An Analysis of Selectional Restrictions of Igbo Figurative Expressions

Chukwunonyelum Esther Okoli

Department of Linguistics,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

es.okoli@unizik.edu.ng

Chinasa Seraphine Muogbo

Department of English Language Education,

Federal College of Education (Technical), Umunze, Nigeria

chinasaseraphine@gmail.com

and

Oluchi Charity Mbah

Department of Linguistics,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

charitymbah303@gmail.com

Abstract

Selectional restrictions can be defined as semantic restrictions words impose on the environments they occur. This research focuses on Igbo figurative expressions. Specifically, it analyzes the co-occurrence constraint that exists between lexical items in figurative expressions in the Igbo language. Also, it aims at examining the misapplications of some figurative expressions in Igbo. The method of data collection is through the use of Igbo written texts. A total number of twenty (20) figurative expressions were collected. The method of analyzing data is descriptive using the binary feature format of Componential Analysis. This study reveals that idioms, proverbs, simile, metaphor, personification and hyperbole are some of the expressions identified. Some figurative expressions in the Igbo language do not violate the selectional restriction rule while others do. The violation does not result in ungrammaticality of the expressions. Conclusively, verbs in the Igbo figurative expressions do not combine in a haphazard manner with their complements and subjects; there is inherent constraint which determines the appropriate subjects or complements of a verb in a particular construction.

Keywords: selectional restrictions, restrictions, figurative expressions, componential analysis

1.0 Introduction

The term figurative expression can be defined as those expressions whose meanings are in contrast to their literal meanings. Such meaning could be metaphorical, idiomatic, or ironic. In other words, any figure of speech whose meaning is not intended to be understood literally is figurative. When one uses a word or an expression in a figurative sense, one uses it with a more imaginative meaning than its ordinary literal meaning.

On the other hand, selectional restriction was first explained by Chomsky (1965). The term can be defined as the co-occurrence restriction or constraint that exists between lexical words. It can also be defined as a semantic constraint or restriction on constituents or argument. For Anyanwu and Iloene (2003) in Omego et al (2012), selectional restriction requires that semantic features of co-occurring constituents should be compatible. Incompatibility of features co-occurring results in anomalous constructions. Words may have various senses and it is very essential to select the proper sense (meaning) for every word in the expression. Selectional restriction rule is the rule that governs the selection restrictions between lexical items. It describes the meaning features of lexical words. Such of the semantic features include: [+animate], [+human], [+edible], [+count], [+adult], etc.

Brown and Miller (1985: 85) note that in our normal use of language we do not expect all linguistic forms to co-occur with all other linguistic forms. In other words, it means that linguistic units have constrains in every language. Thus, linguistic items have environments of acceptability and grammaticality, as well as environments of unacceptability and ungrammaticality. Brown and Miller illustrate their assertion by giving the instance of intransitive verbs which do not co-occur with a following noun phrase (NP), while transitive verbs must co-occur with a following NP.

In the Igbo language for example, the verb 'gba'sting''co-occurs with animate or human object [+animate, +human] and animate/human subject [+animate, +human] such as Aṅụ gbaa nwatà, ọ̀ tụba òkpòròko ijiji egwù. The figurative expression 'Ùbe

m ràchàrà màrà m ùra' do not collocate (co-occur) because the subject 'ube' 'pear' is not human (-human) and the verb 'ma-slap' requires [+human] subject. Thus, it violates the selectional restriction rule. The violation of selectional restrictions in Igbo figurative expressions does not result in ungrammaticality of such expressions.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Selectional Restrictions

This phenomenon, selectional restriction has been defined in several ways by scholars. Some of the scholarly works on selectional restriction shall be reviewed in this section.

Selectional restriction according to Matthews (2007:359), is a restriction on the choice of individual lexical units in a construction with other lexical units. Matthews explains that for instance, the word 'breathe' will typically select an animate subject and in the same form, the word 'pregnant' will typically select a subject referring to someone or some animal that is female. Brown and Miller (1985) define selectional restriction as a semantic constraint which specifies the semantic properties lexical items must have in order to co-occur.

Ndimele (2007:99) sees selectional restriction as a phenomenon which specifies the constraints on the possible combination of lexical items within a given grammatical context. The constraints are stated with reference to relevant inherent semantic properties which are in terms of qualities of animacy, humanness, concreteness and so forth. Here, Ndimele writes on the selectional restriction between the subject and the verb it takes. Hence a human subject will co-occur with verbs like: speak, admire, cook, drive, and so on. While a non-human subject will take the stative verb be.

Murthy's view on indefinite articles in the English language asserts that the selection between a and an is determined by sound (2007:51). He further explained that a is used before a word beginning with a consonant sound, for instance, a boy, a man, a table and so on. While 'an' is used before a word beginning with a vowel sound, for example, an hour, an honour, an heir. The

examples report that indefinite articles can only be used with singular countable nouns in the English language.

2.2. Figurative language

Figurative language is defined as a language that uses words or expressions deviating from their original, basic meaning. In contrast to literal language which maintains a consistent meaning regardless of the context, figurative language uses words and expressions in their non-literal meaning which depends on the context in which they are used. Figurative language can be seen as intentional deviation from literal statement, or normal arrangement of words in language. It refers to words, and groups of words, that exaggerate or alter the usual meanings of the component words.

According to Pradopo (2010:62), figurative language plays a major role in compelling literary works. Its primary purpose is to force readers to imagine what an author means with an expression or statement. Figurative expressions are rhetorical forms of how to use words in speaking or writing to convince or persuade the audience. They are used to assure, persuade, motivate, encourage and fascinate the audience. It is a powerful rhetoric tool to clarify meaning, to provide vivid examples, to emphasize ideas, to stimulate associations and emotions, to ornament sentences and to amuse audience. There are different kinds of figurative expressions that are used in writing. Some of them include: metaphor, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche, simile, irony, idoms, proverbs.

Figurative language serves to make ideas and meanings more vivid and alive. For example,
a. "My hair stood on end." It conveys the meaning of great fear.
b. "Her feelings were all bottled up." It means that they were kept under control.
c. "At the end of the year, the fabric gives the fruit of labor to all the employees." The fruit' refers to the profit, reward, or result of hard work.
d. "Looking at his man have dinner with another girl, she becomes green with envy." It means that she is jealous.

2.3 Componential Analysis

Componential analysis (CA) is the framework adopted in this research. Componential analysis is one of the three specific frameworks for semantic analysis. Others are formal semantics and cognitive semantics.

According to Kempson (1977:18), the componential analysis was developed in the second half of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s as a more efficient way of analysing meaning. For Saeed (2009:260), componential analysis is particularly applicable to distinguishing the meanings of lexemes that are semantically related or in the same semantic domain. It is often seen as a process of breaking down the sense of a word into its minimal distinctive features, that is, into components which contrast with other components. It refers to the description of the meaning of words through structured sets of semantic features, which are given as present, absent or indifferent with reference to feature. To describe the presence and absence of a feature, binary rules are used. The symbol [+] means the feature is present, while [-] means the feature is absent.

Componential analysis has been observed by Hyde (1990:6) as a useful technique for exploring the interrelationship of meaning which exists among lexical sets. This implies that it is a model used to specify the contrastive features among related words. Ndimele (2007:26) refers to componential analysis "as a process whereby the meaning of a word is expressed in terms of the combination of all its sense components. From the above assertion, it can be seen that the sense components a linguistic unit can be its physical features or abstract features.

In the view of Ejele (2003:41), componential analysis is an approach to the description of the meaning of words that is based on the theses that the sense of every lexeme can be analysed in terms of a set of more general sense components or semantic features. Thus, from Ejele, one can say that componential analysis employs the use of features that are characteristic of the linguistic units to be described. Omego (2011:78) posits that componential analysis is an approach to the study of meaning evolved from the views that lexical items are composed of semantic features. Hence,

this means that CA aims at projecting the semantic features of an item in order to demonstrate areas of shared and non-shared features with other units in the same class. Leech (1976:98) emphasizes that componential analysis is a method typical of structural semantics which analyzes the structure of a words meaning. Thus, it reveals the culturally important features by which speakers of the language distinguish different words in the domain. Hence, the word 'man' has the following binary features-+person, +adult, +male, the one that differentiates it from woman is +male.

3.0 Research Methodology
In this research, the method of data collection is through the use of written texts in Igbo. A total number of twenty (20) figurative expressions were gathered from Igbo written works. We are limited to only fifteen expressions because of time. The method of analyzing data is descriptive using the binary feature format of Componential Analysis.

3.1 Tone marking convention
In this study, data shall be tone marked using Green and Igwe's (1963) tone marking convention where high tones are left unmarked, the low tones are marked with a grave accent (`) and downstepped tones are marked with a macron (-). The convention is illustrated below:

Akwa – cry   *Akwà* – clothe
Ezē – teeth   *Àjà* – sacrifice

4.0 Selectional restriction of figurative expressions in the Igbo language
The following Igbo figurative expressions were gathered from Igbo written texts. The literal and correct meanings are provided below each expression.

1. Òbi hụ̀-rụ̀ òriri wụ̀-ọ aja.

   Obi see-rV feeding jump-OVS fence

   LM Obi saw food and jumped the fence

   CM Obi is a glutton

2. Nne sì-rì nri ụ̀wà niile rì-rì.

Mother cook-rV food world DET eat-rV

LM Mother cooked food which the whole world ate

CM Mother prepared food that everyone partook.

3. Nnekà nwụ̀ ọ̀kwà n'aka   bịa.

Nneka hold bird PREP hand come

LM Nneka came with ọ̀kwà.

CM Nneka came very early.

4. Òkeke bị̀à-rà i-gbò ọ̀gụ̀ tinye isi ya

Okeke come-rV INF-settle fight put head Pron

LM Okeke came to settle fight and put his head

CM Okeke came to settle a fight and got himself involved.

5. Aṅụ gba-a nwatà, ọ̀ tụba òkpòròko ijiji egwù.

Bee sting-OVS child, Pron fear fly fear

LM A child who is stung by a bee is afraid of fly

CM Once bitten, twice shy.

6. Ụkwà ru-o ogè ya, ọ̀ dà-a.

Breadfruit reach-OVS time pron, pron fall-OVS

LM When the breadfruit is ripe, it falls down.

CM There is time for everything.

7. Ọ̀kụkọ̀ nyụ-ọ ahụ̀, àlà à-chụba ya ọsọ.

Fowl   fart-OVS fart, land Pref-pursue pron run

LM When a fowl farts, the ground becomes a nuisance

CM Guilty conscience fears accusation.

8. Àzụkà bụ̀ ùdèlè.

Azuka is vulture

LM Azuka is a vulture

CM Azuka is ugly

9. Ǹkèchi bụ̀ akpị̀.

Nkechi is scorpion

LM Nkechi is a scorpion

CM Nkechi is wicked

10. Ùbe m   ràchà-rà mà-rà m   ụ̀ra.

Pear pron lick-rV   slap-rV pron slap

LM The pear I licked slapped me

CM The pear is bitter

11. Agụụ gwọ̀-rọ̀ umùaka ahụ̀ ịbà.

Hunger cure-rV children DET malaria.

LM Hunger cured those children

CM The children are very hungry.

12. Ọnwa nà-a-zàcha àlà.

Moon Aux-pref-sweep ground

LM Moon is sweeping the ground

CM The moon is shining.

13. Ọnwụ kụ-ụ̀-rụ̀ Ibèkwe aka n'ụzọ̀ taà.

Death knock-OVS-rV Ibekwe hand PREP door today

LM Death knocked at Ibekwe's door today

CM Ibekwe died today.

14. Mgbịrịmgba kwù-rù nà ogè e-zù-o-la.

Bell say-rV Conj time pref-reach-OVS-perf

LM Bell said that it is time

CM It is time.

15. Agụụ nà-à-pịa Àda ụ̀tàrị̀

Hunger Aux-pref-flog Ada cane

LM Hunger is flogging Ada

CM Ada is very hungry.

16. Maàzi Ùde rì-rì ihe enyi nyụ̀-rụ̀ n'ikè.

Mr Ude eat-rV thing elephant defecate-rV Prep buttock

LM Mr Ude ate elephant's faeces

CM Mr Ude ate rubbish.

17. Àda sì-rì ṅsị bu-pụ̀ta.

Ada cook-rV faeces carry-come out

LM Ada cooked faeces and brought it out

CM Ada's food is not delicious.

18. Udoka ji ọnụ e-gbu ọjị.

Udoka hold mouth pref-cut down iroko

LM Udoka cuts down iroko with his mouth

CM Udoka is proud.

19. Ji nyụ̀-rụ̀ ṅsị n'ahịa.

Yam defecate-rV faaces Prep market

LM Yam defecated in the market

CM Yam was cheap in the market.

20. Echi dị̀ ime ònye mà ihe ọ gà-à-mụ

Tomorrow is pregnant who know thing pron Aux-pref-deliver

LM Tomorrow is pregnant, no one knows what it will give birth to.

CM The wicked should know that one who is poor today can be wealthy tomorrow.

Numbers 1-6 are the figurative expressions that do not violate the rule of selectional restriction. In numbers 2 and 5 above, verbs (gba–sting) and (si–cook) co-occur with [+animate] subjects and [+animate] [+edible] complements respectively.

Also, examples 1-6 are both semantically and syntactically well formed. For example, the verb nwụ–hold in number 3 above co-occurred with [+animate] subject and [+physical] object .

On the other hand, numbers 7-20 are those figurative expressions which violate the selectional restriction rule. Verbs ("pịa-flog" and "kụ-knock") in examples 16 and 14 above are constrained to co-occur with [+human] subjects but the semantic features of the subjects (Agụụ, Ọnwụ) are [-human] respectively. Numbers 7-21 are semantically not well formed but syntactically well formed. For instance, in example 20 above, the verb 'nyụ-defecate' with the semantic feature [+animate] noun subject co-occurred with [-animate] subject 'ji-yam'.

Also from the above data, it is observed that verbs in Igbo figurative expressions select the subject and object nouns to co-occur with. Hence, there is inherent constraint in the verb which plays an important role in determining the appropriate subjects or complements it co-occurs with in every figurative construction.

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

This research presents an analysis of selectional restriction of figurative expressions in the Igbo language. It aims at examining the co-occurrence constraint that exists between lexical words in figurative expressions in the Igbo language. In this research, the method of data collection is through the use of textbooks and other literary works in Igbo. A total number of twenty (20) figurative expressions were gathered from Igbo written works. We are limited to only these expressions because of time. The method of analyzing data is descriptive using the binary feature format of

Componential Analysis. Haven analyzed the data collected, it is discovered that verbs in Igbo figurative expressions select the subject and object nouns to co-occur with. In conclusion, verbs in the Igbo figurative expressions do not combine in a haphazard manner with their complements and subjects; there is inherent constraint which determines the appropriate subjects or complements of a verb in a particular construction.

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APPENDIX

OVS – Open Vowel Suffix

LM – Literal Meaning

CM – Correct Meaning

Pron –Pronoun

Perf – Perfective aspect

DET –Determiner

Prep –Preposition

Pref   Prefix

Conj   Conjunction

Aux – Auxiliary

INF – Infinitive