

ASPECTS OF DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION IN ÍGÁLÂ

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Abstract

This paper investigates denotative and connotative meaning in Ígálâ. The main focus of semantics in the study of linguistics is meaning, and without meaning, language is lost. What keeps any language alive is the ability of its speakers to provoke studies in various aspects of it, thereby creating a pool of knowledge from where many generations could drink. The method used involved both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources comprised oral interviews with 10 elder-speakers of Igala, for fresh insights on the topic, while the secondary sources involved extant studies that are related to the subject. The insights of the researchers as native speakers of Igala also played a big role here. For purposes of clarity in data presentation and analysis, the data on denotation is separate from that on connotation, and are transcribed and tone-marked accordingly with each containing 20. The framework for this study is the semantic theory, as proposed by Kempson in 1977. The finding of the study showed that aside denotative meaning of names of animals, trees and other things in Ígálâ, their connotative meanings are symbolic and proverbial, capable of teaching both older and younger generations useful and insightful moral lessons, such as: *ikélék^{wu}* ‘rat’, which is connected with deceit and trick. So, a person who is labelled a rat is deceitful, cunning and crafty in character; etc. The study concluded by affirming the presence and use of the two meaning relations in the Igala language.

Keywords: Denotation, Connotation, Lexical relation, Semantics, Semantic theory

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1. Introduction

Being an African language, Ígálâ, as observed by Negedu (2003:116), belongs to the Kwa subgroup of the Niger Congo language family. The Niger Congo languages make up one of the world's major language families and Africa's largest in terms of geographic area and number of speakers. Further, Ígálá is classified as a language of the Yoruboid branch of the Defoid family. The Defoid languages make up a branch of the present Benue Congo language family. It comprises the Yoruba of the South-West, the Ígálá of the North-Central and the Itsekiri of the South-South category of Nigeria. The language is mainly spoken in Eastern Senatorial District of Kogi State, which contains 9 Local Government Areas with over two million speakers.

Denotation and connotation as concepts are just a few out of numerous terms in semantics which deal with how meanings are expressed in language. Meaning goes beyond denotation, and what a word means in a language depends, in part, on its association with other words, which is the relational aspect. Similarly, as a powerful tool both in writing and in our everyday social interactions, language shapes our understanding of the world, often in many ways beyond normal perception and usage. This implies that sometimes, the meaning of a word could go beyond just its basic definition, and this exactly is what necessitated the current study, which concerns these two important semantic concepts. In the light of this, Ígálá words do not only merely 'have' meaning but also contribute meaning to the utterances in which they occur, and what meanings they contribute depends on what other words they are associated with in such utterances, as the case may be. However, the Ígálá words treated in this study that express meaning denotatively and connotatively are not used in association with other words.

2. Literature Review

The review of literature here in this section concentrates on the important concepts that constitute the keywords of this study. In addition to this, the review shall capture empirical studies on concepts related to the current study conducted by other language researchers or scholars previously.

2.1 Conceptual Review

Sankaravelayuthan (2018) reported that semantics as a term was originally and formally used by Breal in 1897. Therefore, we can say that Breal was the first to bring to the fore in a formally acceptable manner, as far as the concept of meaning in language is concerned. Though the desire for the understanding of meaning has always been of interest to scholars, semantics was not mentioned as a term and did not come up in literature until 1897 when Breal first used it. This first attempt to study meanings by philosophers brought about the area of semantics called philosophical semantics which examines the relationship between linguistic expressions and the phenomena they refer to in the external world. According to Akmajian et al (2010), semantics, which refers to the study of linguistic units and their principles of combination would be incomplete without accounting for what these units mean, what they are used to talk about, and what they are used to communicate. This implies that semantics is the study of meaning in language. What then is meaning? Well, the most compelling idea concerning meaning has been that it is some sort of entity or thing. This is because often times, we do speak of words as *having* a meaning, as meaning *something*, as having the *same* meaning, as meaning the same *thing*, as *sharing* a meaning, as having *many meanings*, and so forth. Furthermore, the term semantics does not simply refer to the meaning of words; it is the entire system of meanings of a language, expressed by grammar as well as vocabulary. The study of semantics includes the study of how

meaning is constructed, interpreted, clarified, obscured, illustrated, simplified, negotiated, contradicted, amplified and paraphrased (Alhaj, 2015).

Lexical relation is one of the most crucial subfields of semantics meant for analyzing meanings of words in any natural language. According to Abdullzahra (n.d.), lexical relations are entirely concerned with approaching the meanings of words through relating them to other words within sentences in a language. Such relations are manifested according to the type of the relation that a word may have with another word or words as when having two words with close meanings, two words with opposite ones and so on. They (lexical relations) simply emphasize the relationship of a word with other words in terms of their meanings in an utterance. In other words, they explain relationship among word meaning. Lexical relation examines the manner in which the lexicon is handled as well as the way lexical meanings of lexical items are related to one another within sentences. Undoubtedly, the significance of lexical relations can be clearly seen in various communicative events and situations, either when the meaning of a word is unclear or when it has to be explained thoroughly. Sometimes, when using words in everyday conversation or in any other situation, speakers may explain them according to their relationships. For instance, when speakers are required to explain the meaning of the word *conceal*, they may simply say it means *to hide*. Another instance could be considered when explaining the meaning of the word *shallow* as being the *opposite of deep* and so on. In so doing, the explanations of the meanings of words are understood not only according to what they mean (their features) but also in terms of their relationships with other words. In view of this, Sankaravelayuthan (2018) observed that there are two major modes for exploring word meaning: in relation to other words, and in relation to the world. The traditional method used in dictionaries is to define a word in terms of other words. Obviously, this strategy is circular, because we must, of course define the words we use in the

definition, and in their definitions, until finally we must either run out of words or re-use one of the words we are trying to define.

Denotative meaning of a word is sometimes referred to as conceptual meaning or cognitive meaning of that word. Larson as cited in Hartina (2017) commented that denotative meaning is the primary meaning, that is, the meaning suggested by the word when it used alone. In other word, it is the first meaning or usage which a word will suggest to most people when the word is said in isolation. It is the meaning learned early in life and likely to have reference to a physical situation. Actually, it is said that the purpose of denotative meaning is to provide, for any given interpretation of a sentence, a configuration of abstract symbols, which shows exactly what we need to know if we are to distinguish that meaning from all other possible sentence meaning in the language. Notice also that denotative meaning is also called as logical or cognitive meaning. It is the basic propositional meaning which corresponds to the primary dictionary definition. Such a meaning is stylistically neutral and objective as opposed to other kinds of associative meanings. Denotation, therefore, is the agreed-upon sense of what a word refers to, stands for, or designates, apart from the feeling it may call up. Hartina (2017) also quoted Raeske (1966) as stating that denotation has reference only to what is conventionally understood by word. The denotative meanings of a word is thus void of any emotional or subjective overtones. Furthermore, Ndimele (1997) as cited in Akidi, Amajoyi, Ayozie and Mgborogwu (2021) observed that the term denotation is the ordinary basic dictionary meaning of a word which is normally stable and not affected by contextual colouring or emotional overtones of either the speaker or hearer. He maintains that all the speakers of one language share a common conceptual meaning of a lexical item. This is also to say that denotation is the basic meaning of a word, just like one would find in a dictionary. For example, the word *rose* means a kind of flower. That is its denotative meaning. This is different from what

the word makes people feel or think about, which is called meaning association. As a matter of fact, knowing the denotative meaning of words immensely helps us to understand or assimilate what we read and how to explain them in our own ideas clearly.

Leech (1974) as cited in Hartina (2017) commented that connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content. Connotation, according to Kreidler (1998), is the affective or emotional association that a word elicits, which clearly needs not be the same for all people who know and use that word. For example, when one mentions the word *dog*, what do we feel about it and how does a particular society value dog? Among the Eskimos, a dog is an animal that is used for pulling a sled, the Parsees regard dogs as nearly sacred, Hindus consider them a great pest and in Western Europe and America some members of the species still perform the original chores of hunting and guarding while others are merely 'pets'. In African societies including Nigeria, dogs are kept as pets, hunters as well as for security and economic reasons, while in other places (still within Africa), they are regarded as taboos and sacred beings that should not be kept for any reason. In certain societies too, the flesh of dogs is part of the human diet while in some others it is not. The meaning of the word *dog* pragmatically includes the attitudes of a society and individuals. It would be wrong to think that a purely biological definition of the lexeme *dog* is a sufficient account of its meaning. Therefore, connotation refers to the personal aspect of meaning, the emotional associations that the word arouses. Connotations vary according to the experience of individuals but because people do have common experiences, some words have shared connotations. In the same vein, O'Grady, Archibald & Katamba (2011) declared that one notion that is closely linked with the concept of meaning is connotation, which is defined as the set of associations that a word's use can evoke. For example, for most Canadians, the word *winter* evokes thoughts of snow, bitter

cold, short evenings, frozen fingertips, and the like. These associations make up the word's connotation, but they cannot be its meaning (or at least not its entire meaning). Lastly, Hatim (1997) as cited in Ilyas (2013) defined connotation as the additional meanings that a lexical item acquires beyond its primary, referential meaning. Explaining further, Ilyas (2013) said that words that have positive connotations may become negative and vice versa. An example of this is the word *gay* which was quite positive in the past. The word *charm* which has positive associations today has negative connotation as it is associated with sorcery, etc. Connotation could also be affected by the co-texts and contexts. For example, the word *dove* acquires positive connotations from such collocations as: *the dove of peace, harmless as a dove*; whereas its synonym *pigeon* has negative connotations as it is associated with such collocations as: *a clay pigeon, pigeon droppings*. In advertisements, *second-hand* cars are sometimes advertised as *pre-owned* cars, in which the emotional effect is clearly played out. In the political discourse too, connotations have a significant role and function. For example, a news item once appeared in October, 1989 in the British magazine *Reader's Digest* (135) as: "Why Russia Can't Feed Itself", in which the word *feed* is mainly used with animals and babies, and this use of the verb with reference to Russians is based on its negative connotative function which reflected Britain's negative view of Russia then.

2.2 Empirical Review

Unarguably, there are scholars in the field of linguistics, who have, at one point or the other, carried out some studies previously that are related to the current study. In this section, I review a few of such works, as follows:

Ayegba, M. and Ahamefule, N. O. (2013) conducted a study titled 'Semantic Connotations in Igala'. In this study, the aim of the researchers was to examine connotations from Ígálà perspective in relation to other languages' worldviews via the review of some scholars'

contributions to the study of connotations in such languages. The study was anchored on the theoretical spectrum of the use theory, which the investigators considered more appropriate for easy comprehension of their work. Also, a good number of examples were drawn to substantiate or illustrate their analysis. The study shows that while Ígálá shares some similar ideas on connotative meaning with some languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, etc., it differs to some extent. It also shows that one word or expression from the Ígálá worldview can have more than one connotative meanings, and two words or expressions can jointly have a single connotative meaning or vice-versa. They also found out that connotations are more often used by speakers (elders) who are well experienced in the use of the language than speakers (youths) who have little or no experience about the language or culture.

Hartina, N. (2017) carried out a study titled ‘connotative and denotative meaning in Doang-Doangang of Makassar’. The aim of the researcher in this work was to find out the kind of connotative and denotative meanings in 5 scripts of Doang-Doangang of Makassar. The study was based on Leech’s (1981) theory of basic propositional meaning of denotative and Wardhough’s (2010) theory of connotative meaning. In addition, the researcher applied qualitative descriptive method in data analysis. She also used observation and interview methods to get valid data for this study. In the study, there were 24 words of connotative meaning and 25 words of denotative meaning. The researcher concluded that Doangang scripts used denotative words more dominantly.

Furthermore, Akidi, F. C., Amajoyi, G. N., Ayozie, C. R., and Mgborogwu, A. C. (2021) conducted a study titled ‘Lexical synonyms in Igbo language: A denotative Appraisal’. The study was set to find out whether exact synonym exists in the Igbo language. The synonyms used in the study came from the researchers’ intuitive knowledge of the Igbo language and its diverse dialects. The central interest of the study was in the denotative sense of the synonymous words and not their

connotative implications. The study adopted descriptive approach in its analysis. It found out that exact/absolute synonyms exist in Igbo, and that they are even more in number than near synonyms. The study suggested that more studies should be carried out on synonyms in different dialects of Igbo in order to find out more facts about synonyms in Igbo. According to the researchers, this would help to expand the Igbo vocabulary.

Lastly, Rao, V. C. S. (2017) conducted a study titled ‘A Brief Study of Words Used in Denotation and Connotation’. This study aimed at ESL students and explains how denotative and connotative meanings of words are used in English. People create new words when they need, and they give these words several meanings. Language is symbolic that it is used to represent ideas, objects, and feelings. Connotation and denotation are a part of language and communication. They are two principal methods of describing the meanings of words. The connotation of a word or term adds elements of emotion, attitude, or color. The meaning or use of denotation and connotation depends partly on the field of study. Learning words of denotation and connotation is useful for ESL students to improve their writing style. The study concluded that connotation and denotation play a vital role in learning language and comprehending literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is dependent on the truth-conditional theory of the semantic theory, as proposed by Kempson in 1977. Kempson (1977:4) declared that in order to have any claims to adequacy, a semantic theory must fulfill at least three conditions:

- (i) it must capture for any language the nature of word meaning and sentence meaning, and explain the nature of the relation between them;
- (ii) it must be able to predict the ambiguities in the forms of a language, whether in word or sentences; and

(iii) it must characterize and explain the systematic relations between words and between sentences of a language – i.e. it must give some explicit account of the relations of denotation, connotation, logical inclusion, entailment, contradiction, etc. According to her, any theory which fails to capture these relations, either at all, or in particular cases making the wrong predictions, must be inadequate, either in principle or in some detail of it.

Notice that the truth-conditional theory is use based, that is, the actual application of any of the semantic dimensions of meaning in any living language of the world.

A meticulous reflection of the theory above shows its relevance to the present study. As seen so far, this study is meant to explore, explain and showcase how the lexical relations of denotation and connotation as one of the dimensions of meaning in semantics are actually used in the Ígálá language. In view of this, truth-conditional theory is more appropriate to this study.

4. Methodology

The present study applied both primary and secondary data collection. The primary source of data included oral interviews with **10** elder-speakers of Ígálá, for freshness of insight in this subject matter. Then the secondary source of data comprised a brief lecture note offered to the researchers by the Head of Department (HoD), Ígálá Language and Culture, Dr. Friday Enejo Ikani (2017). The researchers used it as a guide, intuitively expounded it, and made it suitable or appropriate for the current study. In the collection of data, the researchers decided to use the Igala-mela and Ankpa dialects of the Ígálá language. Apart from the aforementioned, the researchers also consulted **2** other native speakers from the above dialect areas. In addition, the input and intuitive insight of the researchers as native speaker of the language is also brought to bear on this work. For clarity and neatness, the data on denotation were presented separately from the ones on connotation, with each of them containing 20 items. This means, both data are **40** in number but

the words are the same with different shades of meaning. The Ígálà data in this study are not only transcribed but also numbered accordingly for purposes of easy articulation and comprehension on the part of the readership.

5. Presentation of Data/Analysis/Discussion

As this subtitle suggests, both data presentation and analysis or discussion are done concurrently under this section. In addition to this, glossing of meaning is indicated accordingly, as outlined below.

A. Denotation

Word	Gloss	Denotative Meaning
1. ábíá	‘dog’	‘a domestic carnivorous animal’
2. ikélék ^{wu}	‘rat’	‘a long-tailed rodent bigger than a mouse’
3. òbàlà	‘cat’	‘a domestic animal/pet that purrs and mews’
4. òwáíló	‘chameleon’	‘a lizard-like reptile that changes colour’
5. óbóbo	‘baobab tree’	‘a short tree with thick trunk and edible fruits’
6. ádzúwε-fufu	‘white fowl’	‘a domestic bird kept for its meat and eggs’
7. éwó	‘goat’	‘a horned domestic animal with a short tail’
8. áńédzε	‘tortoise’	‘a slow-moving reptile with a dome-shaped shell’
9. ìdó	‘bat’	‘a nocturnal flying mammal with leathery wings’
10. ɔ́f̣áɣ̣àkolo	‘deer’	‘an animal known by its branched antlers’
11. ɛkpɛ	‘palm tree’	‘a tropical tree with many useful products’
12. ùlókô	‘iroko tree’	‘a hard African wood used for making furniture’
13. ikènělí (ikèněrí)	‘canary’	‘a small songbird that is yellowish in colour’

14. òlìdžò	‘adder’	‘a small venomous snake dark grey in colour’
15. òbúkò	‘he-goat’	‘a male goat, also called billy goat’
16. ìdù	‘lion’	‘a big wild predatory animal of the cat family’
17. ẹ̀džẹ̀	‘leopard’	‘a spotted slender animal of the cat family’
18. ìga	‘weaverbird’	‘a gregarious finch known for its communal nest’
19. ìgbí	‘snail’	‘a small crawling organism with a coiled shell’
20. ẹ̀džô	‘snake’	‘a legless reptile with venomous fangs’.

From the data presented above, it is obvious that all the meanings derived from the words under consideration here [1-20] are none else but normal and familiar dictionary meanings. As mentioned in the literature review, denotative meanings are meanings that words represent or are known for in the real world. In other words, such words do not conjure any meaning that is over and above the primary or dictionary meaning, implying that no meaning is associated in denotative meaning. As a matter of fact, association of meaning comes in when denotative meaning is said to be inadequate and unsatisfactory. This is where connotation comes in.

B. Connotation

Presented in this section are the same words presented under denotation but this time around with different meanings. To make the data clearer to the reader, these words are arranged vertically as done above exactly along with their glosses as well as their connotative meanings, as follows:

Word	Gloss	Connotative Meaning
i. ábíá	‘dog’	‘a shamelessly promiscuous woman’
ii. ikélékʷú	‘rat’	‘deceitful, cunning, trickery’
iii. ɔ̀bàlà	‘cat’	‘doggedness, discreteness’

iv. òwáíló	‘chameleon’	‘unsteadiness, inconsistency’
v. óbóbo	‘baobab tree’	‘protection, security’
vi. áǵúwε-fufu	‘white fowl’	‘showy, overbearing’
vii. éwó	‘goat’	‘stubbornness, greediness’
viii. áǵédǵε	‘tortoise’	‘cleverness, trickiness’
ix. ìdó	‘bat’	‘indecision, vacillation’
x. òǵǵǵàkolo	‘deer’	‘pace-setter, go-getter’
xi. εkpε	‘palm tree’	‘all-rounder, docility’
xii. ùlókô	‘iroko tree’	‘strength, security’
xiii. ìkèñlí (ìkèñèrí)	‘canary’	‘gifted singer, soothing presence’
xiv. òlǵzò	‘adder’	‘deadly and poisonous’
xv. òbúkó	‘he-goat’	‘wamanising, shamelessness’
xvi. ìdù	‘lion’	‘king of animals, conqueror’
xvii. èǵzε	‘leopard’	‘fierceness, tactfulness’
xviii. ìga	‘weaverbird’	‘noisiness, rowdiness’
xix. ìgbí	‘snail’	‘slow, slippery’
xx. éǵzô	‘snake’	‘dangerous and heartless’

A careful consideration of the above data reveals a case of dialectal variation. In data number xiii, ‘canary’ is *ìkèñlí* in Igala-mela dialect, and it is *ìkèñèrí* in Ánkpa dialect of Ígálâ. One can categorically state that many of the connotative meanings of these words are interestingly peculiar to Ígálâ. For example, *óbóbo* in e. ‘baobab tree’, whose connotative meaning is ‘protection’ or ‘security’, is exclusive to Igala. The same applies to *áǵúwε-fufu* ‘white fowl’,

meaning ‘showy’ and ‘overbearing’, and probably *ikélék^{wu}* ‘rat’, whose connotative meaning is ‘deceitful’, ‘cunning’ or ‘trickery’.

Notice that connotation in semantics is a phenomenon that is context-dependent. In fact, connotation refers to the additional meanings as well as associations that a word holds or contains that is often beyond its literal definition, which is denotation. Definitely, these associations can differ from place to place on account of cultural, social, and situational contexts.

6. Findings

From the data presented and analysed, here are the main revelations from this study. One, the connotative meanings of the words considered are capable of teaching both older and younger generations useful and insightful moral lessons; consider: *ikélék^{wu}* ‘rat’ which is connected with deceit and trick. So, a person who is labelled a rat is deceitful, cunning and crafty in character; *ɔ́fàfàkolo* ‘deer’, which is associated with focus, pace-setting and go-getting. If one is called a deer, they are pace-setters, go-getters, determined and focused in their ways’; etc.

Two, older speakers of this language use connotation a lot as proverbs, either for advice or warning because they are experienced in and have repertoire of the language. Younger speakers of the language rarely use them, and even when elders use connotation for them, it takes in-depth explanation for them to understand. And this is dependent upon the fact that the use of it (connotation) is dwindling among generation of speakers. Consequently, this study is meant to revive the use of connotation among them (the young ones) to ensure the preservation of the Ígálà language at all times, including the generations yet to be born.

7. Conclusion

This study has made a concerted attempt at describing the semantic concepts of the lexical relations of denotation as well as the dimension of meaning of connotation. Although this may not be



exhaustive, it has, however, been able to explain as well as exemplify how these two meaning relations apply to the Igala language. From the data presented and analysed, it is noticeable that these two meaning relations work uniquely in the Igala language, and as such, they are very significant as far as meaning in the Igala language is concerned.

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