

Misinterpreting the Igbo Lexeme: *Nwunye* and its Feminist Implications: A Sociolexicological Approach

Onyinye Anne Nwankwo

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages

Alex-Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu Alike

Ebonyi State

Annegerald2001@gmail.com

Abstract

In the traditional Igbo society, cultural knowledge and systems are embedded in lexemes. This provides an observable relationship between lexemes and diverse connotations expressed in various contexts. However, in contemporary times, some high class Igbo women misconstrue the lexeme *nwunye* and evoke a combative disposition towards the traditional system. This has wrecked the psychological peace of such women. This study argues that the Igbo dominant constituents of the lexeme *Nwunye* evoke the components of a subordinate in Igbo socio-cultural worldview. Adopting a sociolexicological framework, the various semantic connotations of *nwunye* were espoused. Findings reveal that some functional effects of the cognitive content of semantic and non-semantic factors of the lexeme *nwunye* disapprove the notion of *nwunye* as individualistic being in the traditional and contemporary Igbo society. This implies that *nwunye* is a gifted yield from a negotiation, capable of being fluid in character, yet has the capacity to illumine another's life. This implies that polemical lexicographic information in dictionaries could be avoided if a lexis oriented sociolinguistics approach to lexicology is adopted in second language learning, researching and translating activities. The study suggests that informed programmes on traditional norms by older Igbo women organisations should be instituted to ensure the continuity of legendary concepts in contemporary society and also to secure peaceful co-existence and emotional safety for the contemporary Igbo wife.

Introduction

Lexemes of language convey traditional interpretations of a belief system. It evokes semantic meanings in denotative as well as some contextual situations as orchestrated by the dynamic nature of the social use of language. In African societies, lexemes are critical tools for representing the unique traditional knowledge and worldview of a people. In other words, understanding the lexemes of the language is a way to understanding their belief system. It is possible to argue that recent global transformation distorts such worldviews and imposes new lexemes on certain concepts, yet the veracity of the Igbo history, life and culture still secures and transmits a huge amount of their cultural beliefs and values through their lexemes. An instance can be found in a lexeme such as *nwunye*. *Nwunye* is an Igbo lexeme used to denote wife and contextually identify a personality. One becomes *nwunye* to a man, a woman or a community only when the customary rites have been met by the intending partner or son of a deceased live-in-lover. Thereafter *nwunye* becomes the legally entitled bearer of the man's name. However, *nwunye* earns herself the title 'centre of gravity' through her astute roles as a home builder, care giver and house keeper (Uwakwe, 2021).

Apparently, these roles traditionally characterize *nwunye* personality as subservient, acquiescent and 'naivety'. The dialectal variants of *nwunye m*: *nwaanyi m* (child bearing is possible with me), *nnye m* (my given); *nyee m*, (given to me); *mmie m* (my depth/level) among others seems to validate these characteristics. A clear fact inferred from this claim is that the famed modesty of *nwunye* personality is culturally strengthened by her man. Within the Igbo society,

nwunye dares not raise a voice in the presence of his man without permission. Her social underpinnings become centred or shaped by tradition and her husband's level of exposure in life. From a practical point of view therefore, it could be argued that the social construct 'women are inferior to men is obsolete' (Ahamefule, 2019), seems to be paradoxical within the traditional Igbo culture. Again, it is no longer news that in addition to the domestic roles assigned to *nwunye* by nature, recent global socio-economic conditions have compelled her to take up financial roles to complement her man; yet some traditional rites of inheritance elude her. Worse of such denials comes when there is no male child commandeering from her *usekwu* otherwise known as kitchen.

Notwithstanding this unfair practice meted out on her personality by society, she strives to be an outstanding agent of development and empowerment to improve this same society (steady, 2007). These efforts avail some *nwunye* personalities the opportunity to gain financial independence. However, in some situations, they arrogate powers to themselves within the home and even beyond. Among her contemporaries, relatives and friends, a disposition of individualism, threat to authority and a contextual shift in the meaning of *nwunye* personality is inferred; while hushing the feminism ideology. Consequently, *nwunye*'s personality becomes psychologically threatened. Her classy niche carved out of hard work becomes wrecked and antagonism and frustration set in. Does this imply an unappreciative society or a misinterpreted social status? In this paper, we attempt to appropriately delineate *nwunye* personality to sensitize young Igbo women in the contemporary Igbo world. The *nwunye* personality in traditional and contemporary Igbo society as x-rayed was made using a socio-lexicological inquiry. The concept of feminism is also discussed to give a purview of some misinterpreted facts. Being a study in the area of sociolinguistics, such a study provides a platform for a functional effect of the cognitive content of all semantic and non-semantic factors in a lexis-oriented sociolinguistics. Viz-a-viz polemical lexicographic information could be avoided in the production of a comprehensive Igbo monolingual dictionary for second language learners, researchers and translators. The study is in four parts. Having introduced the work, a review of related literature is made. This is followed by the methodological approach, data presentation and analysis then conclusion and recommendation.

Misinterpreting the *Nwunye* Personality

Prior to the advent of colonisation, the traditional Igbo society believed that being a vessel for procreation, *nwunye* personality carries with her the responsibility to perpetuate the customs, values and belief of the land through domestic surveillance. It assumes a subservient nature in some warring situations to ensure peace within the communities. Such roles naturally assigned females to seem to have been misinterpreted as weakness. Some scholars such as Egboh (1974) and Amaefule (2019) claim that the traditional Igbo society showed a dominance of males over females in everything (as can be observed even in order of address involving the two - *nwoke na nwaanyi*, *di na nwunye* etc), they however failed to take cognizance of the fact that the acclaimed preference/dominance of males over females was largely due to domestic surveillance roles played by females in families. As such, disinheriting them was not in any way a sign of subjugation but rather in accordance with the belief that *nwanyị bụ ama onye ọzọ*. By implication, these surveillance roles will be extended to other men's homes when they become wives. On the other hand, it was necessary to empower the males with the family's inheritance to sustain forthcoming generations since the males immortalise lineages thus, the need to share the ancestral inheritance among the males. Being a community that abhors laziness, empowering the males with properties was a way to encourage and support their sons to ensure that the younger generations can trace their origin. Accentuating this involves not allowing daughters to transfer their father's wealth to another man as this may impoverish her father's home.

Today however, this idea seems to have been modified. The *nwaanyi bụ ife* mentality has

paved way for even fathers to prepare their daughters to face a more serious world beyond domestic chores. Yet, sharing the family's inheritance with their male siblings remains elusive. This is also evident today in some traditional rituals such as breaking of kola nut, where males even much younger than their female siblings are still called upon to perform rituals preceding such activities in their presence. Perhaps this belief system has not been appropriately communicated to younger generations and as such a misinterpretation of various concepts abound; hence the *nwunye* personality for feminism ideology.

The Concept of feminism

A plethora of literature on the discourse of feminism exists. Although it is not possible to present all perspectives of feminism in details in this paper, some necessary aspects will be discussed. The concept of feminism can be traced to the nineteenth and twentieth century's women's movement which took place in the United Kingdom and the United States of America to secure women's political, economic and cultural rights (Delmar, 2018). As an ideology, feminism was championed by American women to secure their political, economic and cultural rights. Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker propagated feminism and noted that feminism can be described in three waves (Jenkins, Narayanswamy & Sweetman, 2019). The first wave which was around 1920 took place in the United Kingdom and the United States. It was directed to achieving women's franchise between the nineteenth and twentieth century's. This first wave granted women equal rights in the ownership of property, the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. In other words, the first wave of feminism ideology basically sought for the equal rights with men to own properties and children. It however failed to recognise that mating was also a right basically predetermined by the x and y chromosomes.

During the second wave, feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and reflecting sexist power structures (Delmar, 2018). Such ideas motivated Voltaireine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger between the 1960's and 1980's, to actively clamour for legal and social rights for women. Traditionally, these movements infringe on sociocultural rights of the black and needed some modifications to be adopted among the blacks. Such modifications Madunagu (2008) points out was observed within the third wave as the organisation of Women in Nigeria (WIN) brought Feminism ideology to Nigeria in 1983. Subsequently, scholarly contributions commenced a comprehensive construct that reflected various cultural views and capable of uniting women across borders (Orjinta, 2013). In support of the above view, Steady (2007) and Ogunyemi (1996) proposed that an African version of Feminism theory must be founded on the traditional principles based on humanistic capability of giving women independence and complementary roles. Acholonu's (1995) motherism and Ezeigbo's (2012) snail sense feminism theories emerged in cognizance of the humanistic capabilities to advocate the dialogic approach to achieving independence by African women. Based on these divergent contributions on feminism, one could assert that the ideology behind the feminist movement prioritises the self actualisation of the full potentials of women promotes equal rights with the men and liberates women from subjugation.

However, Madunagu (2008) observes that despite the modifications in the feminism ideological movement, some women whose views presume equality with men find it very awkward to still accept that in Igbo land, women cannot initiate respective choices on pregnancy (the right to have children on their own) as well as divorce proceedings and "no fault" divorce. His observation overtly states that in a patriarchal-driven society, some traditional viewpoints especially on female individualism are inexplicable and may never be outrightly erased. Although

there are no documented articles on *nwunye* from a sociolexicological interpretations to the best of the researcher's knowledge, available records on related studies such as Onukawa (1997) and Okafor (1998) deal with anthropo-linguistic study of *chi* in relation to *di* as a monosyllabic nominal and morph syntactic analysis of *di* thus, the significance of the present study.

A sociolexicological Methodology

Although sociolinguistics studies the use of language in society, such a study may not be veritable without the understanding of the semantic nature of words. Based on this understanding the nature of lexemes becomes paramount. It is in the light of this that one x-rays the aspects of lexicology as an aspect of linguistics which deals with the study of lexemes of languages. As scholarly disciplines, the study of lexemes gives insight to the knowledge of the root, organisation, content and pronunciation of lexical items. However, while lexicology studies the mental lexicon of a language (vocabulary of a speaker), sociolinguistics entrenches that social processes and lexical information can be operationalised within the semantic levels. In an attempt to discourse some cultural perspectives to the interpretation of lexemes, a lexis-oriented sociolinguistic approach applies. Having established that less attention has been given to the study of the lexicon in sociolinguistics (Robinson, 2012), scholarly contributions on lexical variations abound (Ruetter 2012; McColl-Millar et al. 2014; Wieling et al. 2014).

Yet without a perspective on the lexicon, presenting a holistic account of a sociolinguistic study may not be exhaustive. This avails the researcher the opportunity to bring in a social dimension to this study of lexeme. Thus the term sociolexicological approach was adopted. Such study borders on explicating the thrust of lexical units in different social, stylistics, semantic structure and content interpretation of speech communities. Correlating elements with social contextual beliefs provide a veritable platform and espouses the interrelatedness between the functional effect of the cognitive content of all semantic and non-semantic factors. The full-fledged sociolexicological theory was postulated by Grondelaers and Geeraerts (1994) in their study towards a pragmatic model of cognitive onomasiology. This study therefore serves as a re-orientation of the relationship between sociolinguistics, lexicology and lexicography to unveil fundamental interactions of lexis oriented sociolinguistics.

Data presentation and analysis

Based on the above, the sociolexicological study examines the use of *nwunye* in various socially conditioned contexts, and a discrete analysis of the structure, meaning and usage of the lexeme *nwunye*, in the Igbo socio cultural context as shown below.

S / n	Lexeme1 (L1)	Lexeme 2 (L2)	Lexical structure/ category	Nominal/phonologically conditioned	Contextual/ stylistic feature	Socially conditioned context
1	Nwu (shine) verb	Nye (give) verb	$L^1 + L^2$ = N	Nwu (shine) + nye (give) = <i>nwunye</i>	Illumination	illuminating gift
2	Nwi (capture) verb	Nye (give) verb	$L^1 + L^2$ = L	Nwi (capture) + nye(give) = <i>nwinye</i> (Ikwerre)	Captured	gifted yield from a negotiation
3	Wu (pour) verb	Nye (give)	$L^1 + L^2$	Wu (pour) + nye (give)	Fludity	Fluid gift

		verb	= L	=wunye (akwete)		
--	--	------	-----	--------------------	--	--

From the analysis above, *nwunye* is a disyllabic nominal comprising *nwúli* /wu and *nye* asphonologically conditioned. The lexical items *nwu* and *nye* fundamentally put have the extra contextual factors and semantic capacity to derive meaning relations with each other and alone (Saaed, 2007). From synchronic and diachronic points of view, the lexeme *nwunye* denotatively and connotatively give same interpretation in every context thereby, preserving social and cultural oriented values in any traditional context. Each socially conditioned aspect accounts for both the diachronic and synchronic extra-linguistic content of linguistic variants (Eckert 2008) imbued in social and semantic meanings. Consequently, the correlative transfer of knowledge of *nwunye* avails one the opportunity to understand accurately the indepth meaning of the lexeme. Therefore, the sociolexicological analyses of the above imply understanding a linguistic contextual interpretation which involves having common knowledge of the correct and contextual usage of *nwunye* as the lexeme. This approach to lexemes makes it possible to avoid polemical lexicographic information in dictionaries (Skinner 2012).

Sociocultural Implication

Since language carries the culture of a people (Nwankwo, 2021), some Igbo cultural expressions as *dị bu ugwu nwanyị* (husband is the respect of woman), *okpueze nwanyị bu di nwe ya* (crown of woman is her husband), *mma nwanyị bu di ya* (woman's beauty is her husband) *dị bu ndidi* (husband is patience), *kpazie agwa, ma i lụta ezi di* (conduct yourself well if you marry a good husband,) *a jucha onye mụrụ, a jwazie onye na-alu* (after birth, comes marriage); *ogoli kpazie agwa oma o biri* (conduct yourself well to remain married) among others provide diachronic evidence that along the trajectory of the growth, in the life of a female child, these expressions permeate her subconscious mind and become very crucial and instructive tools to moulding her in preparation for womanhood. It can be argued here that fundamentally, the lexeme *nwunye* transmits a psychological feature of being dominated within the Igbo social context. This conforms to Lyons (1968:432) assertion that, "... the lexical distinction drawn by each language will tend to reflect culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language operates."

Discussion

Although, the contemporary Igbo society seems to have lost some of these cultural vestiges to modernity, these traditional psychological dispositions of *nwunye* in a contemporary Igbo society continues to engender a certain level of mental discomfort for some Igbo women who attempt individualistic forms of living. In line with Lyons claim, the sociolexicological analysis of the components of *nwunye* above therefore, shows that *nwunye* refers to a gifted yield from a negotiation, fluid in character, yet has the capacity to illuminate another's life.

In other words, this sociolexicological analysis points to the fact that there is a relationship between lexemes (*nwunye*) and cultural transmission of characteristic social behaviour and identity (Durkin 2012; Wierzbicka 2012).

From a related cultural perspective, 'di' connotes superlative qualities of one who takes the lead as illustrated in the following instances

Di + mgba = dimgba ----- champion of all wrestling champions

Di +ji = diji ----- best of all the best yam farmers

Di + oḡu = diḡu ----- champion among best fighters

Di + mkpa = dimkpa ----- highly knowledgeable among experts , there seems to be the

consensus of opinion by Igbo people that the lexeme 'di' (husband) connotes 'best' available at the time; who invariably becomes the woman's champion. Accordingly, *nwunye* is presumed to operate under the husband; her frontier. It further implies that the husband operates at the frontiers of the world of *nwunye*; her aspirations, and attainments

As the frontier, the champion must kinetize its constant growth and expansion and champions the horizons of the wife, along a trajectory of growth, which is the other side to the *nwunye*'s place as among others, bearing children, the ultimate proof of growth in Igbo culture. From the above, the Igbo sociocultural world view delineates *nwunye* personality as always under her husband and never individualistic in nature. This inter-relates these cultural beliefs with the socially conditioned contexts. Consequently, the *nwunye* personality insisting on the individualistic system is perceived as being combative (Nnaemeka, 2004) against her ancestry. Such may cost her peaceful co-existence which may never be achieved as well as traditional privileges accorded her within the Igbo cultural system.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to delineate the place of *nwunye* as a personality in contemporary Igbo society. It accounts for the diverse semantic and cultural connotations of the lexeme *nwunye* by recovering the diachronic and synchronic components based on a sociolexicological approach. This study provides componential evidence that though a woman illuminates the home, tradition does not permit her to operate an individualistic system of existence irrespective of her social status.

Recommendation

From the sociolinguistic point of view, lexis oriented approach to language study should be encouraged among scholars to enable rich documentation of cultural world views hidden in cultural lexemes. This will preserve a repository of cultural knowledge that can be transmitted to next generations of the Igbo people. Lexicographers are encouraged to embark on the production of Igbo monolingual dictionaries. This will be a sure way to avoid some misrepresented information on some traditional constructs. Although, it is imperative to generate meaningful resource capacity among women to in the effort to bridge developmental issues; foreign world views must not be imposed on traditional systems. Such impoverishes the cultural knowledge systems in 'new worlds'. Although there are efforts to influence control of power, resources and champion 'generation equality' that can remove bottlenecks on the wheel of a *nwunye*'s progress such as economic justice and rights, gender-based violence, climate justice and technology and innovation, *nwunye* should always remember her customary values of obedience principles. We therefore propose that women or women's groups concerned with development issues should endeavour to formulate programmes that would lead to a better understanding of their personality as *nwunye* while improving society.

References

- Acholonu, C. (1995). Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism in Environmental Development series. Vol.3. Owerri
- Amaefula, R.C. (2019). Gendered performance, fluid identities and protest in Tess Onwueme's then she said it. Journal of language and cultural Education:7(1) Doi:10.2479/jolace-2019 0008
- Delmar, R. (2018) What is feminism in Theorizing feminism;parallel trends in the humanities and social sciences edited by Anne C.Herrmann &Abigail J. Stewart Routledge pp5-28 2nd edition

- Durkin, P. (2012). Variation in the lexicon: the ‘Cinderella’ of sociolinguistics? *English Today* 28 (4), 3—9.
- Eckert, P. (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12 (4), 453—76.
- Egboh, E.O. (1974) The place of women in the Igbo society of south-eastern, Nigeria: from earliest time to present Civilizations. 24(4) pp 305-316; *Institute desociologie de l’universite de Bruxelles*
- Ezeigbo, A.T. (2012) *Snail-sense feminism: building on an indigenous model*. Monograph series 17 University of Lagos
- Geeraerts, Dirk. Grondelaers, Stefan. & Bakema, Peter. 1994. *The Structure of Lexical Variation: Meaning, Naming, and Context*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Jenkins Katy, Narayanaswamy Lata& Sweetman Caroline (2019) Introduction: Feminist values in research vol. 27 pp 415-425 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1682311> online
- Lyons, J (1968). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Madunagu, B.E (2008). The Nigerian feminist movement: lessons from women in Nigeria, WIN. *Review of African Political economy*, Taylor and Francis. *Journals*, 35(118) Pp 666-673 doi 10.1080/0305624802574136
- Nnaemaka, O (2004) negro-feminism: Theorizing, practising and pruning Africa’s way in SIGNS: *Journal of women in Culture and society*, 29(2), 359-385. Winter.
- Nwankwo, O. A. (2021) Assessment of knowledge of basic Igbo vocabulary among children: Implications for intergenerational cultural transmission among the Igbo .*Uturu Journal of Languages and Linguistics (UJOLL)*, 1(1); 1-11 (www.ujolls.com)
- Onukawa, M. C (1997). An anthropolinguistic study of the Igbo nominal -Chi: *journal of popular culture in Africa* .2(2) 31-46 calabar
- Ogunyemi, C.O *Africa Wo/Man palava: The Nigerian novel by women*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press
- Orjinta, A. I (2013). *Womanism as a method of literary text interpretation: A study of emergent women’s images under religious structures in selected works of Heinrich Böll*. University of Nigeria Press Ltd. Nsukka, Nigeria
- Robinson, Justyna A. (2012). A gay paper: why should sociolinguistics bother with semantics? *English Today*, 28 (4), 38—54.
- Saeed, D.I. (2007). *Semantics*. London: Blackwell
- Skinner, D. (2012). *The story of Ain’t: America, its Language and the Most Controversial Dictionary Ever Published*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Steady, F. C(1987) *African feminism: A worldwide perspective* in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon harley and Andrea Benton Rushing(eds) .*women in Africa and the African Diaspora*. Washington, D,C Howard University press 3-24
- Udoette, M. (2019) the dynamics of female bonding and liberation in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols’ International Journal of language.Literature and Gender studies (LALIGENS)*, BahirDar-Ethiopia Vol 8(1) pp 65-72
- Uwakwe, P. A (2021) Re-envisioning the Igbo womanbeing in the 21st century. A paper presented at the 10th Annual International Igbo conference in partnership with SOAS