

PATTERNS OF NEOLOGISM AND SEMANTIC CHANGE IN IGBO

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated neologism and semantic change in Igbo. It specifically examined neologism as a word formation process in Igbo language. Oral interview of people involving artisans, traders, students and professionals provided data; which were analyzed descriptively. It was identified that there are semantic neologisms and proper neologisms in Igbo. Igbo is rich with semantic neologisms which are existing words/phrases used in new senses or with new meanings. The semantic changes that led to the realization of the neologisms include semantic drift, metaphorical shift, broadening, narrowing, amelioration and pejoration. The proper neologisms are necessitated by specific social, political, economic and religious activities or changes. These, gain currency in the language and among its speakers over time.

Keywords: *semantics, word formation process, language change, coinage.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Every human language has specific ways of adding to its inventory of words or lexicon. In fact, no human language can claim to have a complete vocabulary. This is because language is dynamic and very importantly; changes in culture, values, or even science and technology create lexical inadequacies. That partly accounts for why languages borrow (ie) the concept of linguistic borrowing from other languages to make up for certain lexical short comings. Aside borrowing, there are other ways a language can add to its inventory of words notable among which are affixation, conversion, compounding and neologism among others. They are generally referred to as word formation processes. A linguistic element could be attached, at different positions relative to the root of a word to form new words. Also a word can change its part of speech without necessarily undergoing reduction or enlargement by way of affixation. In the same vein, two or more formerly independent roots could be joined to form a single new word. These are processes of word formation but our attention here is on neologism or coinage.

Neologism or coinage is a process of word formation whereby there is an introduction or use of new words or new senses of existing words. It could also mean a word invented and understood only by a certain set of speakers. Neologisms are often directly attributable to a specific person, publication, period or event. However one feature of neologisms which must be highlighted is that a neologism may be a new usage of an existing word sometimes called semantic extension. This is distinct from a person's idiolect-one's unique patterns of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. An existing word in a language could be used in a new sense or new senses in which case we say there is semantic change often associated with the so-called 'semantic neologisms'. Semantic neologisms are not restricted to words; they extend to phrases or expressions in language whose meanings have been altered and shared by persons or within a given period in the history of a language. It is argued here that semantic neologisms abound in Igbo language.

Igbo language is a major language in Nigeria with about 25 million people speaking it as their first language (Agbo 2011, Nweke 2012). The language is classified as a Niger-Congo language which

belongs to the new Benue-Congo sub-branch of language (Bendor-Samuel, 1989) or the West Benue-Congo (Williamson and Blench, 2000). Igbo is a tonal language and as such, the Green and Igwe's (1963) tone convention where low tones and mid tones are marked and high tones unmarked is adopted in the study. The study adopted oral interview of groups of Igbo speakers involving students, market women, traders, artisans in various locations within the Igbo speaking area so as to identify some semantic neologisms or coinages in the Igbo language. For ease of reference, this paper has been broken down into sections namely conceptual, theoretical and empirical review all as part of the literature review followed by data presentation and analysis as well as summary of findings and conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The following concepts are briefly reviewed here: neologism and semantic change in language.

2.1 Neologism

Akmajian (2012) observes that neologism or often referred to as coinage is one of the processes that account for how “human language finite vocabulary can be expanded and altered to deal with the potentially infinite world”. He holds that neologisms operate on two levels; namely: introduction and use of new words, and the meaning of already existing words or phrases being changed. Entirely new, previously non-existent words or phrases keep entering a language and this often happens when speakers invent (or coin) new words (in terms of the two components of words (sound and meaning), by inventing a new sound sequence and pairing it with a new meaning. For example, adolescent slang has given us words such as ‘geek’ and ‘dweeb’. Akmajian (2012:27) opines that “under the right conditions, these can be adopted by the larger linguistic community and become part of the language”.

Silvia (2001:16) presents another dimension of the concept of neologism. She views that neologism or coinage is a morphological process of creating new words to name previously non-existent objects or phenomena that result from cultural contact. Her views are consistent with those of Akmajian (2012). However, she looks at neologism as a product of cultural contact. Culture or language contact could lead to coinages or even extension of meaning of existing words or phrases in a language.

Ray (2005) argues that the term neologism is used to describe the use of words that have meaning only to the person(s) who use(s) them, independent of their common meaning. This tendency is considered normal in children but in adults, it can be a symptom of psychopathy or a thought disorder (indicative of a psychotic mental illness, such as schizophrenia). People with autism also may create neologisms. Additionally, use of neologisms may be related to aphasia acquired after brain damage resulting from a stroke or head injury. In theology, a neologism is a relatively new doctrine. In this sense, a neologist is one who proposes either a new doctrine or a new interpretation of source material such as religious texts (Sayadi, 2011).

From the foregoing, one understands that neologism as a language or linguistic concept refers to a process whereby a new word or phrase is introduced and used by speakers of a language as well as an existing word used in new sense(s) often associated with semantic change of a word or phrase. Also, it could be a word or phrase invented and understood only by the speaker(s) which may be in the process of entering common use but has not yet been accepted into mainstream language or

better put, that has not yet been adopted by the larger linguistic community. The coined word, with the passage of time, gains currency within a speech community. Invented trade names such as Xerox and Kleenex are recent additions to the English Language. They quickly became everyday word in the language. The word 'Xerox' use to refer only to a company that produces a type of photocopying machine has recently come to be used to refer to the process of photocopying in general. Also, 'Kleenex' has now been used to refer to a brand of facial tissue other than a brand name. Again, the word 'Crane' is a name for a very large bird with very long neck. But now there is a heavy-duty machine called 'Crane' which is used for lifting heavy objects. This machine has also a long neck. In a way, the machine has taken its name from the bird. However, these do not just happen but they pass through stages.

Sayadi (2011) observes that neologisms in language pass through three stages; creation, trial and establishment. First, the unstable neologism is still new being proposed or being only used by a limited audience, Epstein (2005) calls such neologism 'protologism' by analogy with prototype and neologism. Then it is diffused, but it is not widely accepted yet. Finally, it stabilizes and is identifiable, having gained wide-spread approval; such 'stability' is indicated by its appearance in glossaries, dictionaries and large corpora. In sum, neologism may be a non-existent word/phrase introduced in a language or an existing word used in new sense(s) or new meaning.

2.2 Semantic Change

Although changes in word meaning take place continuously in all languages, word rarely jump from one meaning to an unrelated one. Typically, the changes are step by step. (O'Grady, 1997). This view has been alluded to by Akmajian (2012). He further observes that language/culture contact, advancement in technologies, informalities among others can trigger word meaning change in language. Also, relating semantic change to neologism, Akmajian (2012 p.30) holds that 'a new meaning can become associated with an existing word and that there are numerous ways this can come about. Thus:

- The grammatical category of the word changes (change in part of speech).
- The vocabulary of one domain is extended to a new domain (metaphorical shift/extension)
- The meaning of a word broadens in scope (broadening)
- The meaning of a complex word involves restricting the more general compositional meaning of the complex word (Semantic drift).
- The meaning of a word changes to the opposite of its original meaning (reversal).

A word can be modified by changing its category. In this way, a new meaning can be associated with and related to an existing word. For example 'Xerox' is a brand name of a particular Photocopying machine; its part of speech is Noun. But, it is often used as a verb as in 'to xerox' as the process of photocopying.

Metaphorical extension is another way in which the meaning of an existing word is modified, thus resulting in new uses. When a language does not seem to have just the right expression for certain purposes, speakers often take an existing one and extend its meaning in a recognizable way. For instance, the word 'navigation' in the English language has been metaphorically extended to mean either side movement of a 'moving object/entity' as in car navigation, space navigation, ship navigation. The original meaning in English language is associated with Ocean.

Semantic broadening is the process in which the meaning of a word becomes more general or more inclusive than its historically earlier form (O’Grady, 1997). For example:

| | Word | Old Meaning | Broadened Meaning |
|----|-------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1) | bird | ‘small fowl’ | ‘any feathered vertebrate with a beak’ |
| 2) | barn | ‘place to store barley’ | ‘any agricultural building’ |
| 3) | aunt | ‘father’s sister’ | ‘father or mother’s sister’ |

(Cued from O’Grady 1997:344).

Semantic narrowing is the process in which the meaning of a word becomes less general or less inclusive than its historically earlier meaning. For example ‘meat’ – ‘any type of food’ being narrowed to ‘flesh of an animal’. Also, ‘fowl’ – ‘any bird’ being narrowed to ‘domesticated bird’.

Semantic drift captures a process whereby a word loses some aspect of its former meaning, taking on a partially new, but related, meaning. Example: ‘Immoral’ having ‘not customary’ as old meaning and now ‘unethical’ as the new meaning in the English language. Also, ‘bead’ has ‘prayer’ as old meaning and ‘prayer bead’ as new meaning.

The meaning of a word can also change to the meaning of the opposite. The term is referred to as meaning or semantic reversal and it includes amelioration and pejoration. Amelioration is when the meaning of word becomes positive or favourable. Example:

| | Word | Old Meaning | New Meaning (ameliorated) |
|----|-------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1) | Knight | ‘boy’ | ‘a man of honourable military rank’ |
| 2) | Pretty | ‘tricky, sly, cunning’ | ‘attractive’ |

(Cued from O’Grady et.al, 1997)

Also, the opposite of amelioration, can occur in language which is pejoration – whereby the meaning of a word becomes negative. Example:

| | | |
|-------|---------------------|---------------|
| Silly | ‘happy, prosperous’ | ‘foolish’ |
| wench | ‘girl’ | ‘prostitute’. |

According to O’Grady et.al (1997), word meaning weakening can also occur. A situation he attributes to the propensity of human beings to exaggerate.

He provides the following examples:

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| ‘soon’ | ‘immediately’ | ‘in the near future’ |
| ‘crucify’ | ‘kill by nailing to a cross’ | ‘to cause pain’ |

3. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study is built around the lexical semantic change perspective. The model accounts for different links to lexical semantic change in language. It holds that lexical semantic change is linked to change in culture/society: arbitrary cultural factors can give rise to highly unpredictable semantic changes. Also, the link between form (signifier) and meaning (signifié) is arbitrary. Any link is as good as any other, hence unlimited change is possible. The model explains too that there are no physiological restrictions on lexical change as there are for sound change so; word or lexical change is unlimited and unrestricted in language.

The perspective according to Nweze (2011) was explained at the wake of controversies surrounding the concept of meaning in language. Meaning is visibly difficult to pin down to a specific term, a situation that informed the Odgen & Richards' (1923), investigations on the 'meaning of meaning'. This approach however, accounts for meaning change in language particularly at the word or lexical level.

This perspective also explains lexical semantic change as a phenomena related to lexical meaning diffusion whereby a change in meaning sometimes begins with a small number of a group or community or people then gradually spans through the larger linguistic community and eventually 'stabilizes' (or is established) or at best, being shared by a group of entire community in most often, informal situations.

4. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Neologism has been studied from different perspectives though such studies are scanty; a number of them are on the English language. Lakoff (1980) investigates Neologisms related to the computer. He identified that such new terms are related to different types of activities performed with the help of computers. Many of them are formed with the help of the morpheme 'tele - '. He observed that the list is endless as whatever activity that can be performed using the computer can be attached to the morpheme 'tele' to get a new term. Lakoff (1980) terms this kind of neologism: 'transnomination' – a situation where a new lexical unit can be developed in a language to denote a new dimension or aspect or variety of an object or phenomenon which already has some lexical unit to denote it. He provides the following examples:

- 1) Tele work
- 2) Telecommuting
- 3) Telebanking
- 4) Telemarketing
- 5) Teleshopping

Where, 1 and 2 refer to 'to work at home or elsewhere having a computer which is connected with the enterprise for which one works while 3, 4 and 5 refer to a situation where one can perform different operations with the help of a computer without leaving ones home. All operations are registered by computer at your bank/video bank/computerized telephone which registers all information which is received in your absence. In the sphere of biometrics, Lakoff (1980) identifies neologisms related to computerized machines which can recognize characteristic features of people seeking entrance such as: finger-print scanner, finger prints, biometric eye-scanner also telemonitory unit – a telemonitory system used for treating patients at a distance.

Silvia (2001) and Eve (1991) in their separate studies of neologism in the English language, view that neologisms in language can be triggered by social or cultural changes or even contact. Silvia (2001) investigates neologisms as triggered by social activities or changes in the use of modern English in the US. He observes that with the development of social activities, neologisms appeared as well. Example: *Youth quake, Pussy-footer, Euromarket, Eurodollars, Euro-Parliament, Europol*, etc. Similarly in the modern English society, there is tendency for social stratification, as a result there are neologisms in this sphere as well. Example: *belonger, Yuppei-Young Urban Professional People, Muppie, gruppie, bluppie*, etc. People belonging to the lowest layer of the society are called 'Survivors', a little bit more prosperous are called 'sustainers', and those who

toy to prosper in life and imitate those they want to belong to, are called ‘emulators’. These are “coinages necessitated by change in the society and over time, may form part of the English language vocabulary at least, in those enclaves”. (Silvia 2001:5).

Eve (1991) identifies some neologisms occasioned by certain social changes. In connection with Criminalization of towns in UK, voluntary groups assisting the Police were formed where dwellers of the neighbourhood are joined. These groups are called “*neighbourhood watch*”, or “*home watch*”. Criminals wear ‘*stocking masts*’ not to be recognized. The higher society has neologisms in their speech; such as *dial-a-meal*, *dial-a-taxi*. Eve (1991) further observes that with the development of professional jargons, a lot of words ending in ‘speak’ appeared in the English language. Example: *artsspeak*, *sportsspeak*, *medsspeak*, *education-speak*, *videosspeak*, *cable-speak* etc.

It must be noted that the findings of Lakoff (1980), Eve (1991) and Silvia (2001) are not related to this study because they identified that neologism can take the form of ‘transnomination’ and could be triggered by social or cultural changes/activities. However, Berchfield (2005) analyses neologism from the point of view of a lexical unit existing in a language changing its meaning to denote a new object or phenomenon; in such cases, we have semantic neologisms. He investigated a number of such neologisms in the English Language and this is quite apt for the present study. Berchfield (2005) presents the following semantic neologism; showing the existing words and the new senses or meaning in their use in the English language.

| | Existing word | Existing meaning | New meaning |
|---|---------------|---|--|
| 1 | Meat | Flesh of an animal | i) salary/allowance/wages (ii) Propaganda/bad news |
| 2 | Vegetables | Food items that contain more of vitamins and minerals usually ‘leafy’ | (i) weakling (ii) any food item that can nourish the body |
| 3 | Umbrella | ‘an object with a round folding frame of long straight pieces of metal used to protect one from rain or sun | (i) Protector/shield of someone (ii) Greedy person (iii) A seasonal occurrence |

In his analysis, Berchfield (2005) observes that the new senses or meanings of the existing lexical units are manifestation of different semantic change types. For instance, 1 (i) is a case of semantic broadening while 1 (ii) is an example of weakening. Also, 2 (i) is a case of pejoration while 2 (ii) is typical of semantic broadening. In the same vein, 3 (i) is a case of metaphorical extension while 3 (ii) and (iii) are examples of pejoration and broadening respectively. In sum, the review shows that neologisms are not just new terms or coinages with new meanings in language but also are existing words used in new sense(s) as well as manifestations of cultural and or social activities or changes in a society. Similarly, the findings of the studies reviewed reveal that neologisms are specific to people, period, culture, etc and more importantly, become part of the larger linguistic society over time.

5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The semantic neologisms identified are grouped in terms of context of usage among the Igbo. The groups are: trade/business, ills/Evil in the society, and Human Relationship/Social issues.

Similarly, some new lexical units or words with new meanings were also identified and we grouped them under proper neologism.

For semantic neologism, we have the following:

- a) **Trade/Business**– The Igbo are generally industrious people. They engage in trade and business to make ends meet and as such, a number of semantic neologisms have been identified. We therefore present the words, their existing meaning and new meaning(s) associated with them.

| 1. | Word | Literal/ (Existing) meaning | New Meaning(s) |
|------|----------|-----------------------------|--|
| i) | Mmèmmè | Feast | ‘When there are many Customers in one shop’ |
| ii) | `Owu`Itè | Pots’ thread | ‘Poverty, lack of money, Hardship |
| iii) | Igbu Ozu | ‘to kill’ | ‘to be rich’, ‘to make it big’ or ‘to be successful’ |
| iv) | I nọ mma | ‘you are sitting well’ | ‘you are rich’, /very comfortable |
| v) | Ọnwa | ‘the Moon’ | ‘a successful person’ or ‘a Philanthropist’ |

2. **Ills in the society** – certain actions or activities that are contrary to the values or norms of the Igbo like any other society, lead to existing words/phrases being used in new sense(s).

| | Word | Literal/ (Existing) meaning | New Meaning(s) |
|------|---------------|-----------------------------|---|
| i) | `Umụ nnwa | ‘young people’ | ‘Thieves’ |
| ii) | Onye ọrụ | ‘a worker’ | ‘one who is involved in dirty business or extra-marital affairs |
| iii) | Ndị ahịa rọdù | ‘people who deal on rods | ‘Prostitutes’ or ‘Fraudsters’ |
| iv) | Sàa isī | ‘wash the head’ | ‘try to convince somebody dubiously’ |
| v) | Onye ahịa | ‘a trader’ | ‘an armed robber’ or promiscuous person’. |

3. **Human relationships and social issues** – Some semantic neologisms are identified under this group and they include:

| | Word | Literal/ (Existing) meaning | New Meaning(s) |
|------|--------------|-----------------------------|---|
| i) | nwa | ‘a child’ | ‘a man’s girlfriend or a beautiful girl’ |
| ii) | asa | ‘a kind of fish (catfish) | ‘a beautiful girl’ |
| iii) | kà anyị nwee | ‘Let us have...’ | ‘Let us meet in secret’ |
| iv) | Ọ chàrà àcha | ‘it is ripe’ | ‘It is beautiful or it is Lucrative/attractive’ |
| v) | Ife àkà | ‘to wave a hand’ | ‘to die’ |

| | | | |
|-------|------------|----------------------|--|
| vi) | Ìtā ifē | ‘to chew something’ | ‘to make love’ |
| vii) | Ì hàzì | ‘to organize’ | ‘to toast a girl’, ‘to have sex’ ‘to convince’ |
| viii) | kuọ ọrụ | ‘hit a job/work’ | ‘reveal a secret or foil a plan’ |
| ix) | ì gbā ọgwụ | ‘to give injections’ | ‘to convince or deceive’. |

For the proper neologism which are new words/phrases or non-existing words/phrases introduced and used in a language; the following were identified.

| | | |
|-------|-------------------|--|
| 4. a) | gwadangwā | Do something hastily |
| b) | Kwechiri | Persist in something |
| c) | Òkpu nnàbùènyì | Condom |
| d) | na-ēgòlì | Enjoy |
| e) | Mmajà | Threaten or harass |
| f) | Gbara ọgwù gi ñùọ | Behave yourself or be careful |
| g) | tùọ (down) | Reach a place |
| h) | kpàa | Pretend over something |
| i) | Ìgba akùọlā | There is problem or it has failed |
| j) | Ìsù enwēghì ọnù | One who is being intimidated |
| k) | Ìnyē ọsọ | Harass someone |
| l) | Obì akpọ | Wickedness |
| m) | Ìkwànta | Problem, trouble (fight) or disagreement |
| n) | Ngwodò | Failure, or handling something badly |
| o) | Dei! | Acceptable or correct |
| p) | Ọgbākālā | To be overwhelmed by feelings of joy |
| q) | Ọkàrà àka | It is superb or wonderful |
| r) | Kùsuo | Harass or intimidate |

Below is a breakdown of the semantic changes that have taken place in the realization of the semantic neologisms.

| | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|---|
| A. Semantic narrowing | | | |
| | Word | Literal/ (Existing) meaning | New Meaning(s) |
| i) | Ìmmèmmè in | Feast | when there are many customers |
| ii) | nwa | Child | one shop. A man’s girlfriend or a beautiful girl |
| B. Metaphorical shift | | | |
| i) | Ọnwa | Moon | A successful person or philanthropist |
| ii) | Asa | Catfish | A beautiful girl |
| iii) | Ọ chàrà àcha | It is ripe | It is beautiful/attractive/Lucrative |
| C. Semantic Drift | | | |
| i) | Kà anyi nwee | Let us have... | Let us meet in secret |
| ii) | Ìhàzì | To organize | To toast a girl or to have sex, to convince. |

| | | | |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|--|
| iii) | Ìtā-ifē | To chew something | To make love |
| iv) | Kùọ ọrụ | hit a job/work | Reveal a secret or foil a plan |
| v) | Ìgbā ọgwù | to give injections | to convince or deceive |
| vi) | ị nọ nmā | you are sitting well | You are rich/very comfortable. |
| D. Pejoration | | | |
| i) | Umụ ñnwā | Young people | Thieves |
| ii) | Onye ọrụ | A worker | One who is involved in dirty business or extra-marital affairs |
| iii) | Ndi ahịa roḡdù | People who deal on rods | Prostitutes or Fraudsters. |
| iv) | Sàa isī | Wash the head | Try to convince somebody dubiously |
| v) | Onye ahịa | A trader | an armed robber or promiscuous person. |
| vi) | Owu ịte | Pots' thread | Poverty, lack of money or hardship |
| vii) | Ifē ākā | To wave a hand | To die |
| E. Amelioration | | | |
| i) | ìgbu ozu | To kill | To be rich or to make it big or to be successful. |

For the proper neologisms listed in 4(a-r); their introduction and use is by specific groups as necessitated by specific activities such as social, economic, political as well as religious activities and or changes/contacts. From the data, we observed that neologisms as identified in Igbo are similar to slang in the language. Most if not all the examples provided are equally slang expressions. This may be because slang are usually informal, colloquial, and particularly in Igbo could be among other ways formed, from the usage of existing words or expressions in new sense(s). The groups include traders, artisans, social groups, students, professionals, etc. This is consistent with the views of Sayadi (2011) that “*neologisms are new terms or coinages used and introduced in a language which are often directly attributable to a specific person(s), publication, or period in addition to existing words used in new senses or new meanings in a language*”.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

The study focused on semantic neologisms which are existing words/phrases used with new sense(s) or meanings specific to a group of people, period, publication or event. The oral interview of some people in Igbo speaking areas involving various groups has provided data and reveals the feature of semantic neologisms in Igbo. We found that the Igbo language is rich with Semantic neologisms. They have been drawn into three groups in the study as listed in 1(i-v), 2(i-v) and 3(i-ix). The analysis of the semantic changes reveals that they include semantic drift, metaphorical shift, broadening, narrowing and semantic reversal which include pejoration and amelioration. Similarly, we identified some words or phrases which are introduced and used by specific groups with new meanings and they are referred to as proper neologisms. They are products of specific changes or activities and are also referred to as coinages and are listed in 4(a-r).

We conclude therefore that like every language, Igbo language has specific ways or devices of enriching its vocabulary one of which is introduction of new terms or phrases with new meanings (proper neologisms) or existing word/terms/phrases used with new meanings (Semantic neologisms). The proper neologisms or semantic neologisms, with the passage of time, gain currency in the speech community where they are used.

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