ON IDIOMS IN IGBO DICTIONARIES

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Abstract

This paper examines how idioms are accounted for in Igbo dictionaries. Five (5) Igbo dictionaries and three (3) English dictionaries were examined to ascertain the positioning of idioms in dictionaries. The Igbo dictionaries used for the study include the Igbo–English dictionaries by Welmers and Welmers (1968), Igwe (1999), Eke (2001), Echeruo (2012) and Akponye (2014), while the English dictionaries are the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, *The Chambers Dictionary*, and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)*. The approach adopted in this study is purely descriptive, and the method used in examining the selected Igbo dictionaries involves a look up of some common idioms. The method was devised basically because most Igbo dictionaries examined lacked the outside matter idiom index that is available in the English dictionaries. It can therefore be confirmed that idioms are neglected in Igbo dictionaries. Consequently, the study makes a twofold proposal. First, that idioms should be included in Igbo dictionaries by adopting the format that allows an idiom to be listed under the first noun in the sequence of words that make up the idiomatic expression, and reference should be made to all the nouns in the idiom where there is more than one noun in the idiomatic expression. Secondly, a dictionary of idioms where idioms are entered as head words in their own right should be compiled for the Igbo language.

1.0 Introduction

Lexicographers are most times faced with some challenges in their attempt to compile dictionaries. Among the problems that confront the lexicographer is the appropriate presentation of multi-word expressions in dictionary and of the multiword expressions contained in the dictionary, idioms constitute the most problematic due to their complex nature.

From the traditional point of view, idioms are seen as fixed expressions whose meanings are arbitrary and therefore cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituents. Based on this traditional view, idioms are classified into lexical and phrasal idioms (Katz and Postal (1963) in Langlotz (2006)). The lexical idioms are dominated by one of the lowest syntactic categories such as noun, verb, adjective etc and are said to behave as lexical units while the phrasal idioms like spill the bean, kick the bucket have complex internal structure and are usually subject to inflectional agreement rules. Furthermore it has been adduced that idioms are often constructed

on the basis of dead metaphors, that is, metaphors that must have been originally transparent and productive but whose form-meaning connections have been frozen.

Another view of idioms however is that idiomatic expressions do not form a homogeneous non-compositional class but rather a highly heterogeneous community which lie on a continuum of compositionality (http/www.ucl.ac.uk/pal/researchlinguistics/publication/wpl/03papres/rosa).

Those who hold this view opine that the relation between meaning and form can be established for some idioms. Furthermore, they opine that the meanings of elements contained in idioms often play a role in the way idiom strings are understood in conversation.

The study by Katsarou (2011) is a comprehensive study on English idioms that combines descriptive and theoretical perspectives to explore how idioms function within the lexicon of the English language, discussing idioms at syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. The work focuses on idiomatic expressions and their complexities, addressing how idioms challenge standard compositional semantics. The study also delves into different linguistic models that have been proposed to understand idioms, including transformational grammar and semantic decomposition. Key theoretical figures, including Katz, Postal, Weinreich, and Fraser, are discussed in the context of their contributions to idiomaticity, and various approaches to classifying and analyzing idioms are reviewed. The work further discusses idioms' role in second language acquisition and suggests frameworks for researching idiom comprehension in ESL/EFL contexts.

All languages make use of idioms and these idioms function as a natural reflection of customs, cultural belief, social conventions and norms (Yagiz & Izadpanah, 2013). In addition, idioms are often used in everyday expressions and also encountered in literary works and this means that there is the tendency of looking up the meaning of idioms in dictionary. Against this back drop, this study attempts to examine existing Igbo dictionaries in order to ascertain how idioms are positioned in them. Furthermore, it proposes for the inclusion of idioms in Igbo dictionaries and a subsequent compilation of Igbo dictionary of idioms since there is no existing one in the language. The rest of the paper is organized as follows; section 2 reviews concepts relevant to the study while section 3 provides the methodology. In Section 4, the data is presented and analyzed. Section 5 forms the conclusion of the study. In the section that follows, we attempt a review of studies on idioms.

2.0 Studies on Idioms

Adopting the three circles approach, an approach developed to access the extent of the dominance of English in other countries, Adeyanju (2009) attempts a classification of Nigerian English idioms with the aim of determining the idioms that could be regarded as standard and non-standard. He classifies idioms that are stable in formal usage as standard while those that do not satisfy the criteria are labeled non-standard idioms. The standard idioms category according to the author have the same semantic sense with the native English idioms but are structurally different from their exact native English idioms while the non-standard subsumes idioms restricted to colloquial usage as well as fairly recent Nigerian English idioms. The examples of the standard and non-standard Nigerian English idioms are shown in 1 and 2

1 Standard Nigerian English idioms

Idiom	*Meaning*
To take in	to become pregnant
Son of the soil	an indigene of a place
Kola	a bribe

2. Non-Standard Nigerian English idioms

Idioms	*Meaning*
To eye a person	to seduce
Sweet sixteen	a good looking lady looking younger than her age
To be in soup	to be involved in a big problem
Woman wrapper	one who is excessively fond of women
Aso rock	a heavily fortified and impenetrable building.

Adeyanju (2009) further asserts that in the context of globalization, idiomatic variations have implications for standardization in the areas of length of usage, degree of formal usage, social acceptability and international intelligibility.

In a study on the Nigerianization of idioms, Nwachukwu (1993) notes that the Nigerian user of foreign idioms, apart from converting their verbal picture to resemble what will make meaning in his social and cultural environment, also strips the idioms of particles that are considered

unnecessary for the speech performance demand of his culture. Instances provided by the author to buttress this claim are shown below:

3aEnglish : Don't take the law into your own hand
Nigerian user: Don't take laws into your hands
b.English: He believes in gaining advantages by hook or by crook
Nigerian user: He believes in gaining advantage by hook or crook
c.English: Out of the frying pan into the fire
Nigerian user : From frying pan to fire.

Nwachukwu (1993) notes that where the crucial word in an idiom does not invite the imagination of the Nigerian user, he simply removes or modifies them as shown in the examples in 4:

4a.English version: Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander
Nigerian version: What is good for the goose is good for the gander
b. English version: Don't drag someone else's name through the mire
Nigerian version: Don't drag someone else name in the mud.

The examples in 3 show instances of omissions of articles considered irrelevant by the Nigerian user. In 4a, Nigerian version, the word sauce is replaced with good while in 4b, the word mire in 4a, is replaced with mud.

Galal (2014) applies the conceptual metaphor theory to English- Arabic idioms with the aim of ascertaining the relevance of the theory to idioms of equivalent linguistic form and different conceptual foundations. The study reveals that the main source of difference between the idioms is ascribed to cultural encoding which is evident at the specific level cultural metaphors. He also notes that although the two languages share such metaphors as HEART IS CONTAINER, HEART IS A MOVABLE OBJECT, THE HAND STANDS FOR PERSON etc, that the primary metaphors are differently manipulated by each culture along various cultural parameters.

From a critical point of view, Okolo (1985) claims that such theories as generative grammar, substitution theory, comparison theory and semantic feature analysis postulated to account for idioms and other fixed expressions do not bring out the important factors that are crucial in the interpretation of these fixed expressions. Furthermore, he opines that several linguistic considerations such as beliefs of the users, the way they view the world around them, cultural attitudes , values and natural phenomena that exist in the society which all contribute to the interpretation of idioms are not captured by these theories.

Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) distinguish such idiomatically combining expressions as 'take advantage', 'pull strings' whose meanings are said to be distributed among their parts, from idiomatic phrases like 'kick the bucket', 'saw logs' which do not distribute their meanings to their components. According to them, "a careful examination of the semantic properties of idioms and the metaphors that many of them employ helps to explain certain intriguing asymmetries in the grammatical and thematic roles of idiomatic noun phrases" (p. 491). Similarly, McGregor (2009) also observes that though "the meaning of an idiom is not predictable from the words that make it up; in many cases it is possible to guess some motivation for it"

Gibbs (1994) cited in (Cameron and Low, 1999) adopts a psycholinguistic approach, according to which the metaphorical basis of idioms provides the link between them and their non literal meaning. According to Gibbs (1994) in Cameron and Low (1999) it means that the meaning of many idiomatic phrases draw on various metonymic and metaphorical schemes used during the interpretation process. Having reviewed the works done on idioms, we look at some theories of idioms.

Oweleke (2022) explores the lexicographic treatment of Igbo idioms and fixed collocations. The author analyzes how idioms are documented in various Igbo-English dictionaries and highlights the challenges of translating idiomatic expressions due to their cultural specificity. The study reveals inconsistencies in how lexicographers handle idioms, with varying degrees of coverage and headword status. The study calls for a more systematic approach to handling idioms to enhance usability. The present paper agrees with Oweleke's observations and further proposes formats for the presentation of idioms in both specialized and general Igbo dictionaries. The section explores theories of idioms

2.1 Theories of idioms.

Over the years, the nature of idioms has caused researchers to theorize on how this linguistic element should be handled. These theories are examined in this section beginning with the configuration hypothesis proposed by Cacciary & Tabossi (1988) in Havrila (2009) which suggests that idioms should be grouped together with other memorized strings such as parts of poems, titles of songs, lyrics or any other sequence of words represented and distributed in the lexicon. The hypothesis further emphasizes the compositional nature of idioms, which assumes that idioms are not treated as long words but rather as configurations of words.

Another approach to the study of idioms is proposed by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988:501). The approach could be referred to as an integrative approach. The grammatical model that suits this frame will include principles whereby a language can associate semantic and pragmatic interpretation principles with syntactic configurations larger and more complex than those definable by means of single phrase structure rules.

The idiom list hypothesis proposed by Bobror and Bell (1973) consider idioms as fixed expressions whose meanings are listed in a special idiom module. The module is consulted when the meaning of an idiom is sought from the idiom list.

The lexicalization hypothesis is another theory of idiom proposed by Swinney and Cutler (1979) that provide an account of how people understand familiar idioms. According to this hypothesis, when people encounter idioms, two operations namely linguistic processing and retrieval from phrasal lexicon are engaged in, in a bid to understand the idiom. The hypothesis further claims that familiar idioms are understood more quickly because the access to stored idioms operation is completed first before the linguistic operation which usually include syntactic and semantic processing.

The direct idiomatic access model proposed by Gibbs (1984) disagrees with the parallel operation suggested by lexicalization hypothesis based on what it considers the speed of idiom comprehension which negates the issue of operation and its completion as proposed by Swinney and Cutler (1979).

Sprenger, Levelt and Kempen (2006) cited in Havrila (2009) propose the super lemma theory. The model suggests that an idiom has its unitary idiomatic concept that activates the individual lemmas it is composed of, but the lemmas are not exclusively bound to one idiomatic meaning. Thus, an idiomatic expression is represented in the lexicon and activated by a superlemma that relates to a specific lexical concept which in turn activates the single lemmas comprising the superlemma. They opine that the concept of *´dying´* for instance will activate the superlemma *kick the bucket* which subsequently activates the individual lemmas *kick*, *the*, and *bucket*. In addition, the concept of *´dying´* can activate any other superlemma such as *to bite the dust*, or *to breathe one's last*, and those will compete for production in the actual speech the same way as simple lemmas do in the case of non-idiomatic speech .

Following from the different hypothesis and theories of idioms, it can be deduced that these different authors are interested in how idioms are stored and understood. Though the super lemma theory diverges from comprehension to production, it does not really give an account of idioms from the lexicographic point of view. We will therefore examine the views of lexicographers on how idioms should be treated in dictionary to guide our suggestion for the inclusion of idioms in Igbo dictionaries and our further proposal for a dictionary of Igbo idioms.

2.2 Presentation of Idioms in Dictionaries

The problematic nature of idioms with regard to their presentation in dictionaries have been noted by lexicographer hence their attempt to provide some insight to the positioning of idioms in dictionaries.

According to Stevenson (2009), there are two options with regard to the positioning of idioms in dictionaries. The first option is that the idiom be entered as an indication in the entry of one of the component words while that second option entails entering the idiom as either an independent lemma or a sublemma. Stevenson (2009) further notes that presenting an idiom as an indication apart from violating the notion of an idiom as an independent lexical item, does not convey information about the syntagmatic and semantic properties of one of its component words rather the indication usually occupies an isolated position in relation to the description of the words. The second option for him favours the independent nature of the idiom but comes with difficulties such as deciding which one of the idiom's component words that will form the basis of positioning in the lemma list.

For Atkins and Rundel (2008), idioms can be entered in the dictionary adopting one of the following five ways:

a. The first option is to enter the idiom under the first or only lexical (not grammatical) word. If we adopt this option, the idiom Akụ fechaa, Ọ dara awọ would appear under Akụ which is the first lexical word in the sequence of words that make up the idiom.

b.The idiom can be entered under the least frequent lexical word or the word that has the shortest dictionary entry. Though this option appears to be more suitable for languages with 'dictionaries' so as to help determine the least lexical word, the igbo idiom Aka ajaaja nebụte ọnụ mmanụ mmanụ following this option, would appear either under the entry for ajaaja (sandy) or mmanụ mmanu (oily).To remedy situations such as this, we suggest that where there are more than one less frequent lexical word, the first word that satisfies the criteria should be cross referenced to the second.

c. Another way is to enter the idiom under the first or only noun in the phrase.

d. Idioms can also be entered under the first or only verb in the phrase. Following this method, the idiom Chọọ ewu di oji ka chi di would appear under the verb chọọ.

e. The fifth option is to enter the idiom as a head word in its own right. This would mean having individual entries for the idioms Akụ fechaa, Ọ dare awọ, Chọọ ewu di oji ka chi di and Aka ajaaja nebụte ọnụ mmanụ mmanụ.

From the following proposals on idiom presentation in dictionaries, it becomes more glaring that idioms have a complicated nature which it translates to lexicographers who are often in a dilemma as par the most suitable method to adopt in their lexicographic work. However, it is important that the method of presentation finally chosen by the lexicographer should be clearly stated in the style guide such that users will be clearly guided.

Having looked at the different methods proposed for presenting idioms, we present the method adopted in this study and proceed to examine what is obtainable in some selected English and Igbo dictionaries.

3.0 Methodology

The approach adopted in this study is the descriptive approach. Five Igbo dictionaries and three English dictionaries were used for the study. The positioning and presentation of idioms were examined in these dictionaries. The absence of the user guide and the outside matter idiom index in the Igbo dictionaries necessitated our use of some idioms that are common for the look-up. Some of idioms which include Akụ fechaa, Ọ dara awọ , Ụkpana Okpoko gburu, nti chiri ya, I mara asụ, I sụọ n'odo, I maghi asụ, I sụọ n'ala , E nenie nwa ite, Ọ gbọnyụọ ọkụ, Anụ gbaala taa,

echi bụ nta were looked up in the Igbo dictionaries. The English dictionaries were used as a control and the subsequent findings guided our conclusion.

4.0 Idioms in English and Igbo Dictionaries

In the Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary, idioms are presented as indications under the lemma. The format is such that these idioms are separated from the polysemy structure but not from the whole syntagmatic block. There is also the use of cross-reference, explanation of the idiom and the use of the idioms in context. The following table is an illustrative.

Table 1

5 Raincheck IDM take a rain check → to refuse an offer or invitation but say that you might accept it later. Usage: Can I take a raincheck?
6 Linen IDM see wash (v) IDM wash your dirty linen I public →to discuss personal affairs in public especially something embarrassing

In the Websters dictionary and the Chambers dictionary of the English language, idioms are generally sparingly treated and where they are presented, they are usually stated in bold face as part of the lemma without any indication. There is also no use of cross-reference in the two dictionaries as shown in table 2 below

Table 2

7 Stick - **Stick one's neck out** : to make oneself vulnerable by taking risk
8 Stitch – **in stitches**: in a state of uncontrollable laughter. Usage: He had us all in stitches
9 Fall – **Fall on ones sword**: to sacrifice one's pride or position **Fall between two stools**: to fail because of inability to choose between two conflicting sources of action.

With regard to the presentation format for idioms in Igbo dictionaries, the Igbo dictionaries by Eke (2001), Echeruo (2012), Akponye (2011), Welmers and Welmers (1968) made no effort to

include idioms in lemma list. However, in the Igbo dictionary by Igwe (1999), few idioms were included following no particular format of positioning idioms in dictionaries. Furthermore some of the explanations given by the author do not synchronize with our view though it is not within the scope of the present paper to delve into the issue. Some idiomatic expressions in Igwe's dictionary are shown in table 3

Table 3

10 Aka – ime aka azu: to be hypocritical
11 Azu – inwe azu: to have a good background

From our investigation of existing Igbo dictionaries, it is obvious that existing Igbo dictionaries are deficient in data selection particularly inner selection, that is, selection of information to be given about lemmas. Furthermore, it is expected that dictionaries should describe authentic usage which is evident in the language. This requirement is not met by Igbo dictionaries with regard to Igbo idioms because the usage of idioms though evidenced in Igbo is not reflected in most dictionaries of the Igbo language. Also from the point of view of the dictionary as a means of solving linguistic problem, the Igbo dictionaries examined appears not to have solved the problem of multiword expressions particularly idioms. This is a gap that if properly bridged, will enhance the relevance of Igbo dictionary to the needs of users. Section 4.1 following, provides our proposed format for the inclusion of idioms in Igbo dictionaries.

4.1 Proposed format for the inclusion of Idioms in Igbo dictionaries

Our proposal is for unilateral bilingual dictionaries because most of the Igbo dictionaries consulted bear that form. We adapt in this proposal for the inclusion of idioms into the Igbo – English unilateral bilingual dictionary, a slightly modified version of the third method proposed by Atkins and Rundel (2008). We therefore suggest that:

Idioms should be entered under the first noun in the sequence of words that make up the idiomatic expression and where there is more than one noun in an idiomatic expression; reference should be made to all the nouns in the idiom.

Peradventure these Igbo –English dictionaries are revised to include idioms, this proposed format would be brought to bear as shown below

12 Chọọ ewu dị oji ka chi dị. This idiomatic expression would appear as follows in a unilateral Igbo English bilingual dictionary

Ewu N. Goat **IDM**. Chọọ ˜ ojii ka chi dị. I bido n'oge gbawa mbọ. Make hay while the sun shines. Ọ dị mkpa na ị chọbara ewu ojii ugbua chi dị. Chi.

13.Kpoo ahịhịa ka ọ bere otu ụkpa

Ahịhịa. N.Debris **IDM**. Kpoo ˜ ka o bere otu ụkpa. Ime ihe mgbe ọ ka dị mfe. A stitch in time saves nine. Ọ maghị na ọ ka mma ikpo ahịhịa ka o bero otu ụkpa. Ụkpa.

14 Anụ bu ụzọ naaṅu mmiri ọma

Anụ N. meat **IDM**. ˜ bu ụzọ na-aṅu mmiri ọma. Onye na-atụfughị oge ime ihe ga-eri uru karịa ndị ọzọ. The early bird catches the worms. Mmiri

15 Akpataghi akụ na akpata ntụkwụba oṅụ

Akụ. Wealth. **IDM**. Akpataghị ˜ na akpata ntụkwụba ọnụ. Enweghi ego na-eme ka atụfuo nsọpụrụ ruuru mmadụ. Poverty breeds contempt . Ọnụ .

16 Ịchụ oke ma ọkụ na-agba

Oke. Rat **IDM**. Ịchụ ˜ ma ọkụ na agba. Ịhapụ ihe ka mkpa mewe ihe na-abaghị uru. Fiddle while Rome burns. Ọ bụ naani onye nzuzu ga na-achụ oke ebe ọkụ na-agba be ya . ọkụ

The proposed format of presentation in 12-16 is such that allow idioms to be separated from the polysemy structure and the entire syntagmatic block by highlighting and placing them in a special idiom (**IDM**) section. There is also the use of idioms in context and cross reference to other nouns contained in the idiomatic expression. The tilde (˜) serve as a replacement of the lemma.

However for an Igbo –English dictionary of idioms, we suggest that idioms be entered as head words in their own right as proposed by Atkins and Rundel (2008). Following this method, we will have such entries as shown below

17 Akụ fechaa, Ọ dara awọ. What goes up must come down.

18 Akpataghị akụ na akpata ntukwụba ọnụ. Poverty breeds contempt

19 Anụ bu ụzọ na-aṅụ mmiri ọma. The early bird catches the worms

20 Chọọ ewu ojii ka chi dị. Make hay while the sun shines.

21 Ịchụ oke ma ọkụ na-agba. Fiddle while Rome burns.

22 Kpoo ahịhịa ka o bere otu ụkpa. A stitch in time saves nine.

5.0 Conclusion

This study examined Igbo dictionaries to see how idioms are treated in them. Our interest in this study stems from the fact that idioms when employed in speech and writing enliven the speech and style of writing thus making both very interesting. Furthermore, there is often the need to look up the meaning of idioms in dictionaries and this is not often an easy task because most times these idioms are listed under the first word in the sequence of words that make up the idiom or under the semantically heaviest word in the idiomatic expression. This non steady listing obviously makes it difficult for the dictionary user to decide where to look for the idiom.

We have also put forward suggestions on how idioms should be positioned both in the general dictionary and in a dictionary of idioms. However, it is worthy to note that despite the option adopted, there is need to provide information on the outside matter idiom index of the dictionary. With regard to the compilation of a dictionary of idioms, it is a worthy adventure in that an Igbo dictionary of idioms will facilitate the quick look-up of idioms.

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