

Classifying Mwaghavul Idioms

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Abstract

This study explores idiomatic expressions and attempts their classification in the Mwaghavul language, a West Chadic language of the Afro-Asiatic phylum spoken in some parts of Plateau State, Nigeria. The study uses data collected in the natural linguistic area of Mwaghavul through face-to-face interviews with seven informants who are competent native speakers of the language. The analysis of the data is carried out within the framework of Peirce's pragmatic theory of meaning and in view of the classification of idioms in significant works in the linguistic literature, notably Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991). The study describes several idiomatic expressions in Mwaghavul language and groups them into two main types, namely opaque idioms, otherwise referred to as decoding idioms (idioms in which there are no obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the idioms' meaning), and transparent idioms otherwise referred to as encoding idioms (idioms in which there are obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the idioms' meaning). The study concludes that these two types of idiomatic expression are used by Mwaghavul native speakers on a daily basis and contribute to the wealth of expression in the language.

Keywords: Idioms, Idiomatic expression, Semantic relations, Mwaghavul

1. Introduction

Idioms exist in virtually all human languages as a tool for measuring or indicating effective communication among native speakers of the languages. Blench (2012) suggests that the study of idioms has been neglected in African indigenous languages. On this note, this article appraises the nature of idiomatic expressions in the Mwaghavul language – a West Chadic language spoken in Mangu Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria with about 150,000 speakers (Blench, Yeeden, & Bess, 2014).

The study adopts Peirce's pragmatic theory of meaning propounded by an American philosopher, Sanders Peirce Charles in the 1870s. The theory appeals to the pragmatic premise while postulating that the meaning of a concept is the sum total of its implication for possible observations and actions. Thus, meanings are not entities or attributes but rather 'relations'. Such relations are analyzed by Peirce in terms of sign, what the sign signifies and the effect or response produced by the signification is pertinent to meaning (Bach, 2012). Thus, metaphoric, ironic or idiomatic expressions require contextual understanding to figure out their true meanings. In light of this, the present study aims at analyzing selected idiomatic expressions in Mwaghavul with a view of classifying them according to their semantic structure.

2. The Concept of Idioms

Quite a number of studies have described the notion of idioms in different terms from different perspectives but virtually all descriptions and definitions are in correspondence in a way. Das (2012) notes that idioms express special meaning further away than their literal meaning. This implies that the interpretation of such expressions is not easily deduced from the literal meanings of the individual words that made up the expressions. Das (2012, pp. 428-429) presents many examples of idioms, among which are:

- (1) a double-edged sword (something that has advantages and disadvantages)
- (2) a feather in one's cap (an award, or a credit)
- (3) a race against the clock (an attempt to do something too fast)

In line with Das's (2012) position on the concept of idioms, Almajir and Azare (2016) define idioms as expressions that their meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of their constituent words, noting that they consist of fixed expressions which are learned and understood as units, but not as individual words.

Kroeger (2018) asserts that idioms are non-compositional phrases, whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the individual words, implying that the meaning of the whole phrase must be learned as a unit. For example:

- (4) kick the bucket (to die) (Kroeger, 2018, p. 189).

The meaning of (4) above cannot be predicted or calculated from its constituent words, in that it contains no word at all that has any component of meaning relating to death. Ghazala (2003) describes idioms as phrases that are special, metaphorical and fixed whose meanings and forms cannot be negotiated. The author classified idioms into full/pure idioms, semi-idioms, proverbs, popular sayings and semi proverbial expressions, phrasal verbs and metaphorical catchphrases and popular expressions.

McCarthy and O'Dell (2002) define idioms as fixed expressions whose meanings are not immediately obvious from looking at the individual words in the idioms. Definitions such as this are quite numerous; however, virtually all of them agree on two common characteristics: (a) idiomatic expressions have a fixed word order (b) it is often difficult to guess the meanings from the individual words that make up some idioms.

Cacciari (1993) argues that defining idioms is difficult and controversial along with describing their acquirement and understanding. She maintains that some of the factors that bring about the difficulties are: the fact that idiomatization is a process (structures acquire idiomaticity gradually), the fact that idioms are analyzable and holistic at the same time (they are built on more constituent words but their global meaning are not reduced to the meaning of these words), and the fact that there are different kinds of idioms in which some retain the original meaning of their constituent words while some have different meanings entirely.

2.1 Classifying idioms

Classifying idiomatic expressions has been a challenge to scholars in some ways. Their different views and efforts resulted in idioms being grouped into numerous different ways. Fernando (1996) emphasizes how idioms are used in several facets of English. Idioms may be found to exist in forms such as: proverbs, similes, dead metaphors, allusions, slang, social formulate, and collocations.

Aldahesh (2008) claims that phrasal verbs (verb plus particle, for example: *put up*, *back off*, etc.) make up an essential part of English idiomatic expressions. The author explains that when parts of a phrasal verb (PV) are put together, they give up their original meanings and adopt a new idiomatic meaning. In other words, "in such idiomatic PVs, the meanings of the separate parts tell us little or nothing about the meaning of the whole" (Aldahesh, 2008, p. 18). For instance: *give up* (meaning: to stop trying), *pass away* (meaning: to die), *call at* (meaning: to visit), *iron out* (meaning: to resolve by discussion), *clam up* (meaning: to refuse to speak), and *abide by* (meaning: to respect or obey a decision, a law or a rule). However, Turton and Manser (1985) have pointed out that it is pretty obvious that in idiomatic phrasal verbs, such as those listed above, the meanings of the individual parts tell little or nothing at all about the meaning of the entire expressions.

There are also semantic classifications of idiomatic expressions such as Nunberg (1978), and Titone and Connine (1999). Such classifications depict the way in which idioms are dissimilar in quality in terms of their compositionality. Nunberg (1978) grouped idioms into three different classes, namely normally decomposable idioms, abnormally decomposable idioms, and semantically non-decomposable idioms. Decomposable idioms

contribute to the idiom's figurative meaning. Examples of normally decomposable idioms are: *pop the question* (meaning: for a man to ask a woman to marry him or for a woman to ask a man to marry her), *break the ice* (meaning: to do something to make people feel relaxed and comfortable at a party or meeting, or in a new situation), and *clear the air* (meaning: to dispel controversy or emotional tension) (Nunberg, 1978, p. 227).

Abnormally decomposable idioms are a subgroup of decomposable idioms; they are expressions whose individual components have some metaphorical relation to their idiomatic reference (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989). Examples of abnormally decomposable idioms include: *carry a torch* (meaning: to suffer from an unrequited love), *spill the beans* (meaning: to reveal the truth about something secret or private), *pass the buck* (meaning: to accuse someone of failing to take responsibility for a problem, and of expecting someone else to deal with it instead), and *bury the hatchet* (meaning: when people who have quarreled agree to forget their quarrel and become friends again) (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989, p. 67).

Semantically non-decomposable idioms correspond to the traditional definition, since the meaning of the idiomatic expression is not likely to be derived from the literal meanings of the component words. Examples of semantically non-decomposable idioms include: *chew the fat* (meaning: to chat with someone in an informal and friendly way about things that interest you), *shoot the breeze* (meaning: to talk with other people in an informal and friendly way), and *pack a punch* (meaning: for something to have a very powerful effect) (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989, p. 67; Nunberg, 1978, p. 225). Gibbs and Nayak (1989) argue that decomposable idioms are syntactically more productive, lexically more flexible and more quickly processed than non-decomposable idioms (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989, p. 67).

In Cacciari and Glucksberg's (1991) classification of idiomatic expressions, idioms are grouped into opaque, transparent and quasi-metaphorical. Opaque idioms are considered to be the most difficult because it is impossible to infer the real meaning of the idiom from the meaning of its individual elements since there are no obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the idioms' meaning (Fernando, 1996). Examples of opaque idiomatic expressions are *kick the bucket* (meaning: to die) and *to burn one's bridges* (meaning: commit oneself to an irreversible course) (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991, p. 229). Opaque idioms correspond to Almajir and Azere (2016)'s 'decoding idioms' whose meaning cannot be figured out by the hearer.

In contrast, in transparent idioms, idiomatic meaning is very close to the literal words' meaning, in that there are obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the idioms' meaning. The idiom: '*play your cards right*', has been cited as

an example. The meaning of this expression is to do the correct things to achieve desired results, as in card games. Transparent idioms are apparent examples of what Almajir and Azere (2016) describe as encoding idioms.

Almajir and Azere (2016) distinguished between grammatical and extra-grammatical idioms. They noted that grammatical idioms are idiomatic expressions that conform to syntactic rules, for example, in *kick the bucket* (to die), the direct object ‘the bucket’ supersedes the verb ‘kick’ which is in line with English general syntactic rule. Extra-grammatical idioms on the other hand are idioms that violate the rules of syntax or do not conform to syntactic rules. For example: *all of a sudden, so far so good, believe you me*, etc. (Almajir & Azere, 2016, p. 7).

In Yoshikawa (2008), and Saberian and Fotivatnia (2011), idioms are grouped into five different categories, namely A, B, C1, C2, and D. As the main principle for the categorization of English idioms, Yoshikawa (2008) takes the measure of native language and second language similarities in terms of structure and semantics. These types are established on the basis of structural comparison of idiom of a foreign language with those of a native language (Fernando, 1996). Type A idioms, have structural as well as semantic similarity to native language idioms, while idioms which are in some degree similar to native language idioms in terms of semantics and structure are classified as type B. Idioms in type C1 are those with structural “similarity”, but semantic “dissimilarity” to native language idioms. Idioms with both structural and semantic “dissimilarity” to native language idioms are categorized under type C2 idioms. Finally, idioms in type D are those with structural “dissimilarity”, but semantic similarity to idioms in the native language. This means that they cannot be translated word for word into native language, because literal translation is not intelligible in native language. However, it is possible that their literal translation would give learners some suggestion as to what their real meaning might be (Saberian & Fotovatnia, 2011).

3. Methodology

The data for the study were elicited from seven informants who are competent native speakers of the Mwaghavul language and who reside in its natural linguistic area – Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The research utilized participant observation and direct interview. A conversation in the Mwaghavul language between two of the participants was observed by one of the researchers, during which he recorded expressions that seemed to be idiomatic in nature on paper. In addition, some Hausa idioms from the work of Almajir and Azere (2016) were used as a sample to acquaint each of the

other participants with idiomatic expressions, since they were all bilingual in Mwaghavul and Hausa. Thereafter, they were asked to provide idiomatic expressions and their interpretations in the Mwaghavul language. Approximately 50 idioms were generated in all, which were recorded on paper and later described in the analysis. Further, two of the researchers are competent speakers of the Mwaghavul language. This enabled them to use their native intuition to affirm the validity and reliability of the data.

The study describes the nature of idioms in the Mwaghavul language and classifies them on the basis of Cacciari and Glucksberg's (1991) classification of idiomatic expressions – opaque idioms (idioms whose idiomatic meaning cannot be inferred from the literal meaning of its individual elements) and transparent idioms (idioms whose idiomatic meaning is very close to the literal meaning of its individual elements). The following section presents the analysis of idiomatic expressions in the Mwaghavul language.

4. Results and Discussion

The data for the study show that in Mwaghavul, there are idioms whose meaning cannot be inferred from the literal meaning of their individual elements, as well as idioms whose meanings can be predicted from their literal meanings. These are classified as opaque and transparent idioms respectively, and are discussed in the following segments.

4.1 Opaque idioms in Mwaghavul

These are idioms in which there are no obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the meaning of the idioms. Such idioms are used by people who have learnt the expressions and their meanings over time. They can be otherwise referred to as decoding idioms. Consider the following examples:

- (5) bút bīsh
 (stomach bad)
 'bad stomach' (literal)
 'wickedness' (figurative)
- (6) fīì pīghizing
 (blow nose)
 'to blow the nose' (literal)
 'to look down on/despise others' (figurative)
- (7) b̄wághát kaa
 tie head
 'to tie the head' (literal)
 'confuse' (figurative)

- kyák pòò
 (8) gather mouth
 'to gather the mouth' (literal)
 'nagging' (figurative)

The idiomatic meanings of (5) – (8) above cannot be easily understood from the literal meanings of the words, as there is no close relationship between them.

However, it is worthy of note that the meaning of some opaque idioms in Mwaghavul can sometimes be predicted through the context of usage. For example, the concept of poverty is expressed in Mwaghavul as:

- (9) pyághál pyáá
 (thigh white)
 'white thigh' (literal)
 'poor person' (figurative)

The sense in (9) above is that when an individual is poor, his or her thighs will always remain white due to their inability to afford pomade. Within an appropriate context, the meaning of (9) can be inferred.

The examples (10), (11) and (12) below are further instances of opaque idioms:

- (10) dēp shíí
 (raise leg)
 'to bend the leg' (literal)
 'to die' (figurative)
- (11) mààp láá
 (mourn wound)
 'mourning for a wound/injury' (literal)
 'revenge' (figurative)
- (12) dǒ wús
 (pour fire)
 'to pour fire' (literal)
 'to persuade' (figurative)

The concept of bending one's leg in the Mwaghavul language figuratively means 'to die', as in (10); 'mourning for an injury' which may sound awkward in English figuratively means 'revenge' in the Mwaghavul language, as in (11), while 'to pour fire' in example (12), figuratively means 'to persuade'.

4.2 Transparent idioms in Mwaghavul

These are idioms in which there are obvious semantic relations between the meaning of the idioms' constituents and the idioms' meaning, thus, their meanings can easily be decoded. They can also be called encoding idioms. For example:

- (13) kyéén pyàà
(front white)
'the future is white/bright' (literal)
'to be lucky' (figurative)
- (14) òwághát pò
(tie mouth)
'to tie the mouth' (literal)
'to connive' (figurative)

In the examples (13) and (14) above, there is a relatively close relationship between the literal meanings and the idiomatic meanings which makes them easily comprehensible in actual conversation. In (13), the literal meaning of 'kyéén pyàà' is 'the future is white' and its idiomatic meaning is 'to be lucky': for one to have a bright future, he or she must be very lucky. Similarly, in example (14), 'òwághát pò' literally means 'to tie the mouth', an expression done facially to symbolize that something is not right; idiomatically, it means 'to connive', i.e. to cooperate secretly in order to commit something immoral. In the above examples, there is a relatively close relationship between the literal meanings and idiomatic meanings, which makes it possible to understand the figurative meanings.

The following are further examples of transparent idioms in Mwaghavul:

- (15) rìbèt káá
(desire head)
'to desire oneself' (literal)
'to be selfish' (figurative)
- (16) òl káá
(fix head)
'to join heads' (literal)
'to cooperate' (figurative)
- (17) sár pààt
(finger five)
'to have five fingers empty' (literal)
'to be innocent' (figurative)

- (18) làà kút
 (child air/wind)
 ‘child of the wind’ (literal)
 ‘an irresponsible/ wayward person’ (figurative)
- (19) shágát ár
 (close road)
 ‘to close the road’ (literal)
 ‘to block opportunities’ (figurative)
- (20) sár shwàl
 (hand long)
 ‘long hand’ (literal)
 ‘a thief’ (figurative)
- (21) pòò tál
 (mouth hot)
 ‘hot mouth’ (literal)
 ‘tough conversation’ (figurative)

Example (15) above has the idiomatic expression *ribèt káá* ‘(self-desire), which can be easily understood in a figurative sense as ‘selfishness’; *bàl káá* (the act of joining heads) in Mwaghavul is easily understood in a figurative sense as ‘cooperation’ in (16); *sár pààt* (to have five fingers empty) can be easily understood in a figurative sense as ‘being innocent’ in (17), and example (18) *làà kút*’ literally means ‘a child of the air or wind’, which can easily be understood as ‘an irresponsible person’ in a figurative sense. Similarly, the literal meanings of examples (19) – (21) are relatively close to the figurative meanings, and the latter can be easily understood from the former.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has grouped idioms in the Mwaghavul language into opaque and transparent idioms, otherwise referred to as decoding and encoding idioms, respectively, in line with the classifications of idioms in Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991), and Almajir and Azere (2016). The study found transparent idioms to be more common than opaque idioms in Mwaghavul. Quasi-metaphorical idioms, whose meaning are conveyed via allusion, were not identified in the Mwaghavul data obtained for this study.

The study noted that understanding the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions is sometimes enhanced by the physical and/or linguistic context of the users of such expressions. Nevertheless, since idioms constitute an integral component of the cultural

system of virtually all languages, learners of the Mwaghavul language, or any language as a second language, should not relent in acquiring at least some basic knowledge of common idiomatic expressions in the target language. This is because although understanding or producing idiomatic expressions is often problematic for non-native speakers, they are used by the native speakers of virtually all languages on a daily basis.

This work is a contribution to the study of African linguistics. It is therefore recommended that future research should subject idiomatic expressions in other African languages to scrutiny since idioms generally form an integral aspect of the communication system of every language.

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