

On the Semantic Expansion of the Word “Change” among Yorùbá Speakers of English Bilinguals

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ABSTRACT: *The paper investigates the semantic evolution that has characterised the word ‘change’ in the Yorùbá-English speech community. It undertakes this descriptive effort through pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives that give credence to the impact of widespread usage and acceptability on the semantic elasticity of particular words. Moving from the pedestrian and original financial-related meaning of the money given back when a customer hands over more than the exact price of an item, it has now assumed broader and more socially significant interpretations that may only be comprehensible to a certain class of the Yorùbá-English bilinguals who occupy South Western Nigeria. These contextual meanings are socially inclined and are largely influenced by a certain leaning that borders on the ‘membership’ of an undefined social group that consists of semi-literates in that particular subset of the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment. The paper concludes that the uses of ‘change’ in the aforementioned contexts present a valid case of gradual semantic expansion in the widespread use of some words.*

KEY WORDS: change, semantic expansion, Yorùbá, semi-literate, literates

INTRODUCTION

Language has been said to be a living entity. This assertion stems from the observation that it is a dynamic phenomenon that is subject to changes: phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic. Evidences of such shifts abound in the comparative results that have been showcased in works carried out on the historical developments and varieties of English, (Mugglestone: 2006; McIntyre: 2009). There could be noticeable linguistic changes in the intonation and vocabulary of speakers of a particular language over a period of time. Although linguistic changes occur at all the aforementioned levels, the concerns of this paper reflect and

shall be addressed on the semantic plane. Existing literature on semantics identifies four perspectives to the study of meaning (Mey 2001). The view of meaning that is of interest to this present study of ours is the one that recognises the context of situation in language use. As shown in Mey (2000), Igboanusi (2004) and Adegbite (2005) the knowledge of language is a composite of the knowledge of its structure and use in socio-cultural context. Mey (2000:7) observes that:

Not even the smallest utterance or a single word can be understood in isolation. It is the user and his or her condition of production and composition of language that in the final analysis determine the way his or her words are understood.

In support of Mey's assertion above, J.F Firth (1959) one of proponents of contextual theory of meaning, is of the opinion that the meaning or the class of a word cannot be determined in isolation, until it is used in a sentence. In addition, Adegbite (2005) claims that:

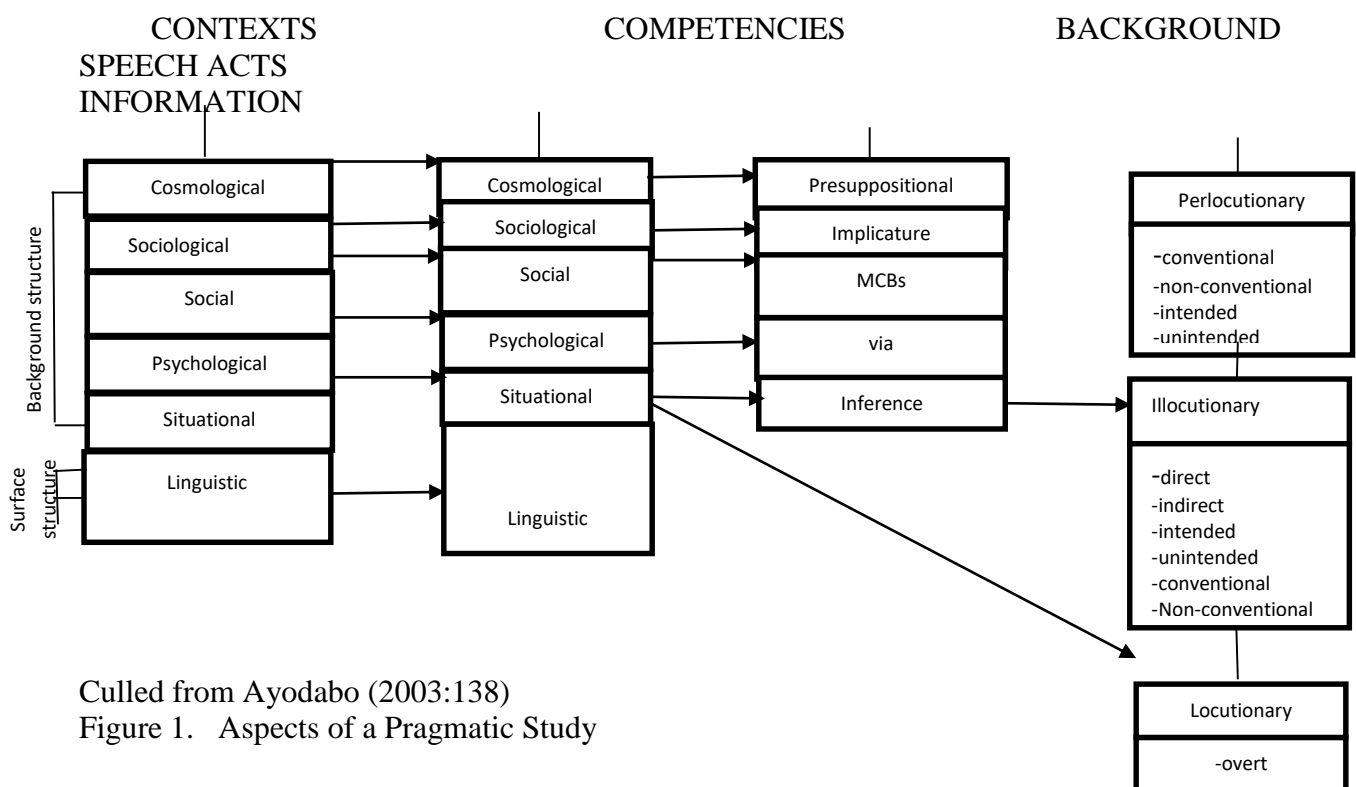
two kinds of context are associated with contextual meaning, viz: the context of culture and context of situation. The condition of meaning in a context of culture (or social context) specify the conventional socio-cultural rules of behaviour which participants must share before they can communicate successfully with each other, whereas the conditions of meaning in a situational context must further specify relevant features if immediate and wider experiences of the specific participants in addition to the conventional rules.

From Adegbite's assertion above, one can argue that context of situation may extend the meanings of some English words to accommodate certain expressions beyond their dictionary meanings. For instance, Igboanusi (2004) notes, among other things that, African writers often reflect African context in other uses of certain English items so that such items now acquire extended meanings in novels. He examines the word 'mother' and uses same to illustrate the shift in semantic interpretations over particular periods. Thus, in contemporary African society, 'mother' has interpretive tendencies that include one's own biological mother, a woman fit to be one's biological mother, a benevolent female boss, a female benefactor etc etc. In this present study, however, we are interested in the use of the word "change" during conversations among the literate and semi-literate bilinguals in South West Nigeria, which is used to connote different meanings in different sociolinguistic contexts and situations. Here we shall itemise and investigate the many semantic inferences that could be drawn from the word 'change'.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatics has been described in the literature as the contextual meaning of utterances. Katz (1977:19) asserts that pragmatics explicates the reasoning of speakers and hearers. For Mey (2001), pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as dictated by the

conditions of society. Lawal (2003) describes it as the general study of how context influences the way utterances are interpreted. Judging from the above, one can claim that pragmatics is the study of the speaker-intended meaning in language use. Pragmatics as a branch of linguistics studies extra-textual interpretation of words and utterances and it has the concept of implicature as one of its major tools. Grice (1989) refers to implicature as what is suggested in an utterance, even though, neither expressed nor strictly implied. To Cruse (2006:85), implicature is “parts of the meanings of utterances which, although not intended, are not strictly part of what is said in the act of utterance, nor do they follow logically from what is said”. The summations from the definitions provided above will compel one to argue that meaning, in particular instances is derived, not from the actual words uttered, but by embedded information in the utterances that is shared/understood by both the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. In a nutshell, it takes the mutual compatibility of the language knowledge on the parts of the utterer and the listener to actually grasp the intended meaning in that particular linguistic construction. Bamigboye (2014) claims that when analysing texts from a pragmatic perspective, the socio-cultural contexts of the linguistic interactions cannot be over-emphasized. Through a system of shared beliefs, common background knowledge and mutual understanding as a result of prolonged co-existence, members of a speech community have a bond, a core and a circle of mutually understandable knowledge. It is from this shared knowledge that deeper underlying meanings and inferences are made from what is ordinarily said. Six levels of context drawn from Lawal’s (1995) are employed for this study. The table below, as adapted from Ayodabo (2003) in Lawal (ed.), illustrates the logical sequence of flow in the relationships of meaning:



Culled from Ayodabo (2003:138)
Figure 1. Aspects of a Pragmatic Study

Bamigboye (2014) explains that the six levels of context are linguistic, social, sociological, psychological, situational and cosmological contexts of any utterance. Linguistic context has to do with the competence of language users—both the speaker and the hearer in a particular instance, while the social context explains the relationship between interlocutors. The sociological context deals with the socio-cultural and historical settings in which an utterance takes place while the situational context concerns itself with the topic of discourse and the factors of the physical event including concrete objective, persons and location. The psychological context accounts for the mental state and personal beliefs of language users. The cosmological context on its own centres on the language user's worldview and his/her ability to link events with some established facts. All these, according to Lawal (1995), contribute to contextual decoding of linguistic forms. It is nearly impossible to separate where, how and why something is said, if we are to verify the real intended purpose of the speaker of the said utterance. In other words, to ascertain meaning sometimes, cultural, social and linguistic factors have to be taken into consideration. The MCBs as major feature of pragmatic theory will be used in pursuing our arguments in this research.

Some Related Works on Semantic Expansion

Igboanusi(2006) reports that Igbo writers/novelists and by extension African writers usually reflect their African experience in their use of English. According to him, many Igbo writers of English are often influenced by their mother tongue. Although they may be writing in English, their style of writing is a through reflection of the Igbo culture and worldview. He referred to this behaviour as an adaptive use of the English language. It is a way of domesticating the English language. Igboanusi (ibid) opines that the Igbo English as a variety of English evolves through a deliberate but significant stylistic device which arises from the influence and interference of the Igbo language and culture. This mode of writing transfers the oral style into the written tradition, this way it captures the Igbo world view in English. For instance, an expression like “Your legs are unfortunate” mean “Sorry I have just finished eating” is an adaptation of the Igbo sentence; “I nwerekwu ojoyo”. The translation above reflects the Igbo worldview not minding its semantic implications to non-Igbo readers. In this paper, although not on writing, we share the same view with Igboanusi that non-native speakers of English often impose their worldview on their use of English, and it is the oral usage that is often transferred to writing. It implies that this creative transfer is cross-linguistic and not restricted to Igbo speakers/writers alone. More so, non-native speakers of English apart of transliterating their worldview in English, may also chose to use and English word beyond is denotative meaning.

While citing two kinship terms from the Yoruba language, Ikotun(2017)claims that semantic expansion is a common practice among the language users. He explains the various domains in which the words can be used to mean something different from what they denote originally. For example, a mother may refer to her daughter as “okọ mi” which literarily means “my husband” to mean “my beloved daughter”. Such usage shows that in addition to the original meaning of a word, other usages which deviate from the denotative meaning may also be obtainable. This implies that the Yoruba people and perhaps every language user may use a word to express a thought that is different from its original meaning. In this paper, however,

we want to show that apart from expanding the semantic feature of a native word, a speaker may also choose to expand the meaning of a foreign word. This kind of creativity usually evolves due to a frequent use of the word. In this regard, one can say that the transfer or interference may occur within a language or between two different languages. Ikotun (2007) also claims that such semantic expansion is not observed in the English culture and therefore suggests that English lexicographers should publish specialized dictionaries that will take care of kinship terms so as to guide against ambiguity and absurdity that may arise from in language use in social interactions. Contrary to Ikotun's claim, we are of the opinion that such cases of semantic expansions may already exist in the English language. This is because, first, Ikotun is not a native English speaker and therefore may not be too sure if such do not already exist in the language. Second, the English language borrowed extensively from both Greek and Hebrew languages and in actual fact the English bible is an adaptation of both Hebrew and Greek languages. It therefore implies that certain words or sentences written in the bible must have been influenced by the English language. An example of such influence is "Yeshua" to "Jesus". We therefore suggest that the only way to determine whether the language has adopted lexical expansion to kinship terms, one would have to rely on literary works (e.g. novels) that are written by native English speakers.

METHOD

Data for this research were drawn from participants' observations in markets, motor parks, and conversations among acquaintances. The researchers all participated in these endeavours and documented the data. The transcribed speeches were then typed on a personal computer and systematically analysed. Literature texts on Nigerian English and home movies were also used as our sources of information.

Data Presentation and Analysis

- | | |
|---|---|
| i) Kò sí change lówó Òjò | 'Ojo has no money' |
| ii) Mo ti ní change diè lówó báyì | 'I have money with me now' |
| iii) Sè mo rí change diè lówó yín | 'Can I get small money from you?' |
| iv) Change lowó è | 'He has little money' |
| v) Wón change ẹ fún mi ni sá | 'He quarrel with me' |
| vi) Tòò bá ní changé máá wolé oo | 'If you don't have small denominations do not enter.' |
| vii) Mo fẹ lọ gba change mi ni ọwó Olú | 'I want to collect my balance from Ojo.' |
| viii) Ẹ bámi change bàtà yí kò size mi | 'Please, substitute this shoe for me it's not my size.' |
| ix) Ẹ bá mi change owó yí | 'Please, change this money for me' |
| x) Ẹ change gear mótò yí kò sáré | 'Please, change the gear the car is not moving fast' |

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The word 'change', with the dictionary meaning of 'transformation', has been used to mean different things among the literate and non-literate Yoruba speakers of English, especially when they code mix. Due to the dynamism with the use of words, each instance of the use of

‘change’ enumerated in the data above connotes different things which are determined by the contexts of use.

Lagos roads are usually characterised by traffic gridlocks. As a result, commercial vehicle operators normally look for ways to escape the traffic jam. As such, they prefer passengers to board their vehicles with the actual denomination of the fare so that other passengers would not be delayed when alighting from the bus. Thus, the ‘bus conductor’, at the point of calling people into his vehicle, usually declaims his preference for smaller denominations for ease of transaction.

Conductor: *Ketú, Ojóta, mile 12. Tòò bá ni **change** má wọlẹ́* 1
Hundred naira (100) lówo móto. 2
*Mi ò ní **change** five hundred (500) àti one thousand (1000)* 3

Translation

Conductor: ‘Ketu, Ojota, Mile 12. If you don’t have **change** don’t come inside’
 ‘The transport fare is hundred naira (100)’
 ‘I don’t have **change** for five hundred (500) and one thousand (1000)’
 (*Direct translation is adopted to bring out the actual use of the word in question*)

In the extract, it is discovered that the word ‘**change**’, as used in the lines (1&3), has no semantic bearing with the dictionary meaning. The word simply implies *smaller denomination of the legal tender or currency*. An average Nigerian speaker of English who is at the scenario of the event will most likely decipher the meaning of the word as used in this particular context. Same cannot be said of a native speaker of English who may likely find it very difficult to create meaning for the word in the context of use. Moreover, the shared background of the Nigerian users of English irrespective of the ethnic group will make them to key into the discussion and bring out meaning from it. Furthermore, the discourse as well as the context pragmatically plays a vital in determining the meaning of the “change” on that particular occasion.

Furthermore, the word ‘**change**’ in another context may connote that somebody is not financially buoyant or there is no smaller denomination of the currency with him /her. In this instance, the Yoruba speaker will put the negative marker *kò* before the word ‘change’. However, in the conversation, participants and the event will actually determine whether the person in question is not financially buoyant or he/she has no smaller denomination with him/her. The conversation below represents one of the scenarios mentioned:

Market woman: *Kò sí **change** lówó ẹ* 1
O fẹ ra nńkan fifty naira (50) 2
O gbé one thousand naira (1000) dání 3

Translation

Market woman: ‘There is no **change** in your hand’

‘You intend to buy fifty naira 50) worth of good’

‘You brought a thousand naira (1000)’

Just like the first extract, the word ‘change’ and the negative marker connotes that the person has no smaller denomination of the currency with him/her. In the market as well, during buying and selling, the utterance: *È bá mi **change** owó yí* (Please, change this money for me) is very common and the word change as used in the conversation may connote that the money the seller gives to the buyer is bad and demands another in return or that he needs a smaller denomination of the money. For instance: 1000 naira can be substituted for either five two hundred naira notes or two five hundred naira notes or lesser denominations. The word ‘change’ may connote that the person in question is in need of the currency of another country.

Again, in another context where the participants are discussing friends, family members or acquaintances, the use of negative marker *kò* and **change** may mean that the person has no money. See the conversation below:

Bola: *Bòdá Tùndé ò wá sílé mó* 1
 *Kò sí **change** lówó wọn mó* 2
 Kola: *o rò bẹ̀* 3

Translation

Bola: ‘Brother Tùndé did not come home again’
 ‘He has no **change** in his hand again’
 Kola: ‘You think so’

In this conversation, Tunde, an elder brother to Bola and Kola had not been home for quite some time. As a result, Kola thought that he was not finally buoyant again. Thus, the word ‘**change**’ as used in line (2) above connotes financial buoyancy. In another context of use, the word ‘**change**’ as used in conversation may connote money itself, or financial sufficiency. See data (ii) and (iii) above.

Furthermore, among the semi-literate Yorùbá speakers of English, in making comparison between people’s wealth or finance, they often use ‘**change**’ to denote something small compared to another thing (See data iii). Consequently, the phrase:

Change l’owó Adenuga l’égbe Dangote

may connote that Adenuga is wealthy but his wealth cannot match that of Dangote. It is a common trend when comparisons are done, most especially when the context is colloquial and very informal.

In another discourse situation, the word ‘**change**’ may connote a sudden surge of aggression or belligerence in a speech situation involving two or more participants. Though the use of ‘**change**’ as ‘quarrel’ is a rather new semantic innovation among the youths (probably slangs

which has been incorporated to day to day conversation amongst them), in most cases, the university students are found of using it in their conversations:

Bode: Wólé **change** è fún bọ̀bọ̀ yẹ̀n lánàá
Kunle: Ó ti gbowó, kò fẹ̀ ̀sìşé

In the brief dialogue above, there is a hint of a quarrel with a third party who had failed to comply with the contract he agreed to. It is also important to note that you may ‘change’ it for someone you had hitherto enjoyed

Furthermore, another common use of ‘*change*’ is to show that the class of the person in question has change from where he was in terms of financial capacity. It is often said among Yoruba that:

Change ti wà lówó è kò rántí wa mó (He has become wealthy and forget us)
or change ti wà lówó è, kò dà bí tẹ̀lẹ̀ (Money has got to his hand when compared to before).

This use change as used here means money or comfort that has separated a close friend from his people. Allusion will also be made to his/her character before the so called ‘*change*’ (money or wealth) got to his/her hand.

The contemporary Nigerian political history has given the word ‘change’ another dimension of meaning. The era of change as promised by the current political administration and as envisaged by Nigerians should have ushered in food on every man’s table and abundance money in circulation. However, reverse is the case. Expectations have been dashed thereby giving the ‘**change mantra**’ an entirely new meaning in the discourse of Nigerians. Consider the conversation below:

Àsìkò change yí lágbára gan-an	1
Kò sí change lówó enikèni	2
Şe ni gbogbo èniyàn n̄ pariwo	3
This era of change is tough	1
There is no change in everybody’s hand	2
Everybody is shouting	3

In the extract, the **change** in the line (1) pragmatically symbolises the period of austerity that was ushered in by the new political dispensation. It is only Nigerians who understand the situation that will be able interpret the meaning of “change” as used in the context to connote austerity because of the shared background. Moreover, the **change** as used in line (1) also makes reference to the government in power at present in Nigeria because it was their campaign slogan.

Going by Bamigboye's (2014) contextual categorisations of mutual contextual beliefs, the data as presented and explained depict different situations where the word "change" is code mixed with Yoruba lexical items to connote different meanings. The six contexts are explained below: Linguistic: the data show that interlocutors' code – mix two languages to generate the meaning intended in the discussion. The code-mixing observed is a clear indication that the interlocutors have good knowledge of their mother tongue and a partial /sound understanding of the second language (English). This makes the transfer of lexical item from English to Yoruba possible. Moreover, the contact between speakers of different languages residing together also facilitates the code-mixing to ensure mutual understanding.

Social: the relationships between the interlocutors are determined by the contexts of the discussions. In some contexts, there is no prior contact between the interlocutors such that the relationship is limited to buyer and seller contact in a market place or a transporter conveying passengers to their destinations. However, there are situations where there was prior relationship between the interlocutors such as family or acquaintance.

Psychological: the mindset of an average educated Nigerian or semi-literate is that English is the language of civilization and civilized people. Therefore, the insertion of English lexical items into the mother tongue in a conversation shows that the speakers belong to the class of the educated or that they show solidarity with the group.

Situational: different situations determine the meaning of the word 'change' For instance, in buying and selling situation, it can mean replacement or substitution. In another situation, it can denote money, lesser denomination, and comparison of wealth or even lack of money when used with negative marker 'kò. In essence, the meaning given to 'change' is situational and context based.

Socio-cultural: in Nigeria, language and culture are intertwined. As a result, what is seen as a language of a particular group can be used in the larger society to mean another thing, or share the same meaning with that of the group or a particular social class.

Cosmological: the worldview of some Nigerians is that anything foreign is better than ours. This ranges from culture, language, education and mode of dressing. Thus, code-mixing is another way of showing that certain lexical items or words have no equivalents in their mother tongue.

CONCLUSION

Going by the discussions above, it is obvious that 'change' has evolved from its original meaning to the different uses to which it is put at present. This, as described above, is as a result of sociolinguistic innovations in the Yoruba-English speech community. We were able to demonstrate the many semantic possibilities in the interpretation of 'change' and how the word has expanded its etymological essence to accommodate these new inferences. The paper concludes that as no claims are made of the sacredness of its descriptions or the finality of its

conclusions, further researches are still encouraged in pushing the frontiers of semantic expansion in sociolinguistic spheres.

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