in the sentence.

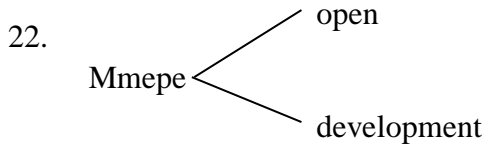


These lexemes have related meanings. 'Ọdụ) in animals are meant for their sitting and it appears at the end. Ọdụ as in shop where traders sit to sell their wares. Ọdụ as last as in 'Ọdụ nwa' that is last born.

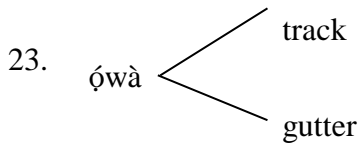


In Oghe variety, song and dance goes hand in hand. Singing always leads to dancing. One can say ‘*ọ na-agba egwu*’, *ọ na-agụ egwu*’

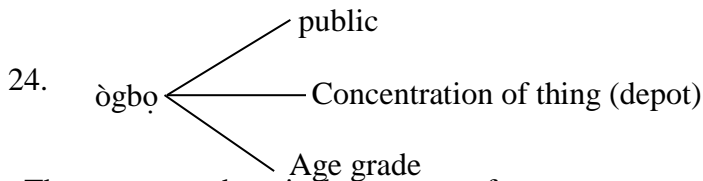
Usage always differentiates them.



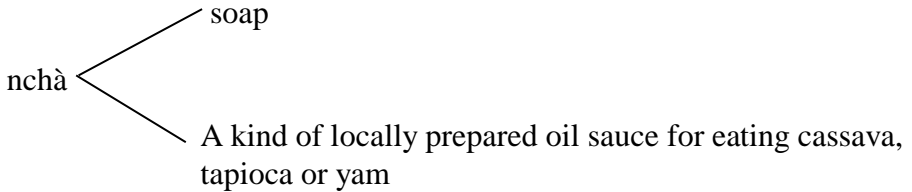
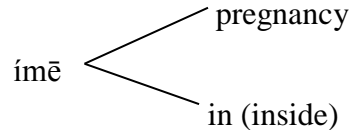
Room for availability of use either in positive or negative direction. In Oghe, use and context explain their difference and meanings.



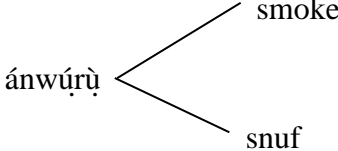
‘*Ọwa ụzọ*’ means track road while ‘*ọwa ideji/mii*’ means gutter. Two of them are outlet or passages for both animals, human beings and water.



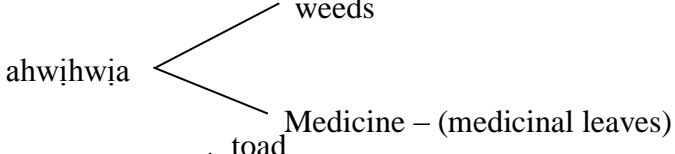
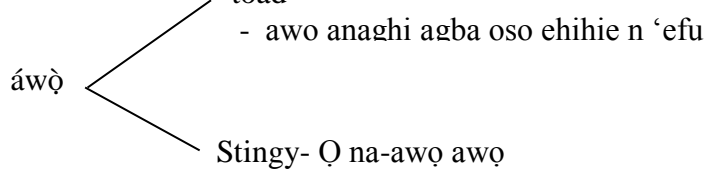
The core sense here is the concept of many.

25. nchà   
soap  
A kind of locally prepared oil sauce for eating cassava, tapioca or yam
26. ímē   
pregnancy  
in (inside)

Ímē (pregnancy/in), in this concept, it means something inside that is not seen, unless when one approaches closer or when it comes out. Use and context disambiguates them.

28. ánwúrù   
smoke  
snuf

The two choke and discomfort people that are allergic to them. The first one is smoke – ‘ánwúrù ọkọ while the second is tobacco, ‘ánwúrù a na-akpọ n’imi’.

29. ahwìhwịa   
weeds  
Medicine – (medicinal leaves)
30. áwọ   
toad  
- awo anaghi agba oso ehie n ‘efu
- Stingy- Ọ na-awọ awọ

31.           élili     /     rope

They are for tying things. rope for wrapper

32.           ízù     /     Abali anọ - (four native week) o kwere  
                  /     ime ọhuru (early pregnancy) izu hiera ya – she has taken in

These have to do with counting of days, weeks, months etc.

33.           manə     /     Palm oil ‘tii manə na nli’ put oil in the food  
                  /     Pomade ‘ye m manə m tee m na ashi’  
                          give me pomade to rub on my body

34.           wùó     /     Jump - ‘wụọ aja’ jump a wall  
                  /     Pour – ‘wụọ m mii’ pour me water

To jump or pour away something, one has to apply little force

### **Findings**

Polysemy can exist in Oghe variety of Igbo without extensional, idiomatic, metaphorical or ambiguous meanings. It is very clear that the meanings of all the lexical relations are made clear through

their use and context. Ndimele 1997:61 posits that all the several meanings of a polysemous word belong to a common core. The examples above made the opinion clear. One important feature about polysemy is that the several meanings must come from a common origin, share or belong to a common core. It is always the grammatical context or use that differentiates or gives accurate meaning on what the speaker intends for polysemous words. As far as use and context are concerned, polysemy is not always ambiguous and is not difficult to differentiate from homonymy as Lyons (1977) and Palmers (1981) assert.

Furthermore, the study reveals that polysemous words must have related meaning among all its several meanings. It is equally observed that polysemy results from a natural economic tendency of languages (Anyanwu 2008:194)

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

The aim of this study has been achieved by finding out that polysemy can exist without ambiguity or extentional meanings in Oghe variant of Igbo. Polysemy is only lexical relation in the sense that it can be considered using two or more different or similar meanings. It does not exist in isolation. Where ambiguity arises, the use in a sentence or contexts, solves the problem. Already existing words are supposed to extend meanings to other entities to avoid word cluster. If everything is given a separate name, it will lead to forgetfulness, thereby rendering many words useless. In this direction, Igwe (2002:20) asserts that “polysemy is an invaluable factor of economy and flexibility in language. More than 30 words are seen in Oghe vocabulary as lexical relations as are cited in the examples. Meanings should always be sought through their use, work, function and context.

Linguists should show interest in the use of polysemy to avoid word cluster that makes discussion boring most of the time. The researcher recommends that the polysemous words in Oghe should be included in the compilation of the standard Igbo dictionary by lexicographers.

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