Ambiguity in the Igbo Language

By

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Abstract

Ambiguity in language is a linguistic device which can hinder, hamper or blur effective communication. It results in multiple meaning or interpretation. This device can be used intentionally in a speech situation as a means of evasiveness, treading cautiously and as a means of avoiding undesirable consequences. This study is an attempt to examine the nature and sources of this device in Igbo. The work identified major types of ambiguity, their major causes and implications in Igbo were also highlighted. The objectives are to highlight the uses of the devices in communication and also to enable the users of the language detect them in communicative situations. In doing this, several materials on the topic were reviewed. The researcher also listened to Igbo speakers as they communicate in the society. The survey research method was adopted in collecting the data used in the work. All the data collected were analyzed and interpreted. The results led to the following findings: Ambiguity is a linguistic condition that is common in Igbo language as in other languages; it occurs as a result of using expressions that have more than one meaning. It is therefore necessary to bear the existence of this feature in mind in the process of language teaching.

Introduction

The use of certain words, phrases and sentences in communication often leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Hence, when one says something and the listener gives it another interpretation or finds it difficult to understand what the speaker meant, confusion has been created against the intent of the speaker. There are complications at times because the speaker may mean one thing and the hearer will understand a different thing all together. The researcher embarked on this study owing to the fact that certain Igbo words, phrases and sentences are ambiguous and their wrong use can hamper effective communication.

Ambiguity as a term is a linguistic condition which originated from both Latin and French in the early 16th century. The Latin word *ambiguus* means 'shifting' or 'doubtful' while the French word *ambigere* means 'go round', 'wonder about' and 'argue'. From the Latin word we can say that ambiguity is the quality of an expression having more than one possible meaning or interpretation. It seems to be a common phenomenon in language since words and sentences can have more than one meaning. Ambiguity in language arises when the users of a language consciously or unconsciously use in their speech and writing, expressions that lend themselves to double or multiple interpretations.

Ambiguity in language can arise in a variety of ways. Three main forms of ambiguity include: phonetic, structural and lexical ambiguity. Phonetic ambiguity results in speech from the phonetic structure of expressions since the acoustic unit of connected speech is the breath group, it may happen that two breath groups made up of different words become homonymous and so ambiguity occurs. Lexical ambiguity occurs when the lexical item may have two or more different meanings. For instance, the noun 'bank' in English may mean a financial institution or the side of a

river. Structurally, ambiguity occurs when a syntactic structure can be assigned to two or more phrase markers. For example "Visiting in-laws can be demanding". This sentence has at least two shades of meanings and is therefore ambiguous. It is not clear therefore whether it is demanding for someone to visit in-laws or whether in-laws who visit could be demanding.

Sometimes, ambiguity is used intentionally in communication to avoid a clear answer, tread cautiously and as a means of avoiding undesirable consequences. Occasionally, it is used ignorantly in speech situation or writing- no matter how it is used, it often times blurs effective communication. This linguistic device could be resolved in communication through context. No matter how a word is used, it is the context that determines its meaning. Content can also be used to dispel ambiguity. An adequate semantic theory must be able to predict where ambiguity is likely to arise in language and provide a means of differentiating the interpretations of the different structures of an expression by the grammar, where this is relevant. Context will cause one of the senses of an expression to be selected.

The study of ambiguity is of immense importance in semantics as one cannot achieve the mastery of a language without the knowledge this feature. For effective teaching of language, the existence of this linguistic feature should be borne in mind.

 The Green and Igwe tone marking convention is adopted. The high tone is left unmarked, the grave accent is used to mark the low while the macron is used to mark the down-stepped tone.

Background and Scope of the study

Semantics is the subfield of linguistics that studies the nature of the meaning of individual words and meaning of words grouped into phrases and sentences. It is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. Since meaning is part of language, semantics is that level of analysis (Palmer, 996:1). The above definitions point to semantics as a branch of linguistics that studies meanings. The study of linguistic units and their principles of combination would not be complete without an account of what these units mean, what they are used to talk about and communicate. (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harmish 2001:227).

Semantics is included as part of grammar like syntax and phonology. It is often said that grammar describes what fluent speakers know of their language- their linguistic competence. The description of meaning is a necessary part of the description of a speaker's linguistic knowledge (i.e. the grammar of his language must contain a component that describes what the speaker knows about how meaning is conveyed in his language. A language is often described as a conventional system of communication, a system of conveying messages.

Moreover, communication can be accomplished (in the system) only because words have certain meanings. Therefore to characterize this system-the language-it is necessary to describe these meanings. Hence, if a grammar describes a language, part of it must describe meaning and thus the grammar must content the component that is responsible for understanding the meaning of lexical items and sentences in the language.

Words, phrases and sentences are the levels of language that carry meaning. Sentences and phrases are made of words. The word is the basic unit of semantics. Perhaps the semantic property of words (and morphemes) in general is the property of being meaningful or meaningless.

This work is a descriptive study of ambiguity in Igbo language. It covers: phonetic ambiguity as a result of phonetic structure in speech, lexical ambiguity as a result of tone, structural ambiguity as a result of syntactic structure. The paper is arranged in five sections. The first section is the introduction, while the second consist of the background and scope of the study. The third section deals with literature review, section four handles types, causes and implications of ambiguity in Igbo. Findings were summarized and concluded in section five.

Review of Related Literature

The concept of ambiguity has been widely discussed in semantics. Hurford and Heasly (1995: 121) opine that "A word is ambiguous when it has more than one sense and a sentence is ambiguous if it has two (or more) paraphrases which are not in themselves paraphrases of each other". The above definition is pointing to the fact that ambiguity is a semantic property of words or sentences.

Crystal (1980:23), Franklin and Rodman (1974:167) share the same view about ambiguity. They see ambiguity as a word or a sentence which expresses more than one meaning.

In Langacker's (1967:123) view, "where a sentence can represent two or more different structures, we recognize it as being ambiguous, having alternative semantic interpretation". Langacker looks at ambiguity from the sentential level thereby ignoring the ambiguous nature of linguistic items (words and phrases).

Wilkinson (2006) also claims that "A situation where a word, term notation, sign, symbol, phrase, sentence or any other form used in communication is called ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way". The above view indicates that other forms of communication can also be ambiguous if they have more than one meaning.

Lobner (2002:39) opines that "An expression or an utterance is ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way". For him, the notion of ambiguity can be applied to all levels of meaning: expression meaning, utterance meaning and communicative meaning.

In his contribution, Cann (1993:8) says that

> *A sentence is said to be ambiguous whenever it can be associated with two or more different meanings. Ambiguity can arise in a sentence for a number of reasons: through the ascription of multiple meanings to a single word, through the assignment of different syntactic structures to a sentence, or through the use of certain expressions that may have different semantic scope.*

From the above, we discover that words can be ambiguous as well as sentences. Cann cites three reasons that can give rise to ambiguity; when words are given multiple meanings, when a sentence has different meanings and through the use of expressions that may have different semantic scope.

Ambiguity is a property of predicates which will affect sentences in such a way that those sentences in which the predicates are used will be capable of two quite different interpretations (Malmkjaer, 2002:450). Consider this example from Malmkjaer. 'James was looking carefully at the coach'. This sentence, according to Malmkhaer, has an interpretation under which 'James is observing a large vehicle and another in which 'he is observing a person'. He also observes that ambiguous words or phrases will be given one entry for each of their extension in a dictionary. For instance, there will typically be individual entry for each of the meanings of 'coach'. Mamkjaer agrees with what other scholars have said about ambiguity, but adds that there are ambiguous words or phrases that pose confusion as to whether they are ambiguous or not. Going by his explanation, the inherently ambiguous words or phrases are given one entry for each item, and then a specification of the various reading or interpretations.

Empirical Review

A number of scholars have contributed to the study ambiguity. In her project work, Maduike (2001) asserts that ambiguity occurs in everyday speech but the degree of usage varies from town to town and from dialect to dialect. Ambiguity according to Maduike appears in different forms depending on the particular language used. This is to say that all languages have one form of ambiguity or the other which is in line with what has been said earlier, that ambiguity occurs because expressions have meanings and an expression can have several meanings which are not related.

Uba,Okonkwo and Osingor (2004:15) have this to say;
In Igbo language, the cases of homonyms pose a lot of lexical ambiguity. this is because Igbo is a tone language, tone is a fundamental property of every syllable of each word. For homonyms to occur in Igbo language there must be the triplet criteria of phonic, graphic and tonemic correspondence.

In continuation, they opine that a tonal difference between two words can therefore cause the two word in question to be recognized as different words, irrespective of their graphic sameness. For instance, *akwa* (cry) and *akwa* (cloth) are immediately seen as different words on the basis of their tonal differences. While *akwa* (cry) has (HH) tone; *akwa* (cloth) has (HL) tone.

Lyons (1977:550) as quoted by Eme and Nkamigbo (2010:2) view homonyms as a "Type of lexical ambiguity whereby the different senses of a lexeme are not obviously related to each other in any way". Some of their illustrative examples of homonyms in tone languages are used here below.

Ibibio

tèm	'cause to sit',	'cook'
bèm	'precede',	'watch over'
timmé	'go back/return',	'again'

The examples confirm the fact that homonyms pose a lot of lexical ambiguity in languages. In line with the above, Hurford and Heasly (1983:123) as quoted in Omego (2006:7) see cases of homonyms as mere coincidence because the meanings are not in any way related.

Lyons (1981:43) also draws a distinction between two kinds of homonyms. They are homography and homophony. Homography according to Ejele (1977:124), is a term used to describe a situation where a set of lexemes have the same spelling but difference meanings and different pronunciations while homophony refers to lexemes that have the same pronunciation but different meanings.

Ambiguity in Igbo Language

Semantics is the field of linguistics that studies the nature of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. It is included as part of grammar just like syntax and phonology. Ambiguity is a semantic property of words and sentences. Words, phrases, and sentences are the units of language that carry meaning. Moreover, communication can be accomplished only because words have certain meanings.

In Igbo, tone is a means of distinguishing between words which otherwise would sound alike and thus become ambiguous. For instance the form *ọkụ* without tone could be interpreted as 'fire' *ọkụ,* 'wealth' *ọkụ*, and 'earthenware pot' *ọkụ*. Inspite of this, certain Igbo words are found to be ambiguous. In the sections that follow, the types and causes of ambiguity in Igbo will be examined.

Types of Ambiguity in Igbo
There are three main forms of ambiguity: Phonetic, Lexical and Structural ambiguity.

Phonetic Ambiguity

This form of ambiguity results in speech from the phonetic structure of the sentence, since the acoustic unit of connected speech is the breath group. It may happen that two breath groups made up of different words become homonymous and so ambiguity occurs. The commonest cause of homonymy according to Ullman, (1962:176) is converging sound development. Two or more lexemes which have different and unrelated meaning may coincide in the spoken language and sometimes in the written language, thus giving rise to homonymy in the language. This means that

homonymy can arise when two or more distinct lexemes coincidentally or accidentally have the same form or phonetic shape. Thus, phonetically homonymous words can be ambiguous.

In Igbo language, there are many lexemes that have different and unrelated meanings but whose surface forms are the same. For example, *okwa* which could be interpreted as

i.   Small wooden mortar and

ii.   Status/rank is a case of homonymy because the different meanings are not related. In other words, we have two different lexemes that accidentally have the same phonetic form and pronunciation. The observation confirms Hurford and Heasly's (1983:123) assertion that "cases of homonymy seem very definitely to be matters of mere accident or coincidence".

Some statements in Igbo are ambiguous in the spoken form as in the examples that follow:

Igbo Ambiguous Statements	Meanings
1. I rèrè n'èlu ?	i. 'Did you decay on top?
	ii. 'Did you sell wholesale?'
	iii. Did you sell upstairs?
2. Ihu gi dì kà ihu m mà	i. Your face looks familiar.
	ii. Your face looks like the face of a knife/matchet'.

When spoken, the ambiguity in (1) and (2) respectively rests on *rèrè,* which can mean 'decay' or 'sell' and *m mà* which can be interpreted as 'I know' or 'knife/matchet'.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is a type of ambiguity where meaning resides in the words themselves. In lexical ambiguity, lexemes express more than one meaning. Lexical items have more than one interpretation and can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. In Igbo language, lexical ambiguity emanates from homonymous and polysemous words. Homonymous words are words with the same form but whose meanings are different and cannot be connected. For example, the English word 'pen' which is a writing instrument can also mean an 'enclosure'.

Polysemous words on the other hand are words that have two or more related senses. Thus the English word 'screen' is polysemous since it is used variously of a fire screen, a cinema screen, a television screen and so on.

The form classes to be discussed in relation to these types are nouns. Polysemous and homonymous forms in Igbo are written the way they are pronounced. This is however not applicable in English. This is because Igbo Language is a tone language. Tone is the basic property of every syllable in each word. The main criterion in the study f homonyms and polysemy in Igbo is relatedness of meaning. We can distinguish both concepts in our present day language. There are several homonymous nouns in Igbo language that have the same form. This is to say that there is no obvious conceptual connection between their two or more meanings.

Generally, nouns start with a syllabic nasal or a vowel. Ambiguous nouns have the same syntactic distribution. Moreover, they can be disyllabic, trisyllabic or polysyllabic nouns. Here are some homonymous nouns in Igbo and their different meanings:

Table1: Homonyms and their different and unrelated meanings

S/No	Homonymous Lexemes (Nouns)	Glass (Different and Unrelated Meanings)
4	□kpù	'mass', 'lump', 'tumour', 'immature fruit', 'goal' (as in football)
5	ọdù	'tall', 'terminus', 'advice', 'shed'
6	ilu	'Bitterness', 'proverb'.

7	*Urù*	'flesh of (e.g. animal, fruit etc) 'profit'
8	*Àkwà*	'bed' 'bridge
9	*àgwà*	'character', conduct' behaviour', 'beans', 'colouration',
10	*ọkwa*	'status', 'position', 'small', wooden mortar'
11	*Ùtu*	'weevil'', 'levy'
12	*Mkpu*	'terminate', 'ant hill' 'alarm', 'uproar'
13	*Anwū*	'sun', 'sun', 'sunlight', 'mosquito'

From table 1, one will observe that some homonymous nouns have the same tonemic, phonic and graphic representation but differ in meaning. In example (1) for instance, □kpù refers to:

i.   A medical condition referred to as tumour
ii.   An immature fruit
iii.   A goal (as in football)
iv.   Rump/shank (a body part)

Polysemous nouns incorporate metaphorical extensions which derive meaning from the primary set of words of natural origin. The meaning derived from words of natural origin portrays human character. Here are some of the polysemous nouns with their related senses.

Table 2: Polysemous lexemes and their related senses

S/No	**Polysemous Lexemes (Nouns)**	**Central Meaning**	**Metaphorical Extensions**
14	*ụzọ*	'way', 'Road'	'door', 'method'
15	*Ajā*	'sand'	'many', 'plenty'
16	*akwụkwọ*	'leaf'	'book' 'school
17	*Anya*	'eye'	'opening', 'foresight'
18	*usụ*	'bat'	'ugliness', neutrality
19	*orụ*	'work'	'job', 'employment'
20	□*gù*	'fight'	'battle',' war'
21	*Osisi*	'tree'	'plank', 'stick'

From the examples in table II, it is clear that polysemic nouns have one original and central meaning from which subsidiary sense radiate. The lexeme *ụz*□ basically means 'road' and this basic sense of the word has been extended to 'door', 'method/procedure', all of which are roads or ways for specific purposes. In polysemy, we have redundancy in meaning in that without it each word in language would have an exact meaning. However, the central and metaphorical meanings are at times related, for example *ajā* ('sand', 'many'/'plenty').
Ajā is a substance consisting of very small particles of rock and minerals. Metaphorically, it means manyness. By its nature, it has defined counting since it is not amenable to enumeration. In Igbo, when one makes a statement as in (22),

22. *Ndi bịārā ọgbak*□ *ahù bù ajā* : 'Those who attended the meeting were innumerable'.

It means that the people that attended the meeting were many in number or uncountable. Here *ajā* is used metaphorically (i.e. a way of describing something by referring to it as something different and suggesting that it has similar qualities to the thing).

Grammatical Ambiguity

This kind of ambiguity is explained by differences in syntax. Ambiguity in terms of structure involves the ability of that structure to be assigned to two or more phrase markers. Anagbọgụ, Mba and Eme, (2001:114) present the following as examples of ambiguous structure in English and Igbo respectively.

23. Old men and women
    Agadi nwokē na nwàanyì
    Old man and woman

24. *Nwokē nà nwàanyì ọma*
    Man and woman good
    A man and good woman

For 23, there are two paraphrases that do not mean the same thing:

26 a. Old man and woman (women unqualified).
    b. Old man and old woman (both man and woman)
In sentence (26a), only the man is indicated as old. It may or may not be true that the woman too is old. But in sentence (26b) both the man and the woman are old. The possible interpretations for example (26) are:
27 a. *Nwokē nà nwàanyì ọma*
        Man and good woman
    b. *Nwokē ọma nà nwàanyì ọma*
        Good man and good woman

We can see in paraphrase (27a) that only 'woman' is qualified as 'good'. In other words only '*nwàanyì'* is specified as having the semantic feature 'good'; (i.e. oma) but in paraphrase (27b) both *nwokē na nwàanyì* are specified as bearing the semantic feature 'good'.

The following are more example of grammatical ambiguity in Igbo in the spoken form. The ambiguity in the following examples results when they are uttered out of context.

28. *Ndị fūrū ụz*

a.   Those who can see
b.   Those who have foresight
c.   Those that are exposed
d.   Those who saw the way
e.   Those who saw the person called Uzo

29. *Ezè àmaka*
a.   The person whose name is Eze is handsome
b.   The king is handsome
c.   Personal name

30. *Ị nahụ agbanwè*
a.   You are changing clothes
b.   You are changing your behavior
c.   You are changing in physical body (maturity)

31. *Ụnù à na-ère*
a.   You are selling
b.   You are decaying

Structural ambiguity is also found where phrases are co-referential to the noun in the sentence. The following examples are illustrative:

32. *Ewu Emeka dī ọcha ànwụọla*
a.   Emeka's white-coloured goat is dead
b.   'The goat which belongs to the fair-complexioned Emeka is dead'.

33. *Oche Obī toro ogologo àgbàjiela*
a.   'Obi's long chair is broken'
b.   'The chair which belongs to tall obi is broken'

In example 32, the two nouns- *ewu* and *Emeka* are referred to by the relative clause *dī ọcha;* the relative clause *di ọcha* refers to Ewu in (32a) and to *Emeka* in (32b). in 33, the relative clause *toro ogologo* could mean 'the long chair or tall Obi'. The ambiguity in these sentences is seen in the relative clauses. The above sentence can be disambiguated by bringing the relative clause nearer to the subject of the sentence.

Example- *Ewu ọcha Emeka ànwùọla*
            'Emeka's white goat died'.

In this case, there is no more confusion whether *dī ọcha* refers to '*Ewu*' or to '*Emeka*'. Many figures of speech in Igbo also pose the problem of ambiguity. They are prone to multiple interpretations (i.e. They have the potential of being ambiguous. For instance, these Igbo idiom are ambiguous.

Table 3: Igbo Idioms and their unrelated senses

S/No	Idioms	Gross (unrelated senses)	
34	*aka abụō*	a.	'two hands'
	hands two	b.	stealing'
35	*ahù ọma*	a.	healthy (body that functions well)
	body good	b.	pregnancy
		c.	good body
36	*afọ ukwu*	a.	big stomach
	belly big	b.	glutton
37	*egbe nà ◻kùkọ*	a.	kite and fowl
	Kite and fowl	b.	two sworn enemies
38	*anya ukwu*	a.	'big eyes'
	eye big	b.	'greed'
39	*aka ikē*	a.	'stinginess miserly'
	hand strength	b.	'strong hand', 'rough hand'
40	*ire àbụō*	a.	'double tongue'
	tongue two	b.	'lying'
41	*ụkwụ ọma*	a.	'good leg'
	leg good	b.	'good luck'
42	*ihu ọma*	a.	'good face'
	face good	b.	'favour'
43	*obì mmiri*	a.	'watery heart' 'wet heart'
	heart water	b.	'compassion'

Euphemistic expressions are also ambiguous. Euphemism is a polite word and expression that is used instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking or upsetting someone. Euphemistc ambiguity is used so that the feelings of individuals will not be injured. This is because there are situations where certain expressions are forbidden in all cultures. In some parts of Igbo land, snake is not called by its name at night. It is believed that mentioning the name at night will attract a snake into one's house. Euphemistic ambiguity in Igbo language include:

44. *kà m gaa kèlee nwàanyi akpī gbàrà* (dialectical variant)
Let 1sg go-ovs greet-ovs woman scorpion shoot-pst
a.   Let me go and sympathize with a woman stung by a scorpion
b.   Let me go and ease myself

45.   *Ahùrù m anụ ogologo/eriri n'azù ụl anyì.*
a.   I saw a long animal/rope behind in our house
b.   I saw a snake behind our house

In the above examples, the ambiguity rests on the words *akpì* (scorpion) and *ogologo/eriri* (long animal/rope). By meaning extension, the literal meanings of scorpion and rope have been transferred to give the readings associated with examples (45a) and (45b) respectively.

Causes of Ambiguity

Fromkin and Rodman (1981:64) opine that ambiguity is as a result of the arbitrariness of language. This is the property of language by which there is in general no natural relationship between the form of a simple lexical unit and the thing that it denotes. For instance, there is nothing in the nature of the sound and meaning to explain why 'cat' is the word for a cat and not for a dog or a pencil, or why cat should not be referred to as a dog instead. Thus Fromkin and Rodman regard ambiguity as an inherent property of words.

Ambiguity can arise through the ascription of multiple meanings to single words. This is the case of homonymous and polysemous words. The assignment of different syntactic structure to a sentence also gives rise to ambiguity. This is where a sentence could be interpreted in several ways. Scope is another primary source of ambiguity. It involves not only adjectives but also conjunctions like *nà* (and), *mbù* (or) and quantifiers like *ọbụlà* (every), *niīlē* (all) and *ùfọdụ* (some).

Ambiguity also occurs because thought is complicated. For the fact that thought has to do with the mind, it is not possible to read what is exactly in one's mind. This is often seen both in written text and spoken language. Generally when one uses ambiguous words or sentences, one does not consciously entertain their unintended meanings; although there is psycholinguistic evidence that when one hears ambiguous words, one momentarily accesses and then rules out their irrelevant sense. Consider this example:

46.   *Ahụ adīghī yā mmā*
        Body vprx-be Neg 3sg goodness.

This expression could be given more than one interpretation which may not be what the speaker or writer has in mind. Thus (46) could mean;
        a. He/she is sick
     b. He/she is mad (dialectical variant)
     c. He/she is deformed

In this case, it is only the speaker/writer that knows what he has in mind by the statement.
Inexact reference of pronouns, especially in indirect discourse, can give rise to ambiguity. For example, in this sentence.

47.   *Ọ gwàrà nnà ya [nà o_{1/2} kwūōla ọtụtụ okwū]*
        He told his father that he had said many things.

The 3rd person singular pronoun (o) subject of the bracketed embedded clause is two-way ambiguous. It can refer to *nnà ya*, object of the main clause or to the 3rd person singular pronoun subject of the main clause. This problem can also be seen in written works where pronouns are used in a way that the reader cannot be sure of their anticedents. Here is another example:

48. *Ngozi gwàrà Adà₂ [kà ọ gwà nne ya na ya ga-abịa echi]*

'Ngozi told/asked Ada to tell her/his mother that she would come the next day'.

The 3rd person singular pronoun *o* subject of the bracketed embedded clause could refer to *Ngozi* or *Ada* as shown by coindexation. Again, the 3rd person singular possessive pronoun *ya,* object of the verb *gwa* in the first embedded clause could also refer to *Ngozi, Ada*, or some other person known to *Ngozi* and *Ada*, as the coindexation also shows.

Another cause of ambiguity is faulty punctuation. The incorrect punctuation in the following sentence gives it a double interpretation.

49. *Ndị bìarà ọgbak□ ahù gụnyērē:*
Prof. Goddy Onyekọnwụ, onyeisi ngalaba,
Prof. Goddy Onyekonwu,head of department,
Sir G.E. Onwudiwe, Prof. O.M. Anizoba, na
Sir G.E. Onwudiwe, Prof. O.M. Anizoba, and
kwa ndi ọka mmụta ndi ọzọ.

'Those who attended the meeting included Prof, Goddy Onyekonwu, Head of department, Sir G.E. Onwudiwe, Prof. O.M. Anizoba and other scholars also'. The wrong punctuation in the above sentence makes it difficult to ascertain whether the head of department (onye isi ngalaba) is different from Sir. G.E. Onwudiwe or whether he is the head of department. The correct punctuation of 49 will be;

50. *Ndi biara ọgbakọ ahụ gụnyere: Prof. G.O. Onyekonwu, onye isi ngalaba; Sir G.E. Onwudiwe, Prof. O.M. Anizoba, nakwa ndi ọzọ.*

Also, lack of proper tone marking of Igbo words or statements bring about ambiguity. For instance:

51. *Obi amaka*

Without proper tone marking, this statement could have up to three different interpretations as follows:
a.   'Obi is handsome'
b.   'Heart is beautiful'
c.   'Personal name' (Obi Amaka) etc.

With proper tone marking, the meaning will be limited to what the speaker or writer has in mind.

Implications of Ambiguity

Despite the problems a mbiguity pose to the study of Igbo language, it is still helpful in some areas:

i. Ambiguity can give rise to humorous double meanings as in the following poetic lines:

52. *Mmadū nō n'ùwa bù ewu chūkwū*
   mgbè Chukwu ch□r□ ewu yā □ kpụrụ
   ndi achì ọchì,
   ndì èbe akwā n'ùwà

(A verse from Ọnwụ in Ezeako and Anọwai, 1989:21)

In 52, the poet likened *mmadū* (man) to *ewu* (goat) which the owner can decide to take its life at will. Thus in the lines above, the poet trivializes death.

The first line - *mmadū nọ n'ùwà bù ewu chūkwū* is metaphorical and could have these interpretations:

a.   'People in the worlds are God's goats'

b.   'People in the world belong to God'

Thus line 1: is ambiguous because it has double meaning.

ii. Ambiguity can also serve as a source of embarrassment and anger. This is true especially when used out of context. For instance:

53. *Anụ gī □ kà f□r□?*

     'Do you still have some of your meat/flesh left?'

54. *Ihu gi di ka ihu m ma*

Meanings: 'Your face looks familiar'

    'Your face resembles the face of cutlass.'

Summary and Conclusion

The major findings in this work are summarized as follows:

a.   Ambiguity is a linguistic condition that is common in language

b.   It is a fact of linguistic life, hence it s use is often unintentional

c.   When ambiguity occurs in a sentence, a lot of linguistic problems are created. For instance, meanings are impaired, communication marred and confusion is created

d.   While structural ambiguity emanates from the grammatical analysis of a sentence, lexical ambiguity arises from the use of words that have more than one interpretation. Phonetic ambiguity arises from the phonological properties (production) of the expressions involved.

e.   Ambiguity as a linguistic device can be used for comic effect through a genuine intension to confuse.

f.   It c an serve as a source of embarrassment and anger especially when used out of context.

g.   Some idiomatic expressions in Igbo are ambiguous .

h.   The study of ambiguity in Igbo language has not been subjected to extensions.

Conclusion

Ambiguity has been examined in this work using Igbo language as a case study. It is a survey research which collected data from Igbo stories/poems through random and unstructured interviews. The data collected were analysed and interpreted through classification and sentential analysis. The implications of ambiguity were also examined and the outcome of the research work were outlined in the research findings.

  It is true that the existence of ambiguity in Igbo language serves some purposes as mentioned in the research findings, yet it is evident that as a linguistic device, it poses a number of problems to the study of Igbo language. The major purpose of language is communication which can only take place when the message conveyed by the speaker is fully understood by the listener. From this study it is discovered that the presence of ambiguity most times creates misunderstanding and confusion which in turn hampers, blurs or even mars effective communication.

  Therefore, to resolve the problem of ambiguity for effective communication in Igbo, the researcher suggests that speakers and writers of Igbo language should learn to choose the right words in a given context. This is because no matter how a word is used, it is the context in question that determines its meaning. Also in the case of lexical ambiguity, where the meaning derives from the ambiguous lexical items themselves, an explication of the ambiguous item or its replacement with an unambiguous one disambiguates the whole sentence. Structural ambiguity could also be disambiguated through an overhaul of the ambiguous structure by addition, subtraction, restructuring etc. of morphemes (Eme and Nkamigbo 2006:98).

  The study is of this linguistic device is of immense importance in semantics as one cannot achieve mastery of a language without the knowledge of ambiguous words and expressions in that language. Finally, for effective teaching of Igbo language, the existence of this linguistic feature should always be borne in mind.

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