

“*Olaniyi*” in Igbo and Yoruba: A Semantic Interpretation

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Abstract

The word ‘*Olaniyi*’ which has the same pronunciation in both Igbo and Yoruba has appeared in media several times. To many, the meaning in Igbo is the opposite of what it means in Yoruba. This paper aims to expose the points of view of both Igbo and Yoruba that brought about the difference in semantic interpretations. It is also to expose the similarities and differences in the characters of the people referred to as *Olaniyi* in both in both Yoruba and Igbo linguistic communities. We also proved that it is the same behavior with minor differences that brought about the different semantic interpretations among the Igbo and Yoruba. We also proved that the same behavior that brought about the Yoruba interpretation brought the one of the Igbo. Again, the *Olaniyi* in Igbo is the same as the ‘*Olaniyi*’ of the Yoruba linguistic community. In this research, we made use of observation and interview methods in gathering our data.

Keywords: *Olaniyi*, Semantics, Interpretation, Culture, Behaviour

Introduction

Language is generally accepted to be a means of communication. Although, many attempts have been made to define language but all end up describing language. However, like life, language is what everyone knows but very difficult to bring out a complete definition of what language is. All attempts added to the fact that language is a means of communication. Syal and Jindal (2016:3) compared the attempt to define language to that of defining life. To him, the only thing one can do is to describe not to define. Kobins (1985) cited in Syal and Jindal (2016:3) define language as a ‘symbol system based on a pure or arbitrary convention... infinitely extendable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers. Considering the above definition, language is a symbol system any language that has a written system has some arbitrary symbols selected for its sounds. The symbol selection is just by convention. By convention because there is no resemblance of the sounds to what they represent. Also, Syal and Jindal's (2016:4) writing on this stated that the formation of words is only an arbitrary convention that makes parts of a system. These symbols are combined based on convention to form meaningful words. The symbols are not always the same in all languages but some are similar to some extent. For the sound /sh/ in Igbo, Yoruba uses /Ṣ/. For the sound /q/ in English, Igbo uses /kw/ while some sounds are missing in some languages. Take for example, Igbo has /z/ while it does not exist in Yoruba. However, every language is complete as long as it interprets the needs of the owners. Sapin in Yul-Ifode (2001:2) explained language as “purely human and non-instructive method of communicating ideas, feeling, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”. To him, “language is the institution whereby human beings communicate ideas, feelings, emotions and desires as well as interest with each other by means by habitually oral, auditory and arbitrary symbols.”

Language

Language, although common to the hearing of everyone and sometimes known by everyone, is difficult to define. Lyons (2009:3) compared it to life. To him, defining life is not easy just like defining the word language. Many of the definitions of language are mainly describing it and stating the characteristics just like describing the characteristics of life. Sapir (1921:8) cited Lyon (2009:3) described language as being purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntary produced symbol. Lyon (2009:3) writing of the above definition stated that this did not cover some metaphorical sense of language for example, body language which makes use of gesture, postures eye-gaze and so on. No matter the definitions made by individual writers, they all boil down to mean that language, among other things is a means of communication.

Cook (1991:10) described language as life wire of every society. Language is what everyone uses. Whenever we speak of language, we also have in mind that here human speakers of that language. A language without human speaker or speakers is death. This proves really that language is for human and for animals. Eze (2019:2) described language as being creative. He stated that this can be done through affixation, coinage, compounding, reduplication, acronyms and so on. Language is culture bound. Language and culture go together. There is no society without language neither is there no language without speakers. According to Anayanwu (2000:10), 'without language, there will be no society'. Culture is the way people live their lives which reflects in their language. Language is an instrument of cultural interpretation. Nwadike (1998:20) stated, 'language is the key to the heart of the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, things will go on well. Language is the most enduring artifact of culture. People trace their history through their language. According to Eze (2019:12), 'one that speaks the same or similar language may likely be a relation. Since similar languages may not exactly be the same.' Elugbe (1990:12) states, "Language changes in patterned way overtime and space. One language begets dialects in space and then time makes the divergent that they become separate languages. In this way, one original language can become hundreds."

Considering Igbo and Yoruba languages of both southern part of Nigeria, the similarities are so many that they unfold continuously. In the chief lecturer inaugural lecture presented by Eze Cyprian, he listed a lot of similar words in Igbo and Yoruba, yet a lot still unfold. Some words and sentences which are believed belong to a particular language is also used by the other having the similar meaning. Take for instance, a word like 'Oluwa' meaning God in Yoruba also means God in Igbo yet many of the Igbo people have not paid attention to that. In Igbo for example, 'Olu uwa' means the voice of the world. One will then ask, who speaks for the world? No human being can speak for the whole world except God. This means that 'Oluwa' as a noun is God both in Igbo and Yoruba.

Semantics

Whenever the word semantics comes to mind, what it signifies is meaning. Therefore, semantic study is the study of meaning. Lyons (2009:136) stated that semantics is the study of meaning. For the purpose of this research, semantics is meaning while the study of semantics is the study of meaning. Chimaobi and Ugonna (2021:98) stated that the theory of semantics was formalized by Triar in (1930) as an approach to meaning which is hinged on understanding that words that have correlate meanings can be grouped under a larger conceptual field or domain. Yule (1996:114) writing more on the theory of semantics, the concepts are those basic essentials components of meaning which are conveyed by literary use of words.

Brinton (2000), as cited in Emezue (2015:94), referred to semantics as hyponyms semantics is an aspect of linguistics that refers to meaning. Meaning of any word in any language depends on the owners of the language. For example, in Igbo, the word 'aja' means sand while in Yoruba the same word 'aja' means dog. Again, *ori* means thief in Igbo while in Yoruba, *ori* means head. This is to say that the meaning depends on the speaker. Whatever people agree to mean a particular thing or action in their language becomes what it is called in their linguistic community.

Even within the same language meaning can vary. Meaning of a word can vary across individual speakers even within the same dialect or language. The word 'anya' in Igbo has different meanings to some Igbo people. The most popular meaning is eye while same take is greeting.

Statement of the Problem

Igbo language is the language of the Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria while Yoruba language is the language of the Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria. They live together especially in major cities like Lagos and Abuja. The two languages have a lot of similarities and some differences. Some words in each other's language are misinterpreted from the perspective of the speaker. A word *Olaniyi* which exists in both Igbo and Yoruba is an example of such words which this research sets out to analyze and clear the misinterpretation of the word. The problem of this research therefore poses the following questions:

Objective of the Research

The objective of this research is to analyze the semantic implication of the word *Olaniyi* as is seen by the Yoruba and the Igbo speakers. It is the aim of the paper to clear the confusion that exists in the word *Olaniyi* which exists in both Igbo and Yoruba.

Methodology

The methodology applied in collecting data for this research are interview method and consulting of existing literatures, books from libraries, Journal articles and internet sources are used. Some Yoruba lecturers in Lagos State University of Education were consulted and information gathered were applied. The researcher is Igbo native speaker and also a lecturer in Igbo language. He also listened to some Igbo people discussing on the topic 'Olaniyi.' All the above methods were used for data collection in this research.

Language and Culture

The study of a language is impossible without the culture of the people. The two are inseparable partners and they go together. This is because it is the people's language that is used to interpret their culture. At the same time, the people's culture and behavior are embedded in their language. No language no exhibition of culture. To fully understand a given culture, one must accordingly master its language. It is through language that one possibly participates in and experiences the culture of the people. Language is a very important part of culture. None can exist without the other. Studying a people's language goes along with studying their culture. Language provides an index of the culture of the owner, that is the culture of the people with which it is most intimately associated. Human language, as we have seen from earlier definitions, is a system and just a system but unique system of communication in many ways.

Language, as stated earlier, interprets culture. Whatever does not exist in a linguistic community does not have a name in that language. Things coming from another linguistic

community to another community are either given a name from the existing words in that new environment or the name the owners gave it borrowed. A society cannot exist without communication and language is a means of communication. In other words, no language no society. Language is a system of human expression by signs or words. Words are joined together to form sentences. It is the major means of expressing what is in human mind. Language performs the following functions which are: communication, for identity and as an instrument of thought.

The Original Language

The First language that people were speaking at Babel before the multiplication of language is yet to be discovered. The search for the original language that was used by everyone when the whole world was together is still on. In spite of all the attempts made by many researchers to find out this language, no satisfactory discovery has been made. According to Yule (1999:8), an Egyptian Pharaoh named Psammetichus tried an experiment with two new born infants around 600BC. After two years in the company of goats and a mute shepherd, the children were reported to have spontaneously uttered not an Egyptian word but something reported to be the Phrygian word 'bekos', meaning 'bread'. The Pharaoh concluded that Phrygian must be the original language. But there is possibility that the children must have picked that sound from the goats.

Also, James IV of Scotland carried out similar experiment around AD.1500 and the children were reported to have spoken Hebrew. All other experiments like that of Fredrick II, Mughal Emperor Akbar showed that children raised in isolation ended up speaking no language at all. Some maintain that human language came from natural sound. While it is true that quite a number of words in any language are onomatopoeic (echoing natural sound), for example in Igbo, we have *gbamgbam* meaning zinc roofing sheet. It is hard to believe that all words are produced through that. Virtually every religion has a story of how language started.

The Beginning of Language Diversity

Human Languages differ in one way or the other unlike animal communication. A word having the same pronunciation in two languages may have different meaning in the languages. Languages use various tones. Some languages have some lexical or some phonological similarities with another. It is a popular belief and the belief of every religion that every human came from the same source. Christian Bible and all other religious teachings: written or not written teach that all human came from the same God, the creator. The Christian Bible tells us that language diversity started at Babel. This was when human being took the decision that was against the will of God. According to the Bible account, God gave them many languages to discomfit their evil plan.

Igbo and Yoruba Phonological and Lexical Similarities

Igbo language and Yoruba language have a lot of similarities syntactically and semantically. Even the symbols have a lot of similarities. However, one cannot argue that there are not minor differences in culture and semantic implication of some words and sentences that sound alike. This will be seen as we go further. Here are some words that have similar pronunciation and similar meanings will be enumerated here.

| Igbo | Yoruba | English |
|----------------|--------------|----------------------------|
| <i>ntị</i> | <i>eti</i> | ear |
| <i>onu</i> | <i>enu</i> | mouth |
| <i>ododo</i> | <i>ododo</i> | flower |
| <i>okwute</i> | <i>okuta</i> | stone |
| <i>ogba</i> | <i>ogba</i> | fence |
| <i>ogo</i> | <i>ogo</i> | Height/hight |
| <i>olu uwa</i> | <i>oluwa</i> | God/the voice of the world |

***Olaniyi* and Its Likes**

In spite of these similarities and many others not stated here, we still have words, sentences that look alike but have different meanings based on culture. Some like the noun *Olaniyi* have the same action that brings it but the action sometimes interpreted in different ways based on the point of view.

Olaniyi which is the subject of discussion will be explained here in both Igbo and Yoruba point of view.

***Olaniyi* in Yoruba**

In Yoruba culture and language, *Olaniyi* is a highly honored and respected name. In fact, it is a praise name. It means in Yoruba ‘wealth has honour.’ What will bring about giving someone this type of name must have to do with the demonstration of wealth. It has to do with spending money.

In spending money like throwing a party or buying expensive cars and other thing money can do can have different interpretations by different people. While some will respect the person that spends, some can see it as a waste of hard-earned income. Interpretation of one action depends on another’s point of view.

A casual look at the Yoruba culture, one can conclude that party throwing like marriage ceremony, burial ceremony, and freedom from apprenticeship and many others are things cherished. In other words, anyone who can spend much in such parties can be praised and honored in the society. Therefore, a word like *Olaniyi* if it is used to refer to that person, is a praise name. This means that this person is praised and respected for his demonstration of wealth.

Although the person described above is praised and honored, this does not mean the same person’s action of spending is approved by everyone. Some may see this as a waste of money, wealth and precious time. Interpretation of one’s action depends on one’s point of view.

One person can work for five years just to buy a car for leisure. To this person that is his need and that means success in his own interpretation. At the same time, the other person sees the action as foolishness and waste of time and precious resources. More explanation of this will be seen as we further on *Olaniyi* among the Igbo.

***Olaniyi* in Igbo**

Olaniyi in Igbo is a noun formed from a complete sentence. *O la n’iyi* literally means, ‘it goes to the river’. Satirically, this full sentence is formed in a word to describe a foolish, wasteful action of a person. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, the name *Olaniyi* means a useless person, a waster and one who spends foolishly and wastes money in useless things. *Olaniyi* is an abusive word against whomever it is referred to.

For example: *Uche bu Olaniyi* meaning Uche is a useless person

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <i>O bu Olaniyi</i> | - | He is useless |
| <i>I bu Olaniyi</i> | - | You are useless |
| <i>Nwa ahụ bu Olaniyi</i> | - | That child is useless |
| <i>O na-ebi ndu Olaniyi</i> | - | He lives a wasteful life |

Characters of *Olaniyi* among the Igbo

An *Olaniyi* among the Igbo can spend all his income on harlot and drinking. An *Olaniyi* can throw parties with all his life earning and spread money lavishly to anything believes is important to him or her. An *Olaniyi* believes in earn and squanders all on whatever pleases him not minding what people say. Spending is the major target of *Olaniyi*. He may be a giver, a drunkard, a womanizer, a habitual traveler, one that believes in riding exotic cars and so on. The belief of *Olaniyi* is get and spend all. He spends on whatever pleases him or her in spite whatever people will say. He or she spends and values things based on his or her own point of view.

In Igbo *o la* means he/she goes, *na iyi* means in the river. In forming a noun the ‘a’ in ‘na’ elides. That is, it remains silent it becomes *Olaniyi*, which literarily means whatever the person has goes to the river, which means all are wasted. That is why a person who spends foolishly in the interpretation of the viewer is described as *Olaniyi* in Igbo meaning waster or useless person. Some say they are good for nothing. An *Olaniyi* can sell all his or her inheritance and use the money for party, drink, womanize or just squander. An *Olaniyi* among the Igbos does not believe in investment. He or she believes in enjoying life for tomorrow is unknown. He does not keep for tomorrow.

Although *Olaniyi* among the Igbo is interpreted as a foolish person. One cannot rule out the fact that the action of one described as an *Olaniyi* by some people are not praised, hailed or welcomed by people who are his own friends even among the Igbos. To this person described as an *Olaniyi* by the other set of people is not *Olaniyi*. To them, this person is a giver, a philanthropist and a man of the people. Among those who share the same idea with him, he is a highly honored person, respected and valued among his friends. To them, this person has wealth, his wealth gives honor.

Comparison in the Meaning of *Olaniyi* in Igbo and Yoruba Cultures

Here, the *Olaniyi* of the Igbo and Yoruba will be compared.

| Igbo <i>Olaniyi</i> | Yoruba <i>Olaniyi</i> |
|---|--|
| Useless person | Highly honored person |
| Spends foolishly | Spends as a wealthy person |
| Spends everything he has | Spends buoyantly |
| Hated by many | Honored by many |
| Loved by a few | Hated by a few |
| Scorned by many | Welcomed by many |
| Has to do with wealth spending | Has to do with wealth spending |
| Believes in spending and demonstration wealth | Believes in spending and demonstrating of wealth |
| Popular in his community | Popular in his community |

1. What are the similarities in the meaning of *Olaniyi* in Igbo and Yoruba?
2. What are the differences in the meaning of *Olaniyi* in both Igbo and Yoruba?

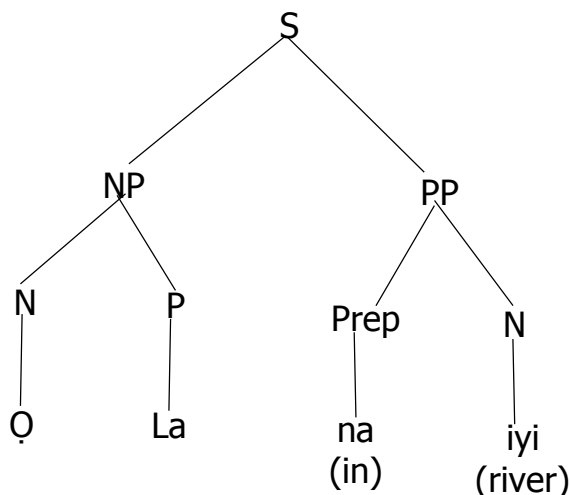


Figure 1.1: Diagram representation of *Olaniyi*

'a' in 'na' elides *iyi* (river) in forming a noun from the sentence *O la n'iyi*

It becomes *Olaniyi*, meaning a waster or a useless person.

Pronunciation and Segmental Similarity of *Olaniyi* in Igbo and Yoruba

The pronunciation of *Olaniyi* in Igbo and Yoruba are the same. Segmentally, the spellings are the same. Both *Olaniyi* in Igbo and Yoruba are sentences joined form words. That is to say *Olaniyi* in Igbo is a full sentence formed into a word to become just a noun. The same thing applies to *Olaniyi* in Yoruba. Semantically, they have slight similarity and slight differences as seen earlier.

Contribution to Knowledge

Before now, the Igbo in the western part of Nigeria especially, who hears the name *Olaniyi* laugh knowing what it is in Igbo. From the related characters of the person referred to as *olaniyi* in both Igbo and Yoruba, as seen in the similarities listed above, this research has opened the eyes of everyone to see that they have some similarities in the meaning with the people they take high esteem as philanthropist or 'Omeroha' in Igbo. Again, it made us see that even the people referred to as *Olaniyi* among the Igbo are not useless to everybody. They are taken in high esteem by some people with different point of view. Any of the interpretations is based on the point of view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, people describe actions, behavior and things based on their point of view. No matter the similarities in language and culture of the Igbo and Yoruba, there are still some minor differences. In the case of *Olaniyi* which has similar segmental and pronunciation semantic interpretation are different in spite of slight resemblance in the behavior that leads to that word.

From the explanations given above, the *Olaniyi* of the Igbo and the *Olaniyi* of the Yoruba refers to human being having similar behavior interpreted differently by the Igbo and

Yoruba linguistic communities. Igbo and Yoruba have a lot of words similar to the other both in pronunciation, segmentally and semantically. However, there are still that sound the same way but having different meaning. *Olaniyi* of the Igbo and that of the Igbo are not completely opposed to the other as people believed before now. Every language is complete as long as it serves the language needs of the owners. No language is superior to the other.

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