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## Semantic Fields and Collocational Restriction: Insights from Igbo

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### Abstract

*This work has considered the field theory in semantics which has to do with semantic fields and collocation. It is an established fact that there exists an inter-related network of words or what we call semantic field. Words of a language belong to different groups, words of each groups are related in one way or the other and are said to belong to the same semantic field. Based on their relationship there is always a collocational restriction in their usage. These networks and collocation are built on sense relations in a language (Syal and Jindal 155). Based on this fact, some sense relations were considered in this work in order to bring the term 'semantic field' home. Some collocates obtainable in Igbo were identified. Furthermore, the three kinds of collocational restrictions identified by (Palmer 79) were analyzed and illustrated using Igbo examples. However, it was also noted that just as some other languages, collocational restrictions are not applicable to all lexical items in Igbo. In other words, some words have no specific collocational restrictions.*

### Introduction

Some theories of semantics have been developed, which deal with the meanings of words and sentences not as isolated entities but as related to situations of occurrence and use. Field theory developed in Europe by Trier explains the vocabulary or lexicon of a language as a system of inter-related networks or semantic fields.

According to (Crystal 429), semantic theory is an approach which developed in 1930s. It has the view that the vocabulary of a language is not simply a listing of independent items (as the head word in a dictionary may suggest), but is organized into areas within which words interrelate and define each other in various ways. Words that are inter-related may belong to the same semantic field, e.g. 'flower', 'bloom', 'bud', belong to the same field. There may also be an overlapping between fields, e.g. the field of 'flower' and 'tree' may overlap in relation to such as 'plant', 'grow' This is also the basis of the idea of collocation, since collocated items are those which habitually co-occur with certain other items, e.g. 'flowers collocate with 'bloom', 'letters with writing'. These networks and collocation are built on sense relations in a language (Syal and Jindal 155).

### **Semantic Fields**

Words can be divided into semantic categories called semantic fields. According to (Denham and Lobeck 294), semantic fields are classifications of words associated by their meaning. Semantic fields may vary across speakers and words may belong to more than one category. These may include: clothing, parts of the body, emotion, directions etc. For instance, trousers, hat, loafers, shirt, blouse, high heels etc., belong to the same semantic category as 'clothing'.

The case of semantic fields is evidenced in slip of tongue. Though slip of tongue can be phonetic, phonological, morphological as well as semantic, speakers rarely, if ever, make random substitutions when producing a slip of tongue.

**Example in English:**

**Intended Utterance**

(1a). He's going uptown

(2a). You have too many irons in the fire

(3a). That's a horse of another colour

**Actual Utterance**

(1b). He's going down town

(2b). You have too many irons in the smoke

(3b). That's a horse of another race

(Adapted from the Fromkin Speech Error Database in Denham and Lobeck 295)

**Examples from Igbo:**

**Intended utterance**

(4a). Ó nà - ásù ánwùru 'It's smoking'

(5a). Ó nà -ásù ánwùrù 'It's smoking'

(6a). Ûbé à èjíélá 'This pear is ripe'

(7a). Ókā à àkáálá 'This corn is mature'

**Actual Utterance**

\*(4b). Ó nà - ásù ókū

\*(5b). Ó nà-ápù ánwùrù

\*(6b). Ûbé à àcháálá

\*(7b). Ókā à àcháálá

From the above English and Igbo examples, in example 1, the semantic fields involving both up and down might be directions, examples, 4 and 5, fire and smoke, things having to do with fire, examples 6 and 7, semantic fields having to do with the verb 'ripe' and so on. Furthermore, in addition to slip of tongue, aphasia provides us with evidence of how words might be stored in the brain. Many people, who suffer from aphasia (language deficit as the result of trauma to the brain,) suffer from lexical access problems and are not able to produce the word they intend but often select a related word. For example: table for chair, boy for girl, knife for fork. This suggests that words that are semantically related (words existing in the same semantic field) are stored together in the brain (Denham and Lobeck 294).

### **Semantic Fields in Igbo**

This concept of semantic fields abounds in languages. For example, in the Igbo language some words belong to the same semantic field. The concept semantic field is clearly illustrated using the sense relations.

#### **(8). Ákwà/Ûwé ‘clothing’**

- (a). nìkà, ‘short’ (b). ìchàfù, ‘head tie’ (c). òkpú, ‘hat’  
(d). mgbánáká ‘bangle’ (e). ólà ntì ‘ear ring’ (f). ólà ólū, ‘necklace’  
(g). ákpúkpwúkpwū, ‘shoe’ (h). ògòdò ‘wrapper’ etc.

#### **(9). Ọkú ‘fire’**

- (a). ọkú, ‘fire’ (b). ìhè ‘light’(c). ánwùrù, ‘smoke’

#### **(10). Ụzò ‘direction’**

- (a).élu, ‘up’ (b).àlà, ‘down’(c).àzú, ‘back’ (d).ìhú, ‘front’  
(e).ákùkù, ‘side’ (f).áká ñrī, ‘right hand’ (g).áká èkpè, ‘left hand’  
(h).ñsò, ‘near’ (i).òtèáká/ ányá, ‘far’ (j).mgbágó, ‘upwards’  
(k).mgbádà ‘downwards’ (l).úzò ‘road’

#### **(11). m̀kp̀ur̀ú̀ós̀ís̀í ‘fruits’**

- (a). òrómá, ‘orange’ (b). ùdàrà, ‘apple’ (c). ùbé, ‘pear’  
(d). ákí óyibó, ‘coconut’ (e). ákwólū, ‘pineapple’

#### **(12). Heavenly Bodies**

- (a). ọnwá, ‘moon’ (b). kpákpándò, ‘star’ (c). ánwū, ‘sun’  
(d). m̀m̀ír̀í ‘water’ (e). ígwē ‘sky’

#### **(13). ụgbó ‘Associated to different types: of sea, land and air mobiles’**

- (a). *úgbó élū*, ‘aeroplane, helicopter etc.’ (b). *úgbó àlà*, ‘vehicle’  
(c). *úgbó mmírī* ‘ship, cargo, canoe etc.’

In each of these terms, the words belonging to the same semantic field are related in one way or the other. This further leads us to the term ‘nyms’. Nyms simply means relationship among words. The case illustrated above can also be handled under the nym ‘hyponymy’.

Hyponymy according to Crystal is a term used in semantics as part of the study of the sense relations which relate lexical items. It is the relationship which obtains between specific and general lexical items such that the former is included in the later. For example, cat is a hyponym of animal, flute of instrument, chair of furniture and so on. In each term, there is a superordinate term sometimes called a ‘hypernym or hyperonym’ with reference to which the subordinate term could be defined, as is the usual practice in dictionary definition (‘a cat is an animal...’) The set of terms which are hyponyms of the same superordinate term are ‘co-hyponyms’. Examples: flute, trumpet, clarinet. A term which is a hyponym of itself in that the same lexical item can operate at both superordinate and subordinate levels is an autohyponyms. For example, cow contrast with horse at the superordinate level but at the subordinate level, it contrast with bull (in effect, a bull is a kind of cow) (233).

Notice from the above Igbo examples that while examples ‘8-13’ are superordinate terms, called hypernym or hyperonym, their respective sub sections (belonging to the same semantic fields respectively) are hyponyms of their respective superordinate term and co-hyponyms in each semantic field respectively. Notice also that examples ‘9’ is a hyponyms as well as hypernym (hyperonym) and thus ‘autohyponyms.’ It is also worthy to note that the

relationship that exist between lexical items is not just of the hyponymy but also antonymy, polysemy, and synonymy. Let us briefly explain these terms with examples from Igbo for illustration.

### **Antonymy**

This is one of a set of sense relations in semantics which forms part of the study of oppositeness of meaning. In its most general sense, it refers collectively to all types of semantic oppositeness with various subdivisions made. (Ndimele 60-66; Ndimele 173) presents two major broad divisions: binary and non-binary contrasts. We shall only consider the binary contrasts (gradable, relational, complementary and directional opposites)

### **Gradable Antonyms**

Antonyms are gradable when they are two ends on a scale and there can be various gradations of two of them. These antonyms express degree in various ways by comparative and superlative morphology in some languages like English. Languages like Igbo does not have a morphological marker for this, however, for such languages, there exists an implied intermediate points on the two extremities of a scale. Ndimele divides gradable antonyms into polarity and hierarchy opposites (173). We shall consider only the polarity opposites using Igbo examples.

### **Examples:**

- |                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| (14). ògàrànyá ≠ ógbènyè | ‘rich’ ≠ ‘poor’        |
| (15). ógólógó ≠ mkpúmkpú | ‘tall’ ≠ ‘short’       |
| (16). élū ≠ àlà          | ‘up’ ≠ ‘down’          |
| (17). nnúkūwū ≠ óbérē    | ‘big’ ≠ ‘small’        |
| (18). nízúzù ≠ àmàmìihé  | ‘foolishness ≠ wisdom’ |

- (19). ókú ≠ óyī                      ‘hot ≠ cold’  
(20). mmā ≠ njó                      ‘beauty ≠ ugliness’

From the above examples, for instance, in example ‘14’, what is considered rich or poor, varies from person to person (what rich means to ‘a’ might be different from what it means to ‘b’). This is also the case in examples ‘15, 17, 18 19 and 20’. This also illustrates the common saying that ‘beauty is in the eyes of the beholder’.

### **Non-Gradable Antonyms**

#### **Relational Antonyms**

This opposition exists in the definition of the reciprocal social roles or spatial relationship. Here, members of each pairs describe a relationship to the other. There is always an interdependence of meaning such that one member of the pair presupposes the other (Ndimele 176; Denham and Lobeck 295-296).

#### **Examples:**

- (21). nné ≠ nnà                      ‘mother ≠ father’  
(22). nwókē ≠ nwányì                      ‘female ≠ male’  
(23). dí ≠ nwúnyè                      ‘husband ≠ wife’  
(24). ónyé nkúzí ≠ nwátàákwúkwo                      ‘teacher ≠ student’  
(25). ényì ≠ ónyé ilò                      ‘friend ≠ enemy’  
(26). ájùjú ≠ ázìzà                      ‘question ≠ answer’

### **Complementary Antonyms**

These may be regarded as a special case of incompatibility which holds between two entities or concepts where the assertion of one implies the denial of the other. These are absolute opposites. If it is one, it can’t be the other.

**Examples:**

- (27). ńnwú ≠ ńdù 'death ≠ life'  
(28). ńmàlító ≠ ògwúgwú 'beginning ≠ end'  
(29). ézíókww̄ ≠ àsí 'truth ≠ false'  
(30). mèghée ≠ mèchié 'open ≠ close'

**Directional Antonyms**

This opposition involves words that can be given spatial interpretation. It commonly exists between words that express the notion of motion in one or two opposing directions with respect to a given place.

**Examples:**

- (31). élū ≠ àlà 'up ≠ down'  
(32). úgwú ≠ ńdídà 'mountain ≠ valley'  
(33). bià ≠ gáá 'come ≠ go'  
(34). ákánrī ≠ ákáèkpè 'right ≠ left'  
(35). òwúwá ányánwū ≠ òdídà ányánwū 'east ≠ west'  
(36). íhú ≠ àzú 'front ≠ back'

**Polysemy**

In this meaning relation, a lexical item has several (apparently) related meanings. This simply entails that the several meanings of a polysemous word must belong to a common semantic field. This is quite different from 'homonymy', a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but different meanings.

**Examples:**

- (37). ńnū 'mouth', 'hole'  
(38). ísí 'head', 'leader', 'eldest'



- |           |                      |
|-----------|----------------------|
| (39). íkè | ‘buttocks,’ ‘bottom’ |
| (40). ódù | ‘tail,’ ‘last child’ |
| (42). chí | ‘God, god’           |

### **Synonymy**

This is a term used in linguistics to refer to a major type of sense relation between lexical items. It is a term used to refer to sameness in meaning. For two items to be synonymous, it does not mean that they must be identical in meaning, i.e. having the same communicative effects in all contexts. Some words are synonymous only in particular context not in all. This is why a distinction is often made between total (complete or absolute) and near (broad) synonyms. Total or absolute synonyms are those words which mean exactly the same thing and have the same communicative effect in all contexts in which they are used. They can be used in the same environments all the time without a change in meaning (Crystal 86; Ndimele 162-165; Denham and Lobeck 297-298).

### **Examples of absolute synonyms in Igbo**

- |                              |                        |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| (43). òmáàdù nílē/ òmáàdùdùm | ‘everybody/all persons |
| (44). ógè nílē/ ógè dùm      | ‘every time            |
| (45). ébé nílē/ébé dùm       | ‘every/all places      |

Absolute synonyms are rare in Igbo. Near or broad synonyms are those words which have the same reference but differ in their associative meanings. They have same communicative effect in some context but not in all. Unlike absolute synonyms, near synonyms are common.

### **Examples of near synonyms in Igbo**

- (46). óbéré, mpe, ntakiri ‘terms used to mean small’  
(47). chá, jí ‘terms used to mean ripe’  
(48). ò, nò, bù ‘is’  
(49). yìrì, díkà ‘resembles’  
(50). kùwáa, pèé, gbùó, gbàjíé, tíwáá ‘all these are terms used to mean break’  
(51). kùó, tié, màá, gbàá, sùò, kèé, zòó, píá ‘all these are terms used to mean beat’

However, these respective synonyms do not operate in the same context. Some of them have their different collocations.

### **Collocations**

This is a term used in lexicology by some (especially Firthian) linguists to refer to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. (Firth 124) in (Palmer 75-76) argues that a word is known by the company it keeps. For him, this keeping company he called collocation, was part of the meaning of a word. It is an established fact that meaning is found in context of situation and all the other levels of analysis as well and by looking at the linguistic context of words we can often distinguish between different meanings. (Nida 98) in (Palmer 76) for instance, discussed the use of chair in:

- sat in a chair
- the baby’s high chair
- the chair of philosophy
- has accepted a university chair
- the chairman of the meeting
- will chair the meeting
- the electric chair
- condemned to the chair

These pairs give four different meanings of the word. This however is addressed in bigger dictionaries. For Palmer, collocation is not simply a matter of association of ideas. For although milk is white, we should not often say white milk but words like white paint is common. Collocation is a type of syntagmatic lexical relation. Although collocation is very largely determined by meaning, it is sometimes fairly idiosyncratic and cannot easily be predicted in terms of the meaning of the associated words. This point according to Palmer is evidenced in Porzig's blond with hair. We cannot associate the word 'blond' with other lexical items like door, dress, and car even if they share the same colour with the hair described as blond. Similarly, rancid occurs only with bacon and butter, addled with egg and brain, sour with milk, even though words like bad and rotten exists in English these words are not used with them. Also, pretty and buxom are associated with females and becomes abnormal when used with males. This characteristic of language is found in extreme forms in the collective words found in English like: flock of sheep, herd of cow, school of whales, and pride of lions. Also, we have dog barks, cat mews, sheep bleats, horse neighs etc. It is worthy to note that some words in English have no specific collocational restrictions. This involves grammatical words such as: the, of after, in. Lexical items which are 'collocated' are said to be collocates of each other; the potential of item to collocate is known as their collocability or collocational range (76).

In line with the foregoing, we shall consider the three kinds of collocational restriction as identified by (Palmer 79).

- Some collocational restrictions are based wholly on the meaning of the item as in: the dog barks, the cat mews, (the collocates here might be plausibly explained based on the noise made by each)

### Some Igbo Examples

Animals and their noise collocates

- (52) *ńkítā nà ùjá* ‘dog and bark’  
(53) *òkúkò nà kòkòrónkòóò* ‘fowl and crow’  
(54) *éwú/átúrū nà òmèèè* ‘goat/sheep and bleat’  
(55) *nwáòlogbó nà miòè* ‘cat and mew’

- Some are based on range - a word may be used with a whole set of words that have some semantic features in common. This accounts for the unlikeliness of ‘The rhododendron passed away’ and equally of ‘the pretty boy’ (pretty being used with words denoting females).

### Igbo Illustrations:

- (56) *Ósísí à àkpóólá* ‘This tree or stick has dried’  
(57). *Ákwā à àkóólá* ‘This cloth has dried’  
(58). *Nwá áhù nà-ètó* ‘That child is growing’  
(59). *Ósísí áhù nà-ámì* ‘That tree is growing or germinating’  
(60). *Òkà áhù nà-èpú* ‘Maize is growing’

Notice that the verb *kpó* ‘dry’ and *kó* ‘dry’ are synonyms belonging to the same semantic field, but while, ‘*kpó*’ has the semantic feature ‘+animate’, ‘*kó*’ has the semantic feature ‘-animate’. Again, the synonyms *nà-ètó*, *nà-ámì* and *nà-èpú* ‘is growing’ belonging in the same semantic field are collocationally restricted in their usage, while ‘*mì*’ and ‘*pú*’ have the semantic features (+animate, -human), ‘*tó*’ has the semantic feature (+animate, +human).

- Some restrictions are collocational in the strictest sense, involving neither meaning nor range, as addled eggs and brain. There are boarder line cases. It might be thought that rancid may be used with animal products of a certain type- perhaps

butter and bacon have something in common. But why not rancid cheese or rancid milk?

### **Igbo Illustrations**

The Igbo examples used for this illustration revolve round the noun and verb categories with their verbal and complement collocates respectively.

### **Igbo Meteorological terms and their Verbal Collocates**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (61). Ánwū nà-àchá, (èké)              | ‘Sun is shining’                              |
| (62). Ọnwá nà-èzí                      | ‘Moon is shining’                             |
| (63). Mmírí nà-àtú, (nà-ézò), (nà-èjí) | ‘Rain is dropping, (falling),<br>(gathering)’ |
| (64). Amuma na-ase’                    | ‘There is lightening’                         |
| (65). Égbè éligwē nà-àgbá              | ‘It’s thundering’                             |
| (66). kpákpándò nà-ámùké               | ‘Star is shining’                             |
| (67). Ígírígí nà-áyò                   | ‘Dew is dropping’                             |
| (68). Chí nà-èjí                       | ‘sun is setting’                              |
| (69). Chí nà-ábò                       | ‘sun rising’                                  |

### **Some of the Igbo fruits and their verbal Collocates**

- |                       |                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| (70). Ákwú ā āchaala  | ‘Palm fruit is ripe’ |
| (71). Ụdàrà à àcháálá | ‘Apple is ripe’      |
| (72). Ụbé ā ējiela    | ‘Pear is ripe’       |
| (73). Ụgū ā akaara    | ‘Pumpkin is mature’  |
| (74). Ọkà àkàárá      | ‘Maize is mature’    |

From the above examples 61-69 the nouns in the subject position belong to the same semantic field and have the different verbs that collocate with each of them. These different verbs however express the action of ‘shining’ or action related to ‘shining’ but take different forms depending on the noun involved.

This is also the case with examples 70-74 where each verb expresses ‘ripe’ or ‘mature.’

### **Igbo Verbs and their complement Collocates**

#### **The Verb of ‘Breaking’**

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| (75). Kùwá ākwā    | ‘break egg’       |
| (76). Pèé ñkū      | ‘split fire wood’ |
| (77). Gbàjíé ósísí | ‘break stick’     |
| (78). Gbàwáá úzò   | ‘break door’      |
| (79). Tiwá īgbē    | ‘break box’       |

#### **The Verbs of ‘Beating’**

- |                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| (80). Gbàá yā ūkwū | ‘Kick him/her’  |
| (81). Zòò yā ūkwū  | ‘Match him/her’ |
| (82). Màá yā òrà   | ‘Slap him/her’  |
| (83). Sùó yā òkpó  | ‘Box him/her’   |
| (84). Kèé yā òkpó  | ‘Knock him/her’ |
| (85). Tié yā īhē   | ‘Beat him/her’  |
| (86). Kùò yā īhē   | ‘Hit him/her’   |
| (87). Pìá yā ùtàrì | ‘Flog him/her’  |

Notice from examples 75-93 that each set of these verbs belongs to the same semantic fields but collocates with restricted complement.

#### **Verbs of ‘sizes and complexion’**

- |                       |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| (88). Ó tòrò ógólógó  | ‘He/She is tall’  |
| (89). Ó sùrù ñkpùñkpù | ‘He/She is short’ |
| (90). Ó pèrè ñpé      | ‘He/She is small’ |
| (91). Ó bùrù íbù      | ‘He/She is big’   |
| (92). Ó di òjí        | ‘He/She is dark’  |

(93). *Ó chàrà òchá*                      ‘He/She is fair’

In example 88-93, each of the verb complement collocates with a restricted verb. This collocational restriction exemplified in examples 61-93 does not involve meaning or range.

### **Summary**

There is an inter-related network of lexical items existing in a language. Each group of words related in one way or the other belongs to the same semantic field. However, in the same field, there are collocates and collocational restrictions attached to their usage which is strictly adhered to in respective languages. In addition to elaborating semantic field in Igbo through sense relation, three different kinds of collocational restrictions as identified by (Palmer 79) were listed and attempt was made in analyzing and illustrating them using Igbo examples.

Finally, it has also been noted that collocational restrictions just as in some other languages are not applicable to all lexical items in Igbo. In other words, some words usually; grammatical words have no specific collocational restrictions.

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