

A CONTEXT-BASED SEMANTIC SHIFT IN IGBO
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Abstract

*This study focuses on the context-based semantic change in Igbo. Certain lexical items in Igbo change and/or shift in meaning as a result of their frequent use in a new context. Primary data were purposively collected through elicitation from native speakers of Anam and Obosi dialects of Igbo, spoken in Anambra East and Idemili North local government in Anambra State respectively. Secondary data were collected from Igbo movies, where instances of meaning shifts were used in free-flowing speech. Adopting the Frame semantics approach, this paper observes that words can take on different meanings from earlier meanings as a result of use in a different context. For example, the word *amōsū* means 'witchcraft' but when used in a context such as *Q tārà amōsū n'ākwūkwō*, 'S/he ate witchcraft in books', it refers to intelligence. The literal sense is not activated, but a new sense is activated instead. Secondly, meaning shift sometimes brings about a word dropping its earlier sense completely, depending on the frequencies of its use by the speakers in various contexts. In English for example, the word 'silly' has shifted its original meaning of 'happy, blissful, lucky or blessed', to meaning in modern English of 'stupid' or 'reckless' due to constant use in a different context. Meaning shifts can be neutral or it can shift from positive to negative meaning or vice versa. This paper shows that the figurative and frequent uses of words in various contexts by the native speakers are key factors in semantic shift in Igbo. Besides, semantic shift is a key activity to understanding and documenting a language.*

Keywords: Lexical item, Semantic shift, Frame semantics, Positive Negativity, Semantic change, Linguistic context

Introduction

Language is dynamic. It grows; it dies. Over time, language has conveniently been referred to as a living organism that grows and changes like everything else in this universe. The rate of semantic change occurs at the utmost speed compared to other types of linguistic change. Words keep changing their meanings. For instance, the word 'gay' has been seen changing its meaning from 'carefree', 'bright and showy' or 'cheerful', to 'homosexual'. Likewise, the word 'presently' has been seen changing from 'soon' to 'now' and many more changes (Bright 1992:387).

This research work focuses on studying semantic shift as a type of semantic change and/or change of some lexical items in the Igbo language based on the frame in which the

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words occur. Semantic change has been analysed and studied over the years, but there appears to be a gap in the semantic shift of words as used in a particular linguistic context in Igbo. Thus, it is observed that the meaning of a word may be replaced over time; as in the case of semantic shift, where a word completely loses its original meaning and acquires a new meaning or shifts its meaning while retaining the old meaning. Meaning shift and/or change, as used interchangeably in this paper, is not studied from the perspective of a diachronic study of historical linguists, but from the angle of shift based on the linguistic context of the use of a lexical item. In other words, it is studied from a synchronic perspective with a focus on contextual usage. However, Hock (1991:301) avers that "semantic shifts usually tend to be 'fuzzy' as their synchronic basis, leading not to 'mergers' and 'splits', but merely to the broadening and narrowing of the range of meanings." The study uses Egudu's (1975) and Emenanjo's (2015) categorization of the concept of positive negativity which involves the use of a negative expression to express a strongly positive state, action, or attribute as in figurative usages in the discourse, to argue that the concept of positive negativity points to the directions that these meaning changes take. A major restricting factor to this research results stems from the fact that there are few varied views and knowledge about meaning change in Igbo. Nevertheless, this study adopts Egudu's (1975) grouping of 'Positive Negativity' for organizing the data, showing the shift in meaning; while Fillmore's theory on frame semantics is known as 'Fillmorean Frame Semantics' used in the analysis of lexical items within their context of use. This is because the approach states that meaning arises in context so that the selection of any meaning is informed by the contextual factors.

The study restricts its primary data to respondents in Anambra state, Obosi, and Anam villages. The secondary data are derived from Igbo movies. The data were glossed and tone marked using Igwe and Green's (1963) tone marking convention which leaves high tone unmarked, but marks low and down step tones.

The rest of the sections are structured as follows: section two discusses the concept of semantic change, while section three discusses positive negativity and frame semantics, the data were presented and analysed in the fourth section, and the last section forms the conclusion.

Concept of Semantic Change

To grasp what it means for a word meaning to change, one needs to know what meanings are in the first place. The concept of semantic change deals with a historical process in which the conventional meaning of a linguistic expression changes its meaning and takes up a new one.

A Semantic change primarily refers to changes in the meaning of lexical units, and may also encompass issues related to compositional semantics when strings of words are concerned as in compounds and collocations. Semantic change or drift looks at how word meaning evolves in time at the level of words and lexical units (Armelle, 2013). Traugott (2003:196) sees semantic change as one of the innovative natures of language as a result of its constant state of flux. It is not easy to understand why meaning words change their meaning over time, just like it not easy to measure growth in humans. According to Cook (2012:115) "Semantic changes are subtle and always move unconsciously and unnoticed". This is to say that, of all the changes languages undergo, semantic change is less resistant. Different factors have been stated to facilitate semantic change, popular among them are factors listed by Ullmann (1962: 193-197). These factors include discontinuity in transmission, vagueness, loss of motivation (severed etymological connection), polysemy, ambiguous contexts, structure of the vocabulary. Besides, Crowley and Bower (2010:198)

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identify metaphor, euphemism, hyperbole, and interference as the different forces that operate to influence the directions of semantic change.

Also, some types of semantic change have been identified by some scholars (Crowley & Bower, 2010; Trask, 2007; Trask, 1996; Hock, 1991 e.t.c.). Four basic types have been identified by Crowley & Bower (2010) such as broadening, narrowing, bifurcation (or split), and shift. Trask (2007:36-38) notes that some certain types of semantic change, although not easy to understand, are so frequent that they are given specific names. For instance, the author identifies generation/broadening, specialization/narrowing, amelioration and pejoration, metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. According to Trask, generalization (or broadening) refers to the spread of meaning from a narrower to a broader class of things; while specialization (or narrowing) is the opposite of generalization and appears to be far more frequent than generalization. Other types of semantic change include amelioration and pejoration. Amelioration is an 'improvement' in meaning and pejoration is the opposite. e.g. The words *queen* and *knight* formerly meant 'woman' and 'boy' are now used to refer to people occupying certain exalted positions; while pejoratively, the word *knave* which used to mean only 'boy' is now demoted to a term of abuse. In Igbo, there are also instances of semantic broadening of the lexical item *Ụkà* "Conversation" derived from *Ikpārī Ụkà* means "to converse." Anieto (2018) explains that the word *Ụkà* is said to originally bear the meaning of "to converse" or "to dialogue". With the coming of Christianity in Igbo land, "Sundays" were referred to as the "day of conversation". This is because the evangelism of the missionaries was more like a normal conversation with the natives. This strategy was used to win new converts/members to the new creed of the colonial masters. The new converts who jettisoned their traditional beliefs and accepted the new creed were then referred to as *Ndị ụkà* "Church people" and their place of worship became *Ụlọ ụkà* "Church" that is, "house of conversation or reasoning". The first day of the 7th-day cycle which makes up a week was then set aside for conversations; thus "Sunday" became *Ụbòchị ụkà* "the day of conversation". The word *Ụkà* here clearly shows a case where a word shifts its meaning while retaining its original meaning. Hence, today *Ụkà* does not only refer to "church", but also conversation.

Furthermore, figurative words such as metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor constitute types of semantic change. Metonymy is a type of semantic change in which an attribute is used to denote the thing that is meant such as using the *White House* to mean the American president. Synecdoche, on the other hand, is the use of the whole to denote a part, or a part to denote the whole, e.g. using *hands* to mean 'workers' or 'sailors', as in 'we need to hire more hands' or 'All hands on deck'. Another type of semantic change that is so frequently used is a metaphor. It involves applying a word to something it does not denote to draw attention to a resemblance. For instance, the word *head* originally meant the part of the body on top of the shoulders, but it is now conceptualized as a metaphor for all kinds of things and people that are high, in front, in charge, or just round (Trask 2007:36-38).

The foregoing simply shows that the meaning or semantic representation of words may change over time to function and accommodate the contemporary needs of the speakers who are the sole determinants of change. It should be noted that as (Trask 2007:52) asserts:

In many cases, a new meaning for a word may co-exist happily with its older meanings. This does not always happen, however; in other cases, the new meaning may completely displace an older meaning...and in certain cases, a new meaning may derive out an older meaning very rapidly such as where the meaning is offensive or producing embarrassing misunderstanding if confused with the old meaning.

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Also, observe that some of the semantic changes following the instances presented earlier are from a diachronic perspective; however, this paper tends to analyse meaning change and/or shift of words based on their linguistic context of use, and not based on their change over the years, in which they lose their old meanings and accommodate new meanings. As shown in this study, the meaning shift of the lexical item does not affect its old meanings, but rather it shifts its meaning to a different meaning entirely, depending on the linguistic context it is figuratively used. In what follows, is a discussion of frame semantics.

Frame Semantics

Frame Semantics is the specific approach to natural language semantics developed by Charles Fillmore (1977, 1981, 1987 & 2003). An essential general idea to be understood is that; first, one cannot understand the meaning of a word (or a linguistic expression in general) without the understanding of all the encyclopaedic situations that relate to the word. For instance, to fully understand the word 'sell or buy', one must fully understand the environment of the commercial transfer.

A 'frame' plays a role in the description of linguistic meanings, it is a system of categories structured following some motivating contexts. Some words exist to provide access to knowledge of such frames to the participants in the communication process, and simultaneously serve to perform a categorization that takes such framing for granted. Frame semantics, according to Fillmore and Baker (2006:316), is the 'study of how linguistic frames activate frame knowledge, and how the frame thus activated can be integrated into an understanding of the passages that contain these forms. Frame semantics developed from the cognitive linguistics principles of encyclopaedic semantics. The theory emphasizes the position that, meaning arises in context so that the selection of any meaning is informed by the contextual factors. Emphatically, Fillmore asserts that 'nobody could be said to know the meaning of any linguistic expression who did not know the details of the kind of scene which provided the background and motivation for the categories, therefore word meanings are said to be evoked by Frames' (Fillmore 2003:378). The understanding of linguistic contexts to determine the meaning shift of lexical items is why this theory was adopted. In the next section, we discuss the concept of positive Negativity as used by Egudu (1975).

Positive Negativity

The concept of 'Positive Negativity' as described by Egudu (1975) refers to aspects of Igbo idiomatic expression which possess some extra aesthetic potentiality, making it more imaginatively appealing than ordinarily what the idiomatic usages is meant to be in a straightforward usage in Igbo. This concept is of relevance to this study, since lexical items change their meaning from neutral to negative or positive meanings or vice versa, based on their context of use.

Among the five groupings of this phenomenon include; praising somebody by attributing to him an unfavorable quality or commending a situation by describing it in terms of a sad event, among others. A basic feature of negative expression is that it operates fundamentally based on contrast or oppositional relationship to the words that make them up and the literal meanings of those words. But the nature of the contrast which may be explicit or implicit, and the actual overt contexts of the negative expressions themselves are varied. Egudu's (1975) work on positive-negative expressions shows a level of semantic shift based on contexts. This concept of positive negativity served as the basis for the analysis of this research work, alongside the theory of Frame semantics.

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Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this analysis are in two complementary forms: primary and secondary data. The primary data were elicited from respondents who are native speakers of Anam and Obosi dialects between the ages of 20-70 years, while the secondary data were elicited in free-flowing speeches of the different dialects of these Igbo movies viz: *Ezè Nnùnù*, *Nkọlì Nwa Nsukā*, *Onye Ezè*, *Nwokē Ikē*, *Arūbà*.

The data were analyzed in two parts: the first shows the linguistic contexts which served as frames for understanding the meaning of the sentence, while the second part uses Egudu's categorization of positive negativity to show the shift in meaning. Note that the italicized lexical items and/or phrasal units are the focus of the analysis.

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Table 1: Meaning Shift in Context

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
1. <i>Mmanwu</i> pìàrà Òbi <i>m̀kpala</i>	Masquerade flogged Obi with a cane	Obi is <i>foolish</i> (used to express foolishness)
2. Òbi bù <i>ikè esū àlà</i>	Obi is a <i>restless buttock</i>	Obi is always <i>restless</i>
3. Ị lechaa <i>nnụnụ</i> dīkà mụ, ị sị nà ọ bù m kà ị b̀jàrà ịlụ	After looking at a <i>bird like me</i> , you say it's me you want to marry	After looking at a <i>beautiful lady like me</i> and you say you want to marry me
4. Òbi nà-arò nr̄ ẹbe ọ nà-ème <i>nsusù</i>	Obi was dreaming where he was acting <i>foolishly</i>	Obi was dreaming where he was <i>enjoying</i>
5. Elewe <i>ukwù</i> ẹgbuo ewū	While looking at <i>the waist</i> , a goat will be killed	She is too <i>beautiful</i>
6. <i>Kwùgbu</i> kwa ònwe unù <i>n'okwu</i>	<i>Kill</i> yourself with talk	You all <i>talk too much</i>
7. A màhà <i>tìrì</i> ḡì azù	I will give you <i>fish</i>	I will <i>inform/gist</i> you
8. <i>Agū</i> kà <i>enyi</i>	The <i>lion</i> that is greater than the <i>elephant</i>	A <i>great</i> man (<i>Agū</i> is used to express greatness)
9. A fùrù m̄ ḡì <i>n'odù anụ</i>	I saw you at the <i>tail of meat</i>	I saw you in the <i>meat market/shop</i>
10. Nwa <i>anụ ọfīā</i>	Child of a <i>bush animal</i>	<i>Stupid</i> man
11. Ebe ị nà-arù akā <i>ntu dī kwè</i>	Where you are pointing at, there is a <i>nail</i> on it	It is a <i>difficult</i> task
12. Nwète ife <i>aka mbē</i>	Bring <i>hand thing</i>	Bring <i>collateral</i>
13. A <i>kwāā</i> m̄ unù <i>na ndi</i>	I will <i>bury</i> you, people, while you are still <i>alive</i>	I will <i>enrich</i> you all/ <i>make you rich</i>
14. <i>Ūburū</i> unù bù <i>ajā</i>	Your <i>brains</i> are <i>sand</i>	You both are <i>stupid</i>
15. <i>Okwu</i> ḡì àgba <i>jurugo</i> kwa <i>doro</i>	Your <i>words</i> have run and are <i>filled to the brim</i>	Your <i>matter</i> is <i>complicated</i>
16. ...Tụkwàsa òmùrù <i>nwa nà ya</i>	<i>Put on top</i> , <i>conceiver of children</i> on it	<i>Put interest</i> attached to it
17. Nwaànyị à bù òkukō ùdu <i>mmīrī</i>	This woman is a <i>fowl of the rainy season</i>	This woman is <i>always sick</i>
18. Ọ bù òsu <i>īmī</i>	He is a <i>nose hitter</i>	He is an <i>informant or nose poker</i>
19. Ọ mākā, <i>ndi ọcha gbàrà àsirì</i>	It is beautiful, <i>the white men gossiped</i>	It is beautiful, <i>the white men did extremely well</i>
20. Òkoro, ị gā- <i>efū</i> kwa	Okoro, you will <i>be lost</i>	Okoro, you will <i>die</i>

In example (1), we observe a semantic shift of the use of words *mmanwu* and *m̀kpala* to mean “foolishness” in the sentence, thereby shifting from its original meaning of *masquerade* and *cane* because of the context (frame) of use. Likewise, in (2) a shift occurs in the meaning of the words *ikè esū àlà* from “buttocks hit the ground” to imply “restlessness” because of its frame. In (3), there is a meaning shift in the use of the word *nnụnụ* “bird” to mean “beautiful lady”.

Nzuzù as used in (4) to figuratively mean “enjoyment”, literally means “foolishness”. In (5) we notice a change in the use of part of the body *ukwù* “waist” in the sentence to imply “a beautiful lady”. This is because speakers of the language see a woman who has a well-shaped waist as a beautiful woman. In (6) the compound verb *kwugbu n'okwu* “kill with words” is used to designate “talkative”. In (7), *ị tìrì azù* “To give little fish” shifts its meaning from “fish” to mean “pieces of information”. The use of *mà hà* “I will” in the sentence is a dialectal variant of *gà mà* (the standard variety) to denote ‘future tense’. While in (8), the animals *agū* and *enyi* are metaphorically used to mean a ‘strong man’, however,

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agū has retained its use as a symbol of greatness in Igbo worldview, in (9) *oḍūanū* "animal's tail" shifts its meaning to "meat market".

In (10) *anū ofīā* "bush meat" changes its meaning to imply "stupidity" in the context of its use. In (11), we observe the meaning of *ntu* shifting its meaning from "nail" to imply "difficulty". This is due to the conceptualization of the lexical item. *Aka* "hand" as shown in (12) shifts in its meaning of "hand" to imply "collateral" as a result of the frame associated. In the context of the use of the verb *ikwā mmadū* "to bury someone" its meaning shifts from "bury" to mean "to enrich/make rich" in the sentence (13). Similarly, in (14), another shift occurs in the use of the word *ajā* to mean "stupidity" instead of its original meaning of "sand".

In (15), to say that something *gba juru doro* i.e. "filled to the brim", things are getting complicated. The frame "full" designate "complication/a matter that has gone out of hand". In (16), *omūrū nwa* shifts from its meaning of "conceiver" to mean "interest" in this frame since *imū nwā* denotes "to give birth" in the language. In (17). *okukō udū mmīrī* shifts in its meaning of "rainy season fowl", to mean "steady sickness". This is because fowls reared during raining season hardly survive it due to the cold weather. *Ōsu imī* as used in (18), shifts in meaning from "nose hitter" to mean "an informant/nose poker". In sentence (19), we observe the meaning of *asiri* shifting from its original meaning of "gossip" to mean "excellence" (in work). In sentence (20), *efū* shifts in its meaning of "loss" to mean "death" as a result of the frame it was used.

The above data has proved that meaning arises in context so that the selection of any meaning is informed by contextual factors. Fillmore (1997) backs up this fact in his words by saying, "meanings have an internal structure which is determined in relation to the background frame or scene". Thus, as observed in table one, the meaning of lexical items changes based on the context they are used. What this means is that, for a language user to understand the meaning of a lexical item, s/he is expected to have mental access to the schematized scenes and the nature of the event, such as identifying the participants of the frame, and how the participants view the event which structures the meaning nature of the focused item. Fillmore concludes this in his statement that, "Nobody could be said to know the meaning of any linguistic expression who did not know the details of the kind of scene which provided the background and motivation for the categories" (Fillmore, 2003:378). From our data, we can say that meaning is dependent on the context of use; that is, the frame structures the word meaning and propagates the change. In the second part of the data analysis, we look at meaning shift using Egudu's categorization of positive negativity showing a shift in meaning.

Table 2: Describing as bad what it is naturally good

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning (shifted meaning)
21. <i>Ō nwèrè ajō egō</i>	He has <i>bad</i> money	He has <i>so much</i> money
22. <i>Nwunyè ya kpūchàrà yà isi</i>	His wife <i>barbed</i> his hair	His wife <i>dealt with him badly</i>
23. <i>Ire nà-àto yā ùto</i>	Her <i>tongue sweetens</i> her	She is a <i>glutton</i>
24. <i>Ire Ādā dī nkō</i>	Ada's <i>tongue is sharp</i>	Ada is a <i>gossip</i>
25. <i>Ugbòala à nà-àgba ajō ōsō</i>	This vehicle <i>runs badly</i>	This vehicle is <i>very fast</i>

As observed in examples (21) -(25), there are occurrences of semantic shift where frames either in negative perspective has its meaning shifting to a positive perspective and vice versa. For instance, in (21), the sentence "Ō nwèrè *ajō egō*" means "He has *so much* money" (at a figurative level and meaning shift), but by the use of the word *ajō* to qualify *egō*, a negative element is introduced which in the context have lost its literal meaning of

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“bad” to function as an intensifier. Similarly, observe that *ajō* is used in (25) to mean "speed/fastness", the negative lexical item *ajō* shifts from its negative connotation and meaning of “bad” to qualify *osọ*, thereby implying “speed/fastness” in its figurative meaning, giving the sentence a positive connotation. This similar figurative use can also be seen on (43) in Table (6) where *ajō* is used to connote “strength” as in strong. In sentence (22), the sentence Nwunyè ya *kpùchàrà yà isi* “his wife barbed his hair” has a positive meaning literally, but figuratively its context of use acquires a negative meaning and a shift in meaning to connote “his wife dealt with him”. Sentence (23), *Ire nà-àtọ yā ùtọ* which has no negative connotation, and which denotes "her tongue sweetens her", experiences a shift in its meaning to mean that the person in question is a "glutton". Likewise, in the sentence (24), the sentence which has a positive connotation, the lexical item *nkọ* in its literal sense implies “sharp”, shifts its meaning in the context to “gossip” and also acquires a negative connotation. The meaning shifts presented in the data as shown in (21) - (25) in table two, simply describe as bad what is naturally good.

Table 3: Describing excellent performance or achievement in terms of destructive action

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning / shifted meaning
26. <i>Òbí rìrì amōsū n' ākwūkwō</i>	Obi <i>chewed witchcraft in the book</i>	Obi is <i>exceptionally intelligent</i>
27. <i>Ọ pīāsàrà fonù ahù</i>	He <i>scattered the phone</i>	He <i>operates the phone excellently well</i>
28. <i>Ọkụ ègbuka ọchù</i>	<i>The fire has committed murder</i>	Food is ready
29. <i>Nri à àtọgbue ñmādù</i>	This food has <i>killed someone</i>	The food is quite <i>delicious</i>
30. <i>Ọ nwègbùrù ònwe yā n'uchè</i>	He <i>killed himself with knowledge</i>	He is <i>extremely sensible</i>

The category involved in the analyses of the data in the table (3) above sees the data describing excellent performances or achievement in terms of destructive actions, thereby shifting the meaning from negative to positive and vice versa. Observe that literally, example (26) denotes a wicked act in its literal context which means “S/he is a witch or she ate witchcraft in books” but figuratively *amōsū* implies “excellence” rather than “witchcraft”, this is a case of a shift from negative meaning to a positive one.

Also, in sentence (27), an excellent performance is described in terms of a destructive action where *pīasàrà* which means "scatter", but figuratively means “operates excellently”. In (28) an inanimate object *ọkụ* commits a destructive action of “killing” in its literal meaning but figuratively implies that it has facilitated the “the readiness of food” in record time. Sentence (29), another negative connotation of a criminal act is implied literally by the lexical item *tọgbue* “sweet-kill” to figuratively mean “delicious”, this is yet another case of meaning shift. The same case applies in (30) where the literal meaning of “self-annihilation” implies “extremely sensible” in the figurative sense. Thus, when the lexical items are used in isolation, their meanings are retained, but when used in relation with other lexical items, their meaning shifts as captured in the sentences.

Table 4: Describing a virtue or an achievement in terms of physical or moral defect

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
31. <i>Egō nà-àsa yā āvō</i>	<i>Money is purging him</i>	He is extremely rich
32. <i>Akwūkwọ nà-àgba yā ālā</i>	<i>Book is running him mad</i>	He is very studious
33. <i>Èkpere nà-èchu yā ūlā</i>	Prayer is <i>causing him sleepless nights</i>	He is prayerful

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34. Àda bù <i>apụ n'anwū</i>	Ada doesn't <i>go out when the sun is out</i>	Ada is beautiful
35. <i>Mma nà-àtu yā àtu</i>	Her <i>beauty intoxicates</i> her	Her beauty makes her proud

The importance of context in depicting the meaning of lexical items cannot be overemphasized as Egudu (1972) states "...in any case, what meaning a word or a sentence has in any language depends primarily on the context of the usage". Here the sentences involved figuratively represent a virtue or an achievement in terms of physical or moral defect. Sentence (31), in Anam dialect, the physical defect of "purging" *Egō nà-àsa yā āvō*, shifts in its figurative sense to mean "extremely rich". In (32), the lexical item *ala* "madness" as spoken in Anam dialect shifts in its meaning as a result of the context of its use to mean "studious". In (33), the physical defect of "sleepless night" shifts in its meaning to accommodate the fact that one is "prayerful". In (34), the meaning shift involves a moral defect, where the literal meaning of the sentence *Àda bù apụ n'anwū* denotes "Ada doesn't go out when the sun is out", but the figurative meaning connotes that "Ada is beautiful". This context can also derogatorily connote "laziness" as the moral defect of a person. Sentence (35) also involves a meaning shift associated with the moral defect of pride; here the literal meaning of the lexical item *àtu* "intoxicates" shifts figuratively to mean "pride" in the context of its use.

Table 5: Describing a happy situation in terms of a sad incident

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning (shifted meaning)
36. <i>Kà avĩa gĩ gba ọkū</i>	May your goods <i>catch fire</i> today	May you make more sales today
37. <i>Azụ riri ñsị n'avĩa</i>	<i>Fish ate shit</i> in the market	Fish was dog-cheap in the market
38. <i>Egō yā bù ñsị ọbàgù</i>	His money is <i>duck shit</i>	He has lots of money
39. <i>Anụ nà-àkwa dī n'avĩa</i>	Meat mourns its husband in the market	Meat is plentiful in the market
40. <i>Àda mebirì ya isi</i>	Ada <i>spoilt</i> his <i>head</i>	He is madly/deeply in love with Ada

The meaning shift in this section involves a happy situation described in terms of a sad incident. In sentence (36), the lexical item *ọkū* shifts from its literal meaning of "fire" to mean in the context of its use "good sales". In (37), the lexical item *ñsị*, also shifts from its original meaning of "shit", to mean "cheap", as a result of the context of its use. This same shift that is seen in (37) occurs in the same manner in the sentence (38). Sentence (39) experiences a shift; likewise, the meaning of the lexical item "to mourn" *ikwā* is figuratively based on the context "plentiful". In (40), the lexical item "spoilt head" *mebirì isi* shifts in its meaning to denote "deeply in love".

Table 6: Describing a man of excellence in terms of a wicked/evil spirit or animal

Data	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
41. <i>Ọ bù nwa mba</i>	He is a <i>child of a cat</i>	He is very clever
42. <i>Èmekà bù mgbàdà</i>	Emeka is an <i>antelope</i>	He is strong
43. <i>Ọ bù ajō ānū</i>	He is a bad	He is strong

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	animal	
44. Ọ bụ <i>mmụọ mmīrī</i>	She is a <i>water spirit</i>	She is very <i>beautiful</i>
45. Ọ bụ <i>òkòsò</i>	He is a <i>snail</i>	He dances <i>marvelously well</i>

The examples in table (6) in their literal sense refer to; “wickedness, destruction, and evil” depending on the context of its use. The noun *m̄ba* which in its literal sense in sentence (41) means “cat” shifts in its meaning to connote “cleverness”. In (42), *m̄gbàdà* shifts to mean “a fast runner” rather than an “antelope”. The lexical items *ajō ānū* in (43) figuratively mean “a strong man” rather than its literal meaning of “a bad animal”. *Mmụọ mmīrī* in (44) refers to “water spirit” but in the context of its use implies “a very beautiful lady”. In sentence (45) the lexical item *òkòsò* which denotes “snail” in the context of its use, shifts its meaning to imply “a good dancer”.

As shown above, the five categories of meaning shifts are only a few out of the many that may be present in the language. For instance, Egenti (2018) confirms that there are more categories of this special class of idioms as she identifies three of them such as describing a good person in terms of an ugly person, describing/showing a person in terms of a destructive and/or an ugly situation, and describing a piece of advice/warning in terms of destructive action. This simply shows that this work has not only provided copious data to demonstrate a shift in the meaning of lexical items or phrasal expressions but that there is still room for further research on meaning shifts and/or semantic extensions in the Igbo language as word constantly change their meanings in daily discourse.

Conclusion

This work has shown that meaning change is inevitable in all languages. Likewise, these changes occur daily, unconscious to the speakers as they converse. The study has also observed that a word can broaden its meaning by accommodating a new meaning based on its linguistic context(s), without losing its literal meaning. On the other hand, some words have come to be associated with particular contexts as in the case of narrowing; while some others retain their literal meaning even when they are used in the figurative sense. However, this study avers that the literal meaning of a lexical item may be lost because of its frequent use in different contexts. It has also exemplified that; when words are used figuratively, they tend to change their meanings as they are used constantly by speakers of the language in everyday discourse to add color and aesthetic quality to their speech.

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