

A Semantic Study of the Ubiquity of Metaphors in Nigerian English

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Abstract

The study surveys the use of metaphors in Nigerian English. Metaphors reflect our ability to think of one thing in terms of something else. Evidently, more of our everyday language is metaphorical in nature than we are consciously aware of. The researchers use the purposive sampling technique in data collection. Data for this research are drawn from Jowitt (1991) and Igboanusi (2002) where a list of NE usages were provided. The metaphors are then identified and a semantic analysis is conducted. The metaphors were underlined in each of the examples for clarity and easy analysis and the descriptive linguistic theory is used as framework. The study found out that metaphors are problematic in discourse when they are not properly encoded. Metaphor hides as much as it reveals and instead of being a descriptive tool, it creates a host of associations and assumptions.

Keywords – Descriptive Linguistic Theory, Idioms, Nigerian English, Figurative Language, Poetic Language, Culture- Specific Concepts.

Introduction

Metaphor, which reflects our ability to think of one thing in terms of something else is not just a feature of poetic or figurative language but a great deal. More of our everyday language is metaphorical in nature than we are consciously aware of. For example, what is metaphorical about the sentence: *I spent two hours at the bank today*. ‘Spending’ is something you do to money, not time. The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘metaphor’ (<= Greek *metapherien*- to transfer, or carry across) as: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Idioms involve the use of metaphor. For example, the idiom *over the moon* involves thinking of vertical distance as representing degrees of happiness, or in other words, HAPPY is UP (metaphor). In linguistics, idioms are used to refer to actual linguistic expressions, whilst the word metaphor is used to describe the two domains that are involved in the mapping. Metaphors are also seen as the linking of two very different universal or culture- specific concepts or beliefs within linguistic expressions in the transfer of meaning or its interpretation. Traditionally, idioms are defined as collocation that have random, non-compositional meanings. However, they are actually well-motivated and not random as we said earlier and that is why their meanings can be guessed from context, even if one has never heard them before.

Linguists over the years stressed that language is an indispensable tool for cultural expression and that “the content of every culture is expressible in its language and there are no linguistic materials whether as to content or form which are not felt to symbolize actual meaning whatever may be the attitude of those who belong to other cultures....(Sapir, 1974:48-9). Here, language is seen as deeply cultural, societal, political and a reflection of the belief systems of the

society at every level. Cameron (1997:66) affirms that whatever our view of language, it is the property of the society which should only be ascertained by the society. Trudgill (1974:24) on his part attests that the view of the interdependence of language and society, where language may be seen on one hand as a factor of positioning an individual's view of environment and on the other hand as a means of reflecting the environment and the society as a whole. The influence of language on society does not resurface but occurs only at different historical moments in a community. Every language encompasses the cultural content of the people; the custodians of the language. There are unequivocally many aspects of culture enshrined in language as rightly captured by Sapir (1974).

Nigerian English according to Bamgbose (1998:2) is a “legitimate variants” of English in Nigeria which contains intelligibility, reflects a common Nigerian culture or perception of the world, has a mother-tongue influence and a common socio-political environment, among other components of language. There are common place metaphors in Nigerian English and that is why the researchers use the expression “Ubiquity of Metaphors in Nigerian English”. When a metaphor becomes so commonly place that it is no longer seen as metaphorical, then it is sometimes said to have become a “dead metaphor” and so many languages are full of them.

Review of Related Literature

Semantics is a specialized branch of the study of language like every aspect of linguistic science. It has its peculiar terms and expressions as a subject which deals with psychological processes of relating human experiences. Semantics is well known as the study of meaning and in a way parallel to phonology or syntax. Leech (1974:1) says “while syntax studies the expression possibilities in language, Semantics studies the meaning that can be expressed. The study of language is culture and environmental based, that is why this study looks at the various metaphors

as used by Nigerians and not in its generic worldview. Agunusi (2001:69) views language as a human behavior and also as “a form of social behavior with a configuration of diverse varieties and sub-varieties”. Language, according to Adeyanju (1998:71-73) varies according to region, sex, status, level of literacy, occupation, socio-cultural and idiosyncrasies and that no variety of language is superior to others. All varieties cannot be considered superior or inferior to any variety, irrespective of their functions.

Sapir (1914:20) affirms that culture is the means by which members of the society express their thoughts and ideas to one another. Cameron (1997:60) on his part, is of the view that group norms are revealed by the way people use language and a confirmation that human behavior requires explanation in terms of the existence of social meaning. Croghan (2000:76-79) notes that African languages exert unavoidable influences to English and without an attempt to understand these influences.

Hudson (1998:226-237) provides a psychological base for lexical meaning acquisition where he opines that one of the requirements of a semantic theory as a model in L2 acquisition is that it must have the ability to characterize differences in language across different languages. The word *uncle* in English and Chinese for example are organized differently under different sets of necessity conditions to yield meaning in each. English specifies the necessity condition of the word ‘uncle as the brother either of one’s parents and so a native speaker is quite certain of the appropriate context in which to use the word. In Chinese on the other hand, different kingship lexical items are used for the same kingship, perceived to be the same lexicon in English. Chinese specifies the lexicon ‘*bo*’ for one’s father’s older brother and ‘*shu*’ for one’s father’s younger brother. The word ‘*shu*’ may though be used to refer to a male of one’s parents’ generation, even without any blood affiliation. In Nigeria, *father* and *mother* refer to one’s biological parents and

also extends to males and females of one's father's or one's mother's lineage despite non-blood relationship.

What this work seeks to achieve is to unravel the fact that metaphors abound in Nigerian English and are used by Nigerians knowingly and unknowingly in both formal and informal conversations. This fills an academic gap established from the empirical review above.

Theoretical Framework

Cameron and Low (1999:78) discuss two important approaches to the study of metaphors namely, the Classical and the Cognitive approaches. The classical approach views language as essentially literal. Metaphor in this sense is seen as used for poetic and rhetorical emphasis. The cognitive approach on the other hand views a metaphor as extending beyond the former. Here, a metaphor is seen as a phenomenon that permeates everyday life which organizes how we think, verbalize and act out our thoughts. The cognitive theory therefore conceives metaphors as a means of conceptualizing one mental domain in terms of another, according to Lakoff (1993:203-207). Metaphors occupy a basic position in cognitive principles as a means of thinking about one idea in terms of another, and the transfer of meaning across domains. This research therefore adopts the cognitive theory which views a metaphor as extending beyond the former.

Methodology

The researchers use the purposive sampling technique in data collection. Data for this research is drawn from Jowitt (1991) and Igboanusi (2002), where a list of Nigerian (NE) usages were provided. The metaphors are then identified and written down. The metaphors were written underlined in each of the examples for clarity and easy analysis. 15 texts were selected for analysis, from the 23 written down. 6 were from Jowitt's text while 9 were from Igboanusi. Thereafter, a semantic analysis of some of them is conducted.

Data Presentation and Analysis

TEXT 1

Dress for me to sit down- (Jowitt, 1991)

The word *dress* in SBE means a piece of cloth or to put on cloths. ‘Dress to sit down’ is a Nigerian idiomatic expression that means to ‘relax’ or ‘make yourself comfortable’. The expression is often used to invite someone to take a seat and feel at ease, letting go of any formalities or tension. This metaphoric expression means ‘make space for me’ in Yoruba language, ‘make room for me’ in Igbo while it may mean ‘adjust’ or ‘remove obstacles’ in the Northern region of the country.

TEXT 2

I branched my friend’s house-(Jowitt, 1991)

The cognitive mapping of this expression suggests the domain of tree branching, human movement and the mapping, ‘brief visit’. It could mean ‘I passed by...’, ‘I stopped by...’, ‘I dropped in’, ‘I paid a quick visit’, or ‘I made a brief appearance in different regions. In Nigerian English, the expression means ‘‘I stopped by’ or ‘I visited’. This reflects that the visit could either be a sudden one that may not take a long time or the contrary. By and large, the visit in the Nigerian socio cultural perspective is a sudden one, mostly unplanned. Here, ‘branched’ is used metaphorically to convey the idea of ‘deviating from a path’, taking a temporary detour’, ‘making a brief stop’

TEXT 3

She assassinated her friend’s character-(Jowitt, 1991)

Biblically, killing or murder is conceptualized (not literally) when one is being hated (mostly not openly). The word *assassinated* is used here to convey ‘intentional harm’, targeted attack’ or ‘violent or intentional harm’ among others.

The semantic components of the word *assassinated* is that of ‘attack’, ‘malice’ and ‘severe harm’. This also x-rays the domains of physical violence targeted at reputation or character and mapped at reputation damage. The metaphor emphasizes the severity and deliberateness of the harm inflicted on a person. This could be active in ‘spreading false rumours’, ‘making malicious accusations’, or ‘publicly embarrassing or humiliating someone’.

TEXT 4

We cracked jokes at the party-(Jowitt, 1991)

To *crack* a joke in Nigerian English reflects a culturally constituted metaphor of palm-nut breaking to enjoy the delicate flesh. Cracking jokes therefore reflects the meaning ‘breaking open’ or ‘splitting open’. This usage is similar to SBE usage which means to ‘make jokes’ which does not reflect the Nigerian cultural and social view.

TEXT 5

The manager ate the bank’s money and was made to vomit it-(Jowitt, 1991)

This is a metaphorical Idiom in Nigerian English which means that the Manager embezzled the funds but was forced to refund the stolen money. The expression depicts a picture of ‘consuming money like food’, and ‘vomiting it’ which are all human attributes.

The semantic components of the expression are consumption, wrongful acquisition or theft, and restitution. The source domain depicts a physical consumption and expulsion, and the target domain is a financial mismanagement and restitution mapped embezzlement.

The metaphor is commonly used in Nigerian English to describe situations where public officials mismanage resources or funds in their custody, the act of corruption is exposed and stolen funds are recovered. In Ghanaian English, it is ‘they chopped the money and were made to cough it out’ while in American English, it is that ‘they were forced to cough up the embezzled funds.

TEXT 6

He is my tight friend-(Jowitt, 1991)

The semantic underpinning of this metaphor in Nigerian English is ‘he is my very close and trusted friend’. Here, *tight* is used metaphorically to convey closeness, strength, and intimacy. The semantic components are proximity, bonding, and loyalty while cognitive mapping shows a source domain of physical tightness, (rope, tight and fit for example). The target domain is interpersonal relationships, mapped by close friendship. ‘Tight friend in Nigerian English suggests and emphasizes ‘unconditional support’, ‘mutual trust’ and ‘deep understanding’

TEXT 7

He looked at me with a bad eye- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

The semantic meaning of the metaphor in Nigerian English is ‘he looked at me with suspicion’, hostility or disapproval. In this case, ‘bad eye’ is used metaphorically to convey ‘negative intention’, ‘disfavor’ and ‘ill will’. It has a semantic perception of negative emotions and hostile or disapproving looks. The cognitive domain source is physical vision while the target domain is social interaction, mapped by negative attitude. ‘Bad eye’ in Nigerian English means dislike, distrust, and malice. The metaphor is synonymous to idioms like ‘he gave me a dirty look’, ‘he eyed me suspiciously’ and ‘he looked at me with disdain’.

TEXT 8

I crammed the textbook- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

This means ‘I intensely studied or memorized the textbook’. The word *crammed* is used metaphorically to convey a forceful compression or packing of information into one’s mind, an intensive effort or studying hard, and temporary memorization. It has the semantic components of action, effort and time. The source domain is physical compression and a target domain of mental processing, mapped by intensive studying.

The word *crammed* in Nigerian English implies ‘last minute preparation, rote learning or memorization, and overloading one’s mind’. The expression also varies in regions. In Indian English for instance, it is ‘I mugged up the textbook’; in American English, it is ‘I crammed for the examination or I studied hard’, while in British English, it is ‘I swotted up or I revised intensively’.

TEXT 9

That is an expensive joke- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

An *expensive joke* in Nigerian English means ‘something that is a costly and or serious matter; not something to be taken lightly’. The word ‘expensive’ is used metaphorically to convey severity, gravity, and unacceptability. The semantic components are evaluation, consequence and emotion. The metaphor’s source domain is financial cost while the target domain is emotional or social implication, mapped in seriousness. It has the synonyms ‘that is not child’s play’, ‘that is a serious business’, ‘that is not a laughing matter’, ‘that is a heavy load’, ‘that is a hot issue’ and ‘that is a thick problem’, among others.

In Nigerian English, the phrase ‘expensive joke’ implies a situation with severe consequences, a matter that requires a caution and something not to be trifled with. In American English, it is ‘that is not a laughing matter while’ and in British English, it is ‘that is not a trivial matter’ or ‘that is a serious issue’.

TEXT 10

I hate eye service- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

This Nigerian Metaphor means ‘I dislike or despise hypocrisy, pretense, or insincerity’ especially in showing respect or loyalty. The phrase *eye service* is used metaphorically to convey deception, superficiality, and insincerity. It has a source domain of visual perception while its target domain is social interaction, mapped in insincere behavior. The semantic components are emotion of hatred, evaluation as judging sincerely and social relation as power dynamics.

The phrase *eye service* in Nigerian English implies pretending to obey or respect, false loyalty, and lip service. In American English, it is ‘I hate lip service’ or ‘I despise hypocrisy’. British English has it as ‘I dislike tokenism’ or ‘I abhor insincerity’. Other similar metaphors in Nigerian English are ‘he is showing face’ (pretending to care); ‘she is doing follow-follow’ (pretending to agree) and ‘he is playing to the gallery’ (seeking attention or approval), among others.

Semantically, the phrase ‘eye service’ critiques power dynamics, highlighting the tension between genuine commitment and superficial obedience. The metaphor reveals societal values prioritizing sincerity and authenticity and reflects cultural discomfort with hypocrisy and pretense.

TEXT 11

He started from the scratch- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

This means ‘he began from the very beginning’, ‘with no prior advantage, resources or foundation’ In Nigerian English, the word *scratch* is used metaphorically to convey starting point or origin, absence or no prior advantage, self-reliance or building from nothing. It also means ‘self-made’, ‘overcoming adversity’, and ‘building from nothing’. The semantic components are action, location and condition while the cognitive mappings are from a source domain of physical

marking, and a target domain of abstract concept mapped beginning. Other usages in Nigerian English are ‘he started from ground zero’, ‘he began from nothing’, and ‘he built from the ground up’.

In American English, it is ‘he started from scratch or he built from ground up’ while it is ‘he started from a standing start or he began from scratch’ in British English. The phrase ‘started from the scratch’, emphasizing resilience and resourcefulness, highlights the importance of self-reliance and hard work, and reflects cultural values of determination and perseverance.

TEXT 12

Ali has a very big heart- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

The metaphor ‘Ali has a very big heart’ means Ali is extremely kind, generous, and compassionate. The phrase ‘big heart’ is used metaphorically to convey emotional capacity, the ability to love and care, generosity, the willingness to give and share, empathy or understanding and concern for others. The metaphors’ semantic components are emotion, or kindness, size or the magnitude of generosity and moral quality or compassion. The cognitive mapping denotes physical organ as its source domain. The target domain is emotional or moral qualities, mapped in kindness.

The phrase ‘big heart’ in Nigerian English implies ‘selflessness, charity and forgiveness’. Again, American English has it as ‘Ali has a heart of Gold’ while British English has it as ‘Ali has a kind heart’. Other forms in Nigerian English are ‘Ali has a soft spot’, ‘Ali’s heart is soft’, and ‘Ali is a blessing’.

The expression ‘big heart’ emphasizes Ali’s exceptional kindness and generosity, highlights the importance of empathy and compassion and finally, it reflects cultural values of community sharing and mutual support.

TEXT 13

She is a big woman- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

Big in the Nigerian English means an influential, wealthy or highly placed personality. It is a universally shared meaning which is related to standard Nigerian English which means ‘important’, probably because of influence or power. Nigerian English uses it metaphorically in a way that reflects its cultural reality. A similar usage is from a popular Nigerian song “I have a very *Big* God ooo...”

TEXT 14

She has just bagged her third degree- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

Conceptually, this metaphor is interpreted as a metaphoric expression which embedded a verbal lexicon which has an underlying concept transferred to itself. Though the word ‘bag’ is a polysemous word in SBE which means ‘kill’, ‘catch’, ‘obtain’, etc.), it means ‘to ‘earn’ in the Nigerian context. When one bags a degree or any title, it is seen as an elevation of one’s status socially or academically. It suggests something of enhancing value which someone has obtained as a valuable or a possession.

TEXT 15

Mark has a coconut head- (Igboanusi, 2002:13-30)

The semantic meaning of the metaphor ‘Mark has a coconut head’ is that ‘Mark is very intelligent, wise, or clever’. The word ‘coconut head’ is used metaphorically to convey intellectual intelligence, wisdom or prudence and cleverness or resourcefulness. ‘Coconut head’ highlights the value placed on intelligence and wisdom and reflects cultural appreciation for resourcefulness.

In Nigerian English, the phrase ‘coconut head’ or wise’ implies sharp thinking, quick understanding and strategic problem solving ability. Simply put, it means ‘Mark is brainy, clever.

On the other hand, ‘coconut head’ could also mean a dull or stubborn person. The context usually determines the meaning.

Conclusion

The metaphorical expressions showcase the Nigerian English’s creative and vivid use of metaphors in almost all expressions across different fields and culture of the Nigerian society as a whole. When we examine metaphorical expressions, we observe that the thing being described is often an abstract concept and the means used to describe it is often a concrete or experiential concept. In other words, target domains are abstract while source domains are concrete. Metaphors shape the way we think and express those thoughts in a culture bound society or variety of English like the English Language in Nigeria called Nigerian English.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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