

POLYSEMY AND LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN URHOBO PROVERBS

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS
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APPROVAL PAGE

I, certify that the research was carried out by **AKPEDERI JULIE EDIRIN** in the Department of Linguistics Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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PLAGIARISM CERTIFICATION

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DATE: _____

DEDICATION

This project work is dedicated to God, for His divine sustenance and grace, my wonderful parents who have been my source of motivation since the beginning of my life till present moment, my mentors for their guidance.

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ABSTRACT

Language is a dynamic and multifaceted tool of communication, often characterized by polysemy and lexical ambiguity, which contribute to depth and richness in meaning. This study examines the phenomena of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, exploring how multiple meanings of words shape interpretations, cultural wisdom, and linguistic expression. Given that proverbs serve as an essential component of Urhobo oral tradition, their meanings are often layered, requiring contextual understanding to fully grasp their implications. The study investigates various polysemous words in Urhobo proverbs, such as "evun" (which can mean stomach, pregnancy, or inside), "oto" (ground, movement, or meaning), and "hwe" (kill, punish, or break), among others. These words introduce lexical ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations depending on the speaker's intent, audience, and cultural setting. By analyzing specific proverbs, this research highlights how ambiguity is intentionally used to convey moral lessons, social values, and philosophical insights within the Urhobo language. A qualitative approach was employed, drawing data from Urhobo oral literature, linguistic analysis, and interviews with native speakers. The findings reveal that polysemy and lexical ambiguity are deliberate linguistic strategies that enrich Urhobo proverbs, making them flexible tools for storytelling, education, and moral instruction. Moreover, the study emphasizes the role of context in deciphering the intended meaning of ambiguous expressions, underscoring the complexity of Urhobo semantics.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are a rich and integral part of the Urhobo culture, serving as vessels of wisdom, moral instruction, and cultural values passed down through generations. The linguistic intricacies of proverbs make them fascinating subjects for study, particularly in the context of polysemy and lexical ambiguity.

Polysemy refers to a single word or phrase that has multiple meanings, which are related by extension. In Urhobo proverbs, polysemy often enriches the meaning, adding layers of interpretation that can provide deeper insights into cultural beliefs and practices. For example, a word like "ọku" might mean "fire" in one context and "a spark of life" in another, depending on how it is used within a proverb.

Lexical ambiguity arises when a word or phrase has more than one possible meaning. This can occur with homonyms (words that sound alike but have different meanings) or when context is insufficient to determine the specific meaning intended. In Urhobo proverbs, lexical ambiguity is a stylistic device that can engage listeners or readers, prompting them to ponder and interpret the proverb's true meaning. This ambiguity can also reflect the complexity and multiplicity of life experiences and truths encapsulated within these proverbs.

The richness of Urhobo proverbs is deeply embedded in their cultural context. Understanding the nuances of polysemy and lexical ambiguity within these proverbs requires not only linguistic analysis but also an appreciation of the cultural and societal norms they reflect. Proverbs are often used in storytelling, rituals, and daily communication to convey moral lessons, social norms, and collective wisdom. Thus, the interplay of polysemy and lexical ambiguity is not a Linguistic phenomenon but a cultural one as well.

1.1 LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF URHOBO

Urhobo is a language spoken by the Urhobo people, who are predominantly located in the Delta State of southern Nigeria. The language is classified within the Niger-Congo language family, specifically under the Southwestern Edoid languages. It has a rich oral tradition and is used in various cultural, religious, and social contexts. The Urhobo people trace their origins to the ancient Benin Kingdom. Over time, they migrated to their current location in the western part of the Niger Delta. Their history is intertwined with the development of trade and interactions with neighboring ethnic groups. The Urhobo language is a crucial component of Urhobo identity and culture. It is classified under the Southwestern Edoid languages in the Niger-Congo language family. Here is an in-depth analysis of the linguistic features of Urhobo. Proverbs are a crucial aspect of Urhobo culture, encapsulating wisdom, morals, and societal norms in a concise and often metaphorical manner. These sayings are typically rich with linguistic devices such as

polysemy and lexical ambiguity, making them an excellent subject for linguistic study.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Urhobo language, with its rich linguistic features, is a critical component of Urhobo cultural heritage. However, the complexities inherent in its proverbs, particularly the use of polysemy and lexical ambiguity, pose significant challenges for both native and non-native speakers. These linguistic phenomena can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and a loss of nuanced meaning, especially in an era where oral traditions are increasingly documented and analyzed in written forms.

While previous research has delved into the general aspects of Urhobo language and proverbs, there is a notable gap in focused studies that explore how polysemy and lexical ambiguity specifically influence communication and comprehension within the Urhobo community. The dynamic interplay between these two linguistic features in proverbs not only reflects the richness of the language but also underscores the potential for varied interpretations that can impact social interactions, cultural transmission, and language learning.

Furthermore, in a global context where languages face the threat of erosion and extinction, understanding and documenting the intricate details of Urhobo proverbs is crucial. There is a pressing need to systematically study these linguistic elements to preserve the cultural essence they embody and to ensure that future generations can appreciate and utilize the depth of meaning encapsulated in Urhobo proverbs.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the impact of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, focusing on how these features contribute to the language's richness and complexity, as well as the challenges they present in communication and cultural.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

To investigate the role of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, this research will employ a multi-faceted methodological approach. The methodology will encompass qualitative and quantitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

1.3.1 Data Collection

Literature Review:

Conduct an extensive review of existing literature on polysemy, lexical ambiguity, and Urhobo proverbs. This will include academic articles, books, and other scholarly resources to establish a theoretical framework.

Corpus Compilation:

Compile a corpus of Urhobo proverbs from various sources such as oral interviews, published collections of proverbs, and folklore texts. This corpus will serve as the primary data for analysis.

Interviews and Focus Groups:

Conduct semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with native Urhobo speakers, including elders and cultural experts. These sessions will provide insights into the contextual and cultural interpretations of the proverbs and help identify commonly

used polysemous and ambiguous words.

Surveys:

Distribute questionnaires to a larger sample of Urhobo speakers, including different age groups and educational backgrounds. The surveys will gather data on the participants' understanding and interpretation of polysemous and ambiguous proverbs.

1.3.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis: Perform a qualitative content analysis of the collected proverbs to identify instances of polysemy and lexical ambiguity. This will involve coding and categorizing the proverbs based on their linguistic features and cultural contexts. Use thematic analysis to explore the cultural significance and contextual factors that aid in the disambiguation of these proverbs.

Quantitative Analysis:

Employ statistical techniques to analyze survey data, focusing on the frequency and patterns of interpretation of polysemous and ambiguous proverbs among different demographic groups. Use descriptive statistics to summarize the data and inferential statistics to test hypotheses about the relationship between linguistic features and cultural interpretation.

Comparative Analysis:

Conduct a comparative analysis of interpretations from different generations and educational backgrounds to identify trends and variations in understanding polysemous and ambiguous proverbs.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the most common polysemous words used in Urhobo proverbs, and how do their multiple meanings contribute to the overall interpretation of these proverbs?
2. What contextual factors (cultural, situational, syntactic) are most effective in resolving lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs?
3. In what ways do polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs reflect the values and worldview of the Urhobo people?
4. How do different generations of Urhobo speakers perceive and interpret polysemous and ambiguous proverbs, and what does this reveal about language change and cultural continuity?

1.5 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Aim

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the role of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, focusing on how these linguistic phenomena contribute to the richness and complexity of the Urhobo language and its cultural expressions.

Objectives

1. To identify and categorize common polysemous words in Urhobo proverbs: By creating a comprehensive list of polysemous words used in proverbs, the study aims to explore their multiple meanings and how these meanings contribute to the depth of the proverbs.

2. To explore the contextual factors that aid in resolving lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs: Identifying cultural, situational, and syntactic clues that help speakers and listeners disambiguate meanings in proverbs.
3. To examine the cultural significance of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs: Understanding how these linguistic features reflect the values, beliefs, and worldviews of the Urhobo people.
4. To investigate the perception and interpretation of polysemous and ambiguous proverbs across different generations of Urhobo speakers: Analyzing how these proverbs are understood and appreciated by various age groups to gain insights into language change and cultural continuity.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

This study will provide a detailed examination of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, contributing valuable knowledge to the field of linguistics. It will enhance our understanding of how these phenomena function in a specific language context, adding to the broader linguistic literature. The study will play a crucial role in preserving the rich cultural heritage encapsulated in Urhobo proverbs. By documenting and analyzing these proverbs, the research ensures that the wisdom and traditions of the Urhobo people are not lost to future generations. This is particularly important in an era of rapid globalization and language erosion. The findings of this study will be beneficial for educators and language learners. Understanding the complexities of polysemy and

lexical ambiguity in proverbs can improve teaching methodologies and learning materials, making it easier for both native speakers and learners to grasp the nuances of the Urhobo language.

By highlighting the unique linguistic features of Urhobo proverbs, the study promotes greater appreciation and understanding of the Urhobo culture among non-Urhobo speakers. This can foster cross-cultural dialogue and respect the research can provide insights into how effective communication can be achieved despite linguistic complexities. This can be particularly useful in areas such as translation, interpretation, and intercultural communication.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of ambiguity in language has gained significant attention in linguistic research, as it plays a crucial role in communication and meaning-making. Ambiguity can arise at various levels including phonetic, lexical, and structural, each contributing to the richness and complexity of language. This literature review focuses on polysemy and lexical ambiguity which occurs when a word or phrase has multiple meanings.

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW ON POLYSEMY AND LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN URHOBO PROVERBS

Polysemy and lexical ambiguity are key concepts in linguistics that contribute to the richness and complexity of languages. In the context of Urhobo proverbs, these phenomena play a significant role in conveying layered meanings and cultural wisdom. This review explores these concepts in detail, with a focus on their application in Urhobo proverbs.

Polysemy

Polysemy refers to the phenomenon where a single word has multiple related meanings. This multiplicity allows for a rich tapestry of expressions and interpretations. In Urhobo, as in many other languages, polysemy allows for a rich tapestry of expressions and interpretations. For example, the Urhobo word "òghò " can mean "to be strong" or "to be firm," depending on the context. This versatility adds depth to proverbs, making them more expressive and open to various interpretations.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word has multiple distinct meanings, leading to potential confusion or multiple interpretations. In Urhobo, this can arise from homonyms—words that sound the same but have different meanings. For example, "òghò " can also mean "to be firm" in a different context, leading to ambiguity.

Urhobo Proverbs

Urhobo proverbs are a treasure trove of cultural wisdom and linguistic richness. They often employ polysemy and lexical ambiguity to convey deeper meanings and moral lessons. For example, the proverb "Òghò lẹ̀ nọ̀" can be interpreted as "Strength is not in

noise," where "ghò" (strength) and "lè nọ " (is not in noise) can have multiple layers of meaning depending on the context.

2.2 PREVIOUS STUDIES

Research on polysemy and lexical ambiguity has been conducted in various languages. For instance, studies have explored these phenomena in languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish¹. These studies often focus on how context influences the interpretation of polysemous words and how speakers navigate lexical ambiguity in everyday communication. Research on polysemy and lexical ambiguity has indeed been conducted in various African languages.

Martine Vanhove worked on lexical typology and polysemy patterns in African languages. This study explores lexical typology and polysemy patterns across different African languages. It examines how languages package semantic material into words and identifies crosslinguistic patterns of semantic associations¹. The research focuses on colexification, where a single lexical form associates with multiple senses.

Babarinde, O. (2018) lexical ambiguity in Yoruba: This study investigates lexical ambiguity in Yoruba, focusing on its implications for second language learners. It examines how learners navigate the multiple meanings of words and the challenges they face in understanding context-dependent interpretations.

Mohammed, I. (2014) elements of ambiguity in Kanuri languages: This research explores the elements of ambiguity in Kanuri languages, revisiting how lexical ambiguity

manifests and is processed in these languages. It provides insights into the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that handle ambiguous words.

Bestman, Esegbuyiota Odeh, Peter, Ada Achadu, and Sopuruchi, Christian Aboh (2019), published in the Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria. Their research examines lexical ambiguity in Urhobo, identifying it in both polysemous and homonymous words¹. The study highlights the importance of context in interpreting these words and recommends further exploration of the relationship between ambiguity and idiomatic expressions in the Urhobo language. The study by Bestman, Esegbuyiota Odeh, Peter, Ada Achadu, and Sopuruchi, Christian Aboh (2019) provides a foundational understanding of lexical ambiguity in the Urhobo language. Their work highlights the complexity of polysemous and homonymous words in Urhobo and underscores the critical role of context in interpreting these ambiguous terms. However, while this research offers valuable insights into lexical ambiguity, it does not specifically address the application of these phenomena within Urhobo proverbs.

This gap presents a compelling opportunity for future research. Investigating polysemy and lexical ambiguity specifically within Urhobo proverbs could uncover deeper layers of meaning and cultural significance. Proverbs are a rich linguistic and cultural resource, and a focused study on how polysemy and lexical ambiguity operate within them would contribute significantly to our understanding of the Urhobo language and its expressive capabilities.

2.3 CONCERN OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Previous studies on polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo predominantly focus on the language in a general sense rather than specifically examining proverbs. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often do not delve deeply into the use of these linguistic phenomena within proverbs, which are rich in cultural and moral teachings. Proverbs rely heavily on context for their meanings. The polysemous nature of words in proverbs allows for multiple interpretations, making it essential to analyze them within specific cultural and situational contexts. The current research might not sufficiently address how different contexts influence the interpretation of proverbs.

The study aims to investigate the phenomenon of polysemy within Urhobo proverbs. It seeks to identify and analyze words that have multiple related meanings and understand how these multiple meanings contribute to the richness and depth of the proverbs. The research intends to examine instances of lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs. It will focus on identifying homonymous words—words that sound the same but have different meanings and analyze how this ambiguity affects the interpretation of proverbs.

Understanding the context in which proverbs are used is crucial for interpreting their meanings. This study aims to analyze how different social, cultural, and situational contexts influence the interpretation of polysemous and ambiguous words in Urhobo.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural semantics provides a robust theoretical framework for exploring the intricacies of meaning in language, especially in contexts rich with cultural and linguistic depth, such as Urhobo proverbs. Urhobo, a language spoken in southern Nigeria, is renowned for its use of proverbs as a medium of wisdom, social norms, and cultural expression. These proverbs often rely on the interplay of polysemy (multiple meanings of a single word) and lexical ambiguity (uncertainty in meaning due to word or phrase interpretation). Structural semantics offers the tools to decode these complexities systematically.

Structural semantics, a subfield of linguistic semantics, examines how meanings are constructed and interpreted through the relationships between linguistic elements within a system. It is rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist principles, emphasizing that the meaning of a linguistic unit arises from its position within a network of contrasts and relationships rather than in isolation.

3.1 STRUCTURAL SEMANTICS

Structural semantics, a subfield of linguistic semantics, examines how meanings are constructed and interpreted through the relationships between linguistic elements within a system. It is rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist principles, emphasizing that

the meaning of a linguistic unit arises from its position within a network of contrasts and relationships rather than in isolation.

Structural semantics as a concept and approach emerged from the broader field of structural linguistics, which was pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). While Saussure did not explicitly develop structural semantics as a separate discipline, his ideas laid the foundation for its development. Key contributors to structural semantics include:

Key concepts in structural semantics include:

Semantic Fields: Groups of related words or expressions whose meanings are interdependent.

Binary Oppositions: Contrasting pairs (e.g., light/dark) that structure meaning.

Componential Analysis: Breaking down words into minimal meaning components or features.

Structural semantics provides a framework to:

Analyze Semantic Networks: Explore how the meanings of words in Urhobo proverbs are linked through cultural and linguistic associations.

Disambiguate Contextual Meaning: Identify how context resolves ambiguity, revealing the intended moral or lesson.

Unpack Figurative Language: Examine metaphor, symbolism, and idiomatic expressions common in Urhobo proverbs.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 DATA PRESENTATION

In studying polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, data presentation plays a crucial role in showcasing how words or expressions carry multiple meanings within different contexts. This study involves collecting Urhobo proverbs, identifying instances of polysemy (where a word has multiple related meanings) and lexical ambiguity (where a word or phrase has multiple interpretations), and categorizing them based on semantic and pragmatic factors. The data will be presented in tables, charts, or thematic groupings to highlight patterns of meaning variations.

1. *Erhò rò nyo ẹ̀mè-é, ọ vé úyòwín ọ-yen gbe ghwe*

Ear that hear word-NEG 3Sg and head it-be will die

Meaning: ‘The ear that does not listen will die with the head’

2. *È kperè àmè hẹ́hẹ́ ùrhúru àmè*

They shout water wait-for thirst water

Meaning: “You will cry for thirst before the actual thirst comes”

3. *À kà rìà-á, à vwẹ̀ àkó ghàrà-á*

One will eat-NEG, one use teeth share-NEG

Meaning: “If you will not eat something, don't divide or share it with your teeth”

4. *Èrò yèn è vwó vùghè ikára ré ọ vọ' òhwó èvùn*

Eyes that they use know bread that 3sg satisfy person stomach

Meaning: “It's is the eye that will know what can fill the stomach”

5. *Òmó tó tǎré nè òní ròyè ká vwrèn èé, ọ́jé ká mrè òvwrèn èé.*

Child that says R.Pro mother that sleep too will also EXP sleep too

Meaning: “A child that says the mother will not sleep too will not sleep”

6. *Èmèmèrà yèn è èhwẹ́ iyen ré ọ dán mùè ibrítè*

Carefully that they kill housefly that 3sg fly on scrotum

Meaning: “One must be careful in killing the fly that perches on the scrotum”

7. *Òhwò rẹ̀ ò brú òhwò phiyọ́ àmẹ̀, ò jẹ́ kporhọ́ òmá*

Person that R.Pro deep person inside water, 3sg also wet body

Meaning: “He who wants to drown someone must still get wet”

8. *Òhwò rẹ̀ ọ́ víẹ̀, ò jẹ̀ mròrè*

Person that R.Pro cry, 3sg also sees

Meaning: “He who is crying also sees clearly”

9. *À dá yán àmè tè ohòrè nù, à bẹ̀ gwònò ùkó à kè jẹ́*
dà-á

One if walk water reach neck finish, one will look cup one will serve
drink-NEG

Meaning: “When you have been submerged in water you don't need a cup to take a drink
“

10. *Ìsòṅ dé gán nọ́, kẹ̀ à rẹ̀yọ̀ òbọ̀ vwó béré́ ikébé.*

Excreta if strong much, then one take hand to tear buttocks

Meaning: “When feaces is too strong you'll need your hands for help”

11. *Orhẹ je ga-an, ọyen aye da rẹ̀yọ̀ òbọ̀ yọ́rọ̀n ivie*

Race is strong-NEG, it-be woman take hand hold breast

Meaning: “It's when the race is not serious that the woman uses her hands for support”

12. *Òtò ùmò rẹ̀ mívwè. iròrhò.*

ground snail shell that breaks movement

Meaning : “the breaking of the snails shell does not prevent it's movement”

13. *Èghwò rẹ̀ ò rẹ̀ hwe elmèghènè, ò dè vwó vwirhi awọ, kẹ a ghóghó*

Death that R.Pro would kill youth, 3sg if use break leg, then we jubilate

Meaning: “The death that ought to have killed a youth if it's breaks his leg, this calls for jubilation”

14. *A vwo èmù rẹ òtù vwó rùè èròbò*

One use things of all use do own-NEG

Meaning: “You don't use everybody's properties as personal properties”

15. *Idarho rẹ ọvwièrẹ à dà kọn ìghò rẹ à vwọ́ dé*

presence of lazy-person one will work money that one use buy-him

Meaning: “While a lazy man looks, the industrious man accumulates money”

16. *Èrìvwìn mú àyè uwòrọ́nvwè ró gbè ọ̀fànrhièn.*

Spirit catches woman marriage-house that dance infidelity

Meaning: “Ancestors holds housewife that commits adultery”

17. *Àghwánrè ọ̀yèn è vwo sìvwì òrà rẹ Ọ̀shọ́*

Wisdom it-be they use save injury of penis

Meaning: “wisdom is used to treat sore penis”

18. *Èsè w' rù kẹ̀ òhòrò hòhọ́ èsè wó rù kẹ̀ èkpà*

Gift you do for vagina resemble gift you do for fool

Meaning: “A gift you do for a vagina is a gift you do for a fool”

19. *È rà vwo èrò mrẹ́, kẹ̀ ọ̀yèn Ọ̀ghènè mà-rọ́-ó*

Those that use eye see-NEG, then it-be God create-it-NEG

Meaning: “Whatever the eyes did not experience was not created by God”

20. *Okpohrokpo ọ̀ gbrọ́, ọ̀diọ̀yen kpo ibefii*

Lion R.Pro bark, not-3sg go hunting-NEG

Meaning: “The lion that roars is not the one that goes hunting”

21. *Òvwìmè èhwé nà'rù ùdùvwè nà òdhò.*

Person foot Steps on stone. and dirt

Meaning: “the person who steps on a stone cannot avoid dirt”

22. *A da re, kẹ e rhivwẹ*

One if eat, then they swallow

Meaning: “When you eat you must swallow”

23. *Kùà nù ùwéywin mè òyèn à mrè, a mrẹ kùà nè àkpò mée'*

Move out house mine it-be one see, one see move out world mine-
NEG

Meaning: “We can only see people saying leave my house not leave this world”

24. *Èsè ò vwo tòrè ònù ò. rù kpa.*

Leg it that Leg journeys hands rest give

Meaning: “it's the leg that journey, the hands rest”

25. *Diè phrén nẹ ènù chà òtọ́ dá sìòn?*

What falls from up come ground will reject?

Meaning: “What is that thing that comes from the sky that the ground will reject”

26. *Èdón hwe èránkòó*

Leanness kill dog-NEG

Meaning: “The leanness of a dog can not kill the dog”

27. *Wó dè gún òhwò, kẹ̀ à vwè ùrùrù kpò òtọ́*

You if judge person, then one use voice go ground

Meaning: ‘When gossiping the tone of your voice should be low’

28. *Ùkpèdè òyèn è sívwè*

Daily it-be they save

Meaning: “Work for today will last you for today only”

29. *È tè èmù rù-ú, è rù-ò-ó*

They reach thing do-NEG, they do-it-NEG

Meaning: “If you are not up to a task don't do it”

30. *Ìkírù fẹ̀fẹ̀ òyèn mà mrá*

Drum empty it-be most sound

Meaning: “Empty drum sounds more”

31. *Èdò rẹ̀ èkì hwè ùrhé rẹ̀ èkì*

Noise of market kill tree of market-NEG

Meaning: “The noise at the market square does not kill the tree in the market”

32. *Àmè tórhè phròkè-é; ọ̀ dè tórhè tè àsàn, kẹ̀ ọ̀ fọ̀*

Water hot till-dawn-NEG, 3sg if hot reach place, then 3sg cool

Meaning: “Water does not remain hot over night; it will only get hot for a while and become cool”

33. *Á vwò obọ ọvò vwó hwe ọmọ, à vwò obọ ọvò vwó sè rẹhọ*

They use hand one use beat child, they use hand one use call back

Meaning: “One uses a hand to beat a child and uses the other to draw him closer”

34. *Òmùòmọ ọyen gèrè ọmọ shè*

Child-carrier it-be push child fall

Meaning: “It is a person who carries a baby that falls it”

35. *Á djè ọmọ ibiàkò idè èdjè-é, tàkpè ọ mrè ‘bèrigbùnù vwó rhùrho ayèn*

They drive child teeth big grow-NEG, provided 3sg see lip use cover them

Meaning: “No one stops a child from growing protruded teeth, provided he has lips spread enough to cover them”

36. *Èmèmèrhà a rhùrèrè òkpòtá.*

carefully they settle heavy-word

Meaning: “A serious dispute requires a gradual settlement”

37. *Ùshàwò gròn nẹ́ ohwò rẹ ọ vwòrò-ó*

okra tall pass person that R.Pro has-it-NEG

Meaning: “An Okra plant does not grow taller than its owner (the farmer)”

38. *Ọmọ djíjí kọ àdà rẹ́.*

child foolish go outside not

Meaning: ‘A foolish child does not stroll out’

39. *Ọmọtètè vwóro èbé kpàhé ùchùkrà-á*

Child clear leaf on boundary-NEG

Meaning: “A child does not weed a farm and uses the weeds to demarcate land boundaries”

40. *Òhwò rẹ̀ e shèvwèrhè kẹ̀rẹ̀, òyèn e mu òbọ́ kpàhà*

Person that one lie-down close, 3g-be one carry hand on

Meaning: “The person one sleeps next to is the person that one can rest his hand on while asleep”

4.2 DATA DISCUSSION

This data analysis aims to examine how polysemy and lexical ambiguity function within Urhobo proverbs. By analyzing a collection of proverbs, we seek to identify recurring polysemous words, explore their varied meanings, and understand how context influences interpretation. The study will also assess the role of lexical ambiguity in shaping oral tradition, cultural wisdom, and everyday communication.

Through qualitative analysis, we will classify proverbs based on the types of ambiguous words used and their semantic variations. This will provide insights into the structure, function, and communicative effectiveness of Urhobo proverbs. Ultimately, this analysis will contribute to a deeper understanding of Urhobo linguistics and the broader study of African oral traditions.

1. *Òhwò rẹ̀ ò brú òhwò phiyọ́ ámẹ̀, ò jẹ́ kporhọ́ òmá*

Person that R.Pro deep person inside water, 3sg also wet body

Meaning: ‘He who wants to drown someone must still get wet’

Polysemous word : òmá

- Meanings
- (a) body
 - (b) Statue
 - (c) Private part

Literally, Oma means "body", referring to any part of the body.

Figuratively, it can mean "a human being,"

The polysemous nature of oma (body) allows the proverb to be applied in multiple contexts, making it an effective tool for oral tradition and storytelling. Lexical ambiguity makes the proverb open to interpretation, meaning it can be used flexibly depending on the situation—whether in a moral lesson, a political warning, or a personal reflection.

The proverb suggests that negative intentions often backfire. In Urhobo society, where communal living is important, this teaches that harming others is not just unethical but also self-damaging.

2. *Èrò yè èvwó vùghè ikára tó vò'hwò èvùn.*

Eyes that they use know bread that 3sg satisfy person stomach

Meaning : It's is the eye that will know what can fill the stomach

Polysemous word èvùn.

- Meaning s
- (a). Stomach
 - (b) Pregnancy
 - (c) Inside

The word "evun" is often used in Urhobo proverbs and expressions, creating multiple layers of meaning depending on context. Here, "evun" (stomach) can refer to hunger and

physical satisfaction but can also metaphorically mean personal fulfillment, needs, or desires. The ambiguity makes the proverb useful for both literal and figurative situations. The word "evun" exemplifies the depth of Urhobo language through its polysemy, functioning as "stomach", "pregnancy", and "inside" depending on the context. Its ability to carry multiple meanings enhances communication, storytelling, and proverbs, making Urhobo a language rich in metaphor and wisdom. Understanding context is essential to interpreting "evun", as its meaning shifts from the physical to the abstract, personal to philosophical.

3. Òtò ùmò rè mívwè ìròrhò.

ground snail shell that breaks movement

Meaning : the breaking of the snails shell does not prevent it's movement

Polysemous word	Òtò
Meanings	(a) ground
	(b) Meaning
	(c) Movement

The polysemy of "oto" shows how Urhobo relies on context to determine meaning.

Here, Oto" as Ground (Physical Meaning) Used to describe the earth, land, or foundation on which people walk, build, or plant. This meaning is literal and commonly used in discussions about the environment, farming, or geography.

Oto" as Movement (Progress/Action)Used to describe physical movement or progress in life. This meaning is often figurative, referring to life’s journey, career progress, or struggles.

Oto" as Meaning (Sense/Reasoning/Understanding)Used metaphorically to describe sense, purpose, or the deeper meaning of something. This interpretation is common in philosophical, educational, or abstract discussions.

This diversity enhances communication, proverbs, and cultural expression, making Urhobo a language rich in metaphor and depth. The interpretation of "oto" depends entirely on context, reflecting the complexity and beauty of Urhobo linguistic tradition.

4. Ùghwò rò rè hwe mèghènè òdè vwó vwì rhòwò k’aghógò.

Death that R.Pro would kill youth, 3sg if use break leg, then we jubilate

Meaning: the death that ought to have killed a youth if it's breaks his leg, this calls for jubilation

Polysemous word	Hwe
Meanings	(a) kill
	(b) Punish
	(c) Break

Hwe" as Kill (Taking Life/Destroying) In its most literal sense, hwe means to kill—the act of causing death. This meaning refers to physical death, typically used in serious, life-and-death situations.

"Hwe" as Punish (To Inflict Harm or Discipline) Hwe can also mean to punish, not necessarily with death, but with harm or hardship for a transgression or wrong. This meaning is often used in contexts where someone is being held accountable for their actions, whether through discipline or suffering. It can apply to spiritual or moral consequences, reflecting the Urhobo community's belief in justice and accountability.

"Hwe" as Break (Shatter or Destroy in a Figurative or Literal Sense) Hwe can also refer to breaking something, whether physically (like breaking an object) or figuratively (breaking someone's spirit or resolve). It could also refer to a significant disruption or disintegration of something that was once whole.

The word "hwe" is often used in Urhobo proverbs and expressions, where its meaning shifts depending on the context. This allows the word to take on multiple layers of meaning, making communication more complex.

5. Ùghwò rò rè hwe mèghènè òdè vwó vwì rhòwò k'ághógò.

One use things of all use do own-NEG

Meaning: you don't use everybody's property as personal property

Polysemous word Vwo

Other meanings: (a) Own

(b) Jump

(c) personal

"Vwo" as Personal (Own, Belong to) In this sense, "vwo" means something that belongs to someone personally—that is, possessed or owned by the individual. It signifies ownership, implying that the speaker has something that belongs personally to them.

"Vwo" as Jump, leap, or spring upwards—the physical act of ascending or moving suddenly. refers to a physical action, specifically the act of leaping or jumping.

The word "vwo" is often found in Urhobo proverbs and common expressions, where its meaning depends on the context. It allows for multiple interpretations, whether referring to ownership or movement. This flexibility makes it a powerful word in the language, especially in situations that involve personal possessions or dynamic action.

6. Vwè èmù rẹ̀ òtù vwó rùè èròbò.

presence of lazy-person one will work money that one use buy-him

Meaning: while a lazy man looks, the industrious man accumulates money

Polysemous word Igho

Other meanings: (a) Milky tooth

(b) (money)

Igho" as Money (Wealth, Financial Value) This is the most common meaning of "igho" in everyday Urhobo speech. It refers to currency, material wealth, or anything of economic value.

In Urhobo, "igho" also refers to a child's milky tooth (baby tooth). This meaning is mostly used in traditional and familial contexts, especially concerning children's growth.

suspect). Forceful capture (Kidnapping or forceful restraint). Spiritual or ancestral punishment (being "seized" by a spiritual force).

Mu" as Afflict (Cause Pain or Suffering) Mu" can also mean to afflict, to be seized by pain, or to suffer from a misfortune. In this sense, "mu" does not mean physical holding or arrest but rather being overtaken by an illness, spiritual force, or punishment.

8. *Aghwánrè òyèn è vwo sìvwi òrà Òshò.*

Wisdom it-be they use save injury of penis

Meaning: wisdom is used to treat sore penis

Polysemous word: Sivwi

Other meanings: (a) struggling

(b) Contesting

(c) (treat)

In its most common sense, "sivwi" means to treat or heal an illness, wound. In many cases, "sivwi" does not just refer to medical treatment, but also to solving personal, social, or spiritual problems.

Sivwi" can also mean to struggle or fight against hardship. Could mean struggling in life (working hard to succeed). Could mean treating a difficult life situation (solving problems). This shows that "sivwi" does not just mean physical struggle, but can also refer to mental, emotional, or social struggles.

In some contexts, "sivwi" means to contest, fight, or challenge someone or something. In some cases, "sivwi" can mean fighting against oppression, injustice, or personal obstacles.

9. *Èsè wó rù kè òhòrò hóhò, èsè wó rù kè èkpà.*

Gift you do for vagina resemble gift you do for fool

Meaning: a gift you do for a vagina is a gift you do for a fool

Polysemous word: Ekpa

Other meanings: (a) unripe

(b) (fool)

In Urhobo, "ekpa" is commonly used to describe someone who is foolish, ignorant, or lacking in wisdom. It can refer to a person who makes bad decisions, does not understand things properly, or behaves in a senseless way. In proverbs, "ekpa" is often contrasted with wisdom, experience, or intelligence.

In another sense, "ekpa" refers to something that is not ripe, immature, or underdeveloped. This usage is common when talking about fruits, crops, or even people who are not yet fully grown or ready for something. This shows that "ekpa" does not only refer to stupidity but can also mean lack of maturity, experience, or development.

Depending on the context, it can describe a person who lacks sense or something that is not yet ready for use. The richness of "ekpa" reflects Urhobo culture's emphasis on wisdom, growth, and discernment

10. *. Èrà rè èrò mrè rè k'òyè òghènè mà kó.*

Those that use eye see-NEG, then it-be God create-it-NEG

Meaning: whatever the eyes did not experience was not created by God

Polysemous word Ero

Other meanings: (a) swallow

(b) (eyes)

Primary Meaning: "Ero" means eyes, the organ of sight.

Extended Meaning: It also represents awareness, perception, or knowledge.

Figurative Meaning: In many Urhobo expressions, "ero" symbolizes experience, wisdom, or insight.

"Ero" means to swallow something (food, liquid, or even emotions). It can also refer to taking in or absorbing something beyond food, like knowledge or pain. "ero" is sometimes used metaphorically to describe enduring suffering or absorbing experiences.

These meanings create lexical ambiguity, where "ero" could mean either visual observation or physical/mental absorption. The dual meaning reflects the Urhobo cultural understanding of perception and experience just as seeing brings knowledge, swallowing brings nourishment or suffering.

11. *Èrhìvwì òvìn-òvwìn ùrhvèvwè Ènyà.*

Lion R.Pro bark, not-3sg go hunting-NEG

Meaning: the lion that roars is not the one that goes hunting

Polysemous word: Oviwin

Other meanings: (a) call

(b) dominate

(c) (roar)

Primary Meaning: "Ovin-Ovwin" refers to the loud sound made by a lion, person, or even a crowd. It can mean making noise, boasting, or speaking loudly. It represents drawing attention through sound or speech. In Urhobo culture, noise can be a sign of strength, but also of weakness. A lion's roar can signal dominance or fear.

"Ovin-Ovwin" means to dominate, to rule, or to assert authority. It can also mean influencing others through power or intimidation. It represents having control over a situation, whether through fear, respect, or leadership.

Ovin-Ovwin" can mean to call out to someone or summon attention. It can also mean to attract others through sound, power, or presence. It represents gathering people, making a public appeal, or seeking attention.

This word (oviwin) is deeply connected to communication, authority, and influence in Urhobo culture, whether through physical noise (roaring), social power (domination), or verbal summons (calling). Understanding its different meanings is essential for correctly interpreting proverbs and expressions in Urhobo language.

12.. *Òvwimè èhwé nà'rù ùdùvwè nà òdhò.*

Person foot Steps on stone. and dirt

Meaning: the person who steps on a stone can not avoid dirt

Polysemous word: Odho

Other meanings: (a) trouble

(b) Scandal

(c) (dirt)

Primary Meaning: "Odho" refers to physical dirt, mud, dust, or anything that makes a person unclean. It can also mean moral or spiritual impurity. It represents anything considered undesirable or contaminating.

"Odho" means challenges, struggles, or difficult situations. It can also mean a burden or suffering that someone experiences. It represents life's problems or obstacles.

"Odho" can also mean a disgraceful event, shame, or scandal that damages one's reputation. It can also mean public humiliation or dishonor. It represents any situation that leads to loss of respect or dignity.

In Urhobo culture, dirt (odho) represents impurity, both physically and morally. A person who is covered in "odho" may not only be physically unclean but may also be spiritually unclean or morally compromised.

13. . *Ìvwò rẹ̀ èkpò nẹ̀ tó.*

One if eat, then they swallow

Meaning: when you eat you must swallow

Polysemous word : Ekpo

Other meanings: (a) swell

(b) Charm

(c) (swallow)

Primary Meaning: The most common meaning of "Ekpo" is the act of swallowing food, liquid, or medicine. It refers to ingestion, which involves taking something into the body

by the mouth. In some contexts, "Ekpo" can also be used figuratively to mean accepting or taking something into oneself (like a responsibility or task).

"Ekpo" can also mean a swelling or enlargement of a part of the body, usually due to injury, illness, or inflammation. It can also refer to something growing or expanding in an undesirable way, such as emotions, pride, or problems.

In Urhobo culture, "Ekpo" can also refer to a charm, spell, or magical object used in spiritual or traditional practices. These charms are believed to have spiritual power to influence situations, protect individuals, or bring good fortune. It can also refer to any mystical or unseen influence that is said to affect the outcome of events, even in non-physical contexts.

In Urhobo culture, the word "Ekpo" bridges both the physical and spiritual realms. While it refers to physical actions like swallowing or swelling, it also encompasses spiritual or magical powers, which are crucial in traditional beliefs and practices.

14. *Kùà nè ùwévwìn mè òyè àmrè kùà nè àkpò mèé.*

Move out house mine it-be one see, one see move out world mine-

NEG

Meaning: we can only see people saying leave my house not leave this world

Polysemous word Akpo

Other meanings: (a) earth

(b) Life

(c) (world)

In one interpretation, "Akpo" refers to the physical world or the earth as a place where humans live. It encompasses everything on this planet: the land, the atmosphere, and the environment.

"Akpo" can also mean life or human existence in a broader, more philosophical sense. It represents the span of human life or the world of living beings.

In some contexts, "Akpo" can also refer to a cosmic or spiritual realm, representing everything beyond the physical, including the universe and spiritual planes.

In Urhobo culture, "Akpo" represents all facets of existence: the physical world, the human experience, and the cosmic universe. This all-encompassing view of "Akpo" reflects how interconnected the material and spiritual realms are in Urhobo thought.

15. *Èsè ò vwo tòrè ònù ò rù kpa.*

Leg it that Leg journeys hands rest give

Meaning: it's the leg that journey, the hands rest.

Polysemous word: Onu

Other meanings: (a) action

(b) Labour

(c) (hands)

Primary Meaning: The most straightforward meaning of "Omu" is hands, which refers to the physical body part used for various tasks such as working, holding, grasping, and manipulating objects.

In a broader sense, "Omu" can also mean action or effort, representing the work that is done or the deeds that are performed, not necessarily limited to the use of hands. It conveys the idea of movement or doing something, not just the physical aspect but the initiative and effort involved.

"Omu" also refers to labor or work, particularly in the context of hard work, effort, or toil. This usage emphasizes the effort and sacrifice associated with completing a task, whether physical or mental.

"Omu" in Urhobo carries multiple meanings: hands, action, and labor. This polysemy creates lexical ambiguity, allowing "Omu" to be understood in different ways depending on context. Whether referring to the literal hands, the actions taken, or the labor required to complete a task, "Omu" underscores the theme of effort, work, and action in Urhobo proverbs. The richness of its meanings reflects the cultural importance placed on work, agency, and diligence, making "Omu" a versatile term in the Urhobo language.

The study found that many words in Urhobo can have both literal and figurative meanings, creating ambiguity that requires contextual understanding for proper interpretation. This lexical ambiguity enriches Urhobo's oral traditions, making proverbs and idiomatic expressions deeply complex. The analysis highlights that understanding Urhobo requires not just vocabulary knowledge but also cultural and contextual awareness. This finding emphasizes the complexity and richness of the language, demonstrating how ambiguity serves as a linguistic tool for deeper meaning and interpretation in Urhobo discourse.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The exploration of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs has revealed the complex ways in which language operates in this rich cultural context. Through the study of various Urhobo proverbs, it becomes evident that many words in the language possess multiple meanings, often depending on the context in which they are used. These polysemous words introduce a level of lexical ambiguity that is integral to the meaning and interpretation of proverbs, reflecting the dynamism and depth of the Urhobo language.

In this discussion, we have examined several proverbs where polysemy plays a central role, highlighting how words with multiple meanings shape the interpretation and philosophical underpinnings of Urhobo proverbs. This phenomenon not only enriches the proverbs but also reveals the linguistic creativity and cultural values embedded in them. The following section presents a summary of the findings, which focus on the role of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs, followed by the conclusion, where key insights and implications of the study will be discussed.

5.1 SUMMARY

This paper examines lexical ambiguity in Urhobo. The presence of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs highlights the depth and richness of the language. The study reveals that lexical ambiguity in Urhobo involves a lexical item with the same spelling and pronunciation but has different interpretations. A word in Urhobo may be pronounced alike but has different meaning. In Urhobo, homonymous and polysemous words are lexical ambiguities. The paper discovers that lexical ambiguity is prevalent mostly among nouns and verbs, although, there are few instances of lexical ambiguity in adjectives. . Lexical ambiguity in Urhobo is denotative and contextual (i.e. context-sensitive).

Through an analysis of Urhobo proverbs, it is evident that lexical ambiguity plays a crucial role in conveying wisdom, moral lessons, and philosophical reflections. Words such as *ugoma* (tree/support), *erivwo* (wealth/abundance), and *esi* (heart/mind) demonstrate how the same term can shift meaning depending on its use within a sentence or proverb. This linguistic feature enables the language to be poetic, metaphorical, and adaptable to different communicative needs.

5.2 FINDINGS

From the analysis of Urhobo proverbs, several key findings emerge regarding polysemy (words with multiple meanings) and lexical ambiguity (words or phrases with uncertain meanings).

Polysemy is Common in Urhobo Proverbs

Many words in Urhobo have multiple meanings depending on context. For example:

Ugoma can mean both tree and support (e.g., "A great person is like a tree that gives shade").

Esi can mean heart or mind, showing the connection between emotions and thought in Urhobo culture. Erivwo can mean wealth or abundance, making proverbs about prosperity open to various interpretations.

Context Determines Meaning. Since polysemous words are common, the meaning of a proverb often depends on the situation in which it is used. Speakers rely on tone, setting, and cultural knowledge to correctly interpret a proverb's meaning.

Lexical Ambiguity Adds Depth to Proverbs. Many Urhobo proverbs deliberately use ambiguous words to create multiple layers of meaning. This allows speakers to express wisdom in a way that requires thought and deeper understanding, engaging listeners in critical thinking. **Cultural and Philosophical Reflections.**

A single proverb can be used in different situations because of its open-ended meaning. This flexibility makes proverbs useful for teaching, advising, warning, and storytelling.

The study of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs highlights the linguistic richness of the language. It shows that Urhobo is not just a means of communication but a carrier of wisdom, culture, and philosophy. Understanding these features enhances appreciation of Urhobo as a language of deep meaning and expressive power.

5.3 CONCLUSION

The study of polysemy and lexical ambiguity in Urhobo proverbs has provided valuable insights into the intricacies of the language and its rich cultural heritage. Through careful analysis, it has become clear that many words in the Urhobo language are polysemous, carrying multiple meanings that depend on context. These multiple meanings often lead to lexical ambiguity, which plays a critical role in shaping the interpretation of proverbs. Polysemy and lexical ambiguity are fundamental features of Urhobo proverbs, contributing to their expressiveness, depth, and cultural significance. These linguistic elements not only reflect the creativity of the Urhobo people but also serve as a means of preserving cultural values and cultural significance. These linguistic elements not only reflect the creativity of the Urhobo people but also serve as a means of preserving cultural values and wisdom passed down through generations. The study of these phenomena offers a deeper understanding of how language shapes thought and communication within the Urhobo community.

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