

SEMANTICS OF NON-LEXICAL VOCALICS IN NGWA

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Abstract:

Non-lexical vocalic vowels, refer to vowel sounds that are components of communication by speech, which indicate cues as to how a preceding or a following message should be interpreted. Ngwa is a dialect of Igbo. The word 'Ngwa' also refers to the people and the geo – political area known as Ngwa land. The Ngwa people are found in Abia State in the Federal republic of Nigeria. This paper examined non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa. Data for the study were obtained from competent native speakers using the elicitation method of oral interview, where the native speakers were requested to make utterances that have non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa. The paper is poised to demonstrate the meaning of some non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa, and to illustrate that non-lexical vocalic vowels can be used to substitute verbal expressions in Ngwa. The framework employed for the analysis of data in this paper is, Ethnomethodology, also known as Conversational analysis. The choice of this



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framework is because it is concerned with the identification and isolation of different types of utterances that occur in discourse interactions. The findings of this paper on non-lexical vocalic vowels are: that non-lexical vocalic vowels are semantically loaded utterances in Ngwa, that competence in the use of the Ngwa dialect will include a proper understanding and use of the non-lexical vocalic vowels in this dialect of Igbo and that non-lexical vocalic vowels can be used to reinforce and substitute verbal and nonverbal expressions in Ngwa. This work recommends further research in the study of non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa in order to enhance the use and understanding of the various linguistic features in this dialect of the Igbo language.

Keywords: Ethnomethodology, Ngwa, semantics, verbal and nonverbal expressions and vocalics.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to O' Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, and Rees-Miller (2001, p. 245), "... there is more to language than just form. In order for language to fulfill its communicative function, utterances must also convey a message; they must have content". This means that every utterance in language must have its own meaning. Studies in language, have shown that there are cues in human communication that give clues as to what the expressions in adjacent positions mean, or what an active hearer or reader is to anticipate in an expression, which could be verbal, non-verbal or written. This paper aims at examining the meaning of some non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa. Non-lexical vocalic vowels, are vowel sounds that are used to reinforce verbal or graphic expressions. According to Wikipedia (2021, p. 1) "... vocalics are a component of meta-language that may modify meaning, give nuanced meaning, or conveying different shades of meaning". This in other words means that non-lexical vocalic vowels are modifiers of the expressions in which they occur. Vocalics are non-lexical components of communication by speech. This is because they are vocal but non-verbal, but all the same they have meaning and introduce the semantic content of the expression in adjacent position. cf. Merriam-webster (2021, p.1) and Slidetodoc (2021, p.1). In the subsections below, one is going to present a conceptual review of the term vocalics, a brief discussion of the term semantics, verbal and non-verbal expressions, Ngwa as a dialect, ethnomethodology as the framework under which this paper is discussed and the methodology used for the collection of data for this paper.



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1.1 Conceptual Review

Matthews (2007, p. 429), refers to voclics as, “Consisting of or pertaining to a vowel or vowels. The term is also used to refer to a distinctive feature in the schemes of Jakobson, Chomsky and Halle”. This means here that the *Vocalics*, is used to refer to vowels or to the *vocalic feature* used in the categorization of vowels in a matrix of phonetic segments. From Weebly (2021, p.1), “Vocalics is the study of the nonverbal uses of the voice that indicate emotion, and provide cues as to how the message should be interpreted”. This in other words means that vocalics include the study voice features such as: pitch, volume, stress, intonation, non-lexical vowels, fillers and so on in order to help understand the maximum intention of a sender of a message. Weebly, goes on to mention some examples of vocalics as: nope, yes, huh, uh, em, er, and so on. Weebly, also mentions that vocalics specify the state of nervousness, anger, upset, tiredness, joy and so on of a speaker. Another internet source, Indeed (2021, p.1), notes that vocalics are referred to as paralinguage, includes the way you speak, such as your tone of voice”. This still points to the vocal features that are studied in speech. Having seen that vocalics is concerned with the study of the vocal features that are used in speech, this paper is however concerned with the non-lexical vocalic vowels that are used in Ngwa.

1.2 Semantics

According to Lyons (1981, p. 136) “Semantics is the study of meaning”. This means that semantics is concerned with the study of the meaning of any code or means by which meaning is conveyed from a sender to a receiver. Lyons went further to add that, “meanings are ideas or concepts, which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearers by embodying them, as it were, in the forms of one language or another”. Thus, language is the medium for the conveyance of meaning, and that language comes in different forms such as: spoken, written or sign.

According to Robins (1989, p. 19), “meaning is an attribute not only of language but of all sign and symbol systems, and the study of meaning is called semantics which, therefore, embraces a wider range than language alone”. From the above assertion by Robins, Semantic studies include not only verbal human language, but also other paralinguistic signs and symbol systems which may include, vocalics (stress, tone, pitch, volume, vocal quality, pronunciation, fillers, pausings, non-lexical vocalic vowels, rate of speech and so on), road signs or mathematical notational symbols



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Kreidler (1998, p. 3) notes that, “Semantics is the systematic study of meaning and linguistics semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings”. This means that semantics is a field of study that is concerned with identifying how the human language organizes linguistic units in order to be able to effect meaningful communication at different contexts.

O’Grady et al (2001, p. 245), refer to Semantics as “the study of meaning in human language”. This means that Semantics is concerned with the analysis of utterances in human language. utterances here, could be verbal, non-verbal or written which are used to convey information from a sender to a receiver.

Ejele (2003, p. 1) notes that, “Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies meaning”. This indicates that the other branches of linguistics: phonology, morphology and syntax are mainly concerned with the forms of linguistic units in their specific domain and not with content (meaning).

According to Ndimele (2007, p. 1) “Semantics is an area of linguistics which studies the meaning of words and sentences in language”. This implies that the study of meaning in a language could be either at the lexical or syntactic level.

Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2008, p. 227), define Semantics as, “the study of linguistic meaning”. Thus, to them, Semantics targets at studying the content of every linguistic unit in human language, which will include morphological, lexical, phonological and syntactic units of language.

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010, pp. 204-9) equally assert, “that Semantics is the study of meaning”. Thus, the study of the content of a linguistic unit is the preoccupation of Semantics.

Omego (2011, p. 4) asserts that, “linguistic semantics is the scientific study of all aspects of meaning encoded in natural languages, from the meaning of individual words to the meaning of words grouped into phrases and clauses in context within the lexical and grammatical structure of specific languages”. Thus, from this definition of semantics, semantics is a study in human language which studies individual words, or group of words in phrases and clauses. From the above definitions, all the language scholars mentioned



above, seem to agree that semantics is an aspect of language study that is concerned with the study of the content (meaning) of linguistic units.

1.3 Verbal and Non-verbal Expressions

The verbal mode of communication involves the use of the articulatory organs in the oral cavity to produce sounds of a language that are both understood by the sender and receiver for the transmission of information from one person to another. Oral communication is the oldest form of communication. The oral method of communication, often requires face –to-face interaction between a speaker and a listener. However, some other methods that are used in this mode of communication are: the telephone, radio, television, and public address systems and conversations. This method of communication requires that the environment must be devoid of distractions, personal discomfort, and noise. The sender of an information (message), is expected to use clear language, a clear strong and acceptable intonation. cf. (Onyekwere and Nkoro 2007, p. 222-3) and Ugorji (2020, pp. 246-257).

The non-verbal type of communication, is that which does not require the use of words. This mode of communication is also known as a paralanguage which include: vocalics (voice mode), tactilics (touch), olfactics (nasal perceptions/smell), chronemics (time/season), occulesics (eye contacts), proxemics (distance), non-lexical vocalic vowels and so on. In its unique form, message is passed on from a source to receiver by the use of any of the above mentioned non-verbal modes. In this paper, the concern is with the non- lexical vocalic vowels in the Ngwa dialect of Igbo.

1.4 Ngwa

Ngwa is an Igbolect in the Niger-Congo language family under the new Benue-Congo. cf. Williamson (1989, p. 21). The word, *Ngwa* refers to the language, the people, and geopolitical area known as Ngwa land. Ngwa people are found in Abia State in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. They are found in seven local government areas of the state namely: Aba North, Aba South, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Obingwa, Osioma Ngwa, and Ugwunagbo. According to Nwankwo (2009, p. 180), the Ngwa homeland measures about 512.8 square miles, and has one of the most beautiful and fertile table lands of the Igbo nations in Nigeria. Research has shown that the Ngwa land is bounded in the west by the Imo River, which separates the Ngwa land from Asa Nteke in the South-West, and their Mbaise Kith and Kin in the west.



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Northwards of the Ngwaland are neighbouring Ohuhu, Umuahia and Bende clans of the old Bende. The Ndokis are in the South-East and Anaangs and Ibibios are in the Eastern parts of the Ngwa land. The exact date of the settlement of the Ngwa people in their present location/homeland is not known, but oral tradition has it that the Ngwa people were a group of Igbos who left Umuneoha, a place in Owerri (Owere) in search of cultivable arable land, on which to hunt for bush animals and for a better trading and exchange opportunities cf. Nwankwo (2009, pp. 18-19 & Ezeibe (2009, p. 9). Cf. Ugorji (2019, pp. 190-203). The next section of this paper, presents the methodology employed in the collection of data.

1.6 Methodology

The primary source of data for this paper were gotten from two selected Ngwa-Igbo native speakers of the age 40-65 years, who were personally interviewed and listened to as they spoke. They also mentioned the contexts under which non-lexical vocalics could be used in Ngwa. For the secondary source, use was made of the library texts and the internet. As one of the researchers is a native speaker of the dialect, we also made use of intuition to assess some of the semantic interpretations of the non-lexical vocalics in Ngwa. In the subsection that follows, examples of non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa are presented.

1.7 Non-Lexical Vocalic Vowels in Ngwa

1a. òòó? ‘What?’

b. òòó?/ m̀ gà-ìmèrè ǵ g̀r̀r̀?/ ́ś m̀ b̀á? ‘What? What can I do for you?/ Should I come?’.

2a. ùùú? What is it? How may I help you?’

b. ùùú ́ di8 ́kpóm?

3a. ìé? What do you mean?

b. ìé, nwáányí áhù ọ múọ́lá nwá? What do you mean? Has that/the put to bed?’

4a. óóó ‘yes!’

b. óóó, ánùlá m̀ hwé ́ kàrà! ‘Yes, I have heard what you told me’.

5a. Èèé? ‘So it has really happened?’.

b. Èèé, Úchè ázúọ́lá úgbọ̀là. ‘So it has really happened, that Uche bought a car?’.

6a. Íh! This is it! Exactly!.

b. Íí, kénà bù hwé m̀ chọwájé! This is it! This is what I have been looking for’.



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7a. ọ̀ọ̀ọ! ‘Not at all!’.

b. ọ̀ọ̀ọ, ọ́ gáfúghí! ‘Not at all, he did not go!’.

8a. Ààá! ‘No!’.

b. Ààá, ánúfúghí, m h́wé-ọ́ kàrà óó! ‘No, I didn’t hear what he said!’.

9a. Ààà! ‘What?’.

b. Ààà, gírì ọ̀zọ̀ m̀m̀èkwàrà? ‘What, ’what again happened?’.

10a. Hèèyí? ‘What is it again? / What evil or disaster is this?’

b. Hèèyí, Ọ́ d̀ìkwà m̀ma? ‘What is it again? / What evil or disaster is this? I hope all is well’.

11a. Òwèyí? ‘Who is calling? Here I am. I can hear your call’.

b. Òwèyí, lèè m̀ óbénà. ‘Who is calling? Here I am. I can hear your call, see me here’.

12a. ùòò? ‘Yes! ‘Who is calling?’.

b. ùòò, ị̀ d̀ì ị̀chọ̀ m̀? ‘Yes, Who is calling? Are you looking for me’.

13a. óó! ‘Okay. Let it be so!’ (A cool consent to a statement/assertion).

b. óó tà ọ́ d̀ìnyè ótú ányì kàrà. ‘Ok. Let it be as we have said!’.

14a. óóó! ‘Don’t worry! I have heard you’.

b. óóó ọ́ gà ímé yá ‘Don’t worry! I have heard you. He/She will do it’.

15a. Éwóó! ‘I have forgotten it!’.

b. Éwóó! Échéfúólá m̀ éḡḡ## l’úlò! ‘I have forgotten it! I have forgotten the money at home’.

16a. Ólólílóó, òòò, óóó, ‘Come and celebrate/rejoice with me!’.

(An exclamation for a great achievement).

b. Ólólílóó, òòò, óóó, Àdà á múḡlá nwá nwóké óó! ‘Come and celebrate/rejoice with me. Ada has put to bed a baby boy!’

17a. Òhò! ‘You are looking for my trouble!’.

b. Òhò, hàfù m̀ áká óó! ‘You are looking for my trouble! Leave me alone!’.

18a. Hèwù? ‘Why this?’



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b. Hèwù? Mánù ákwáfúólá. ‘Why this? The oil has poured out’.

19a. Ééé! ‘Yes!’ (An emphatic agreement to a statement).

b. Ééé, ọ gáwálá. ‘Yes, he/she has gone!’ (An emphatic agreement to a statement).

20a. Áhàá! This it! We love it!

b. Áhàá! Àgbàí kénà ndì mǎmá óó! This it! We love it! These shoes are really fine!

21a. Àààyé? Please, what is it?

b. Àààyé, ọ dì hwé mǎ gá-ìmèrè gí? Please, what is it? What may I do for you?

22a. Òó! ‘Is this why you called?’

b. 22. Òó, ọ bù hwé ísǐtá dì àkpò mǎ? Échéfúó dì là mǎ yá. ‘Is this why you called? I have forgotten all about it.’

23a. ǎ! ‘God forbid’!

b. 23a. ǎ, mǎdù éjǐghí álù ònwá yá óó! ‘God forbid, it is not normal for a man to marry his daughter!’.

24a. Óóò! ‘I am surprised it is so’!

b. Óóò, Nnéómá ágáwálá àlà békèé. ‘I am surprised, Nneoma has travelled abroad’.

25a. Èèèé! ‘So it has happened at last’?

b. Èèèé, éjídélá ónyé óhí áhù. ‘So it has happened at last’?

26a. Òhó! ‘Mind yourself’!

b. Òhó, mǎmèrè gǐnì gbòò? ‘Mind yourself, what is my offence now’?

27a. Ụù! ‘Hold it there’!

b. Ụù! Chèrè mǎ àkàrà gí hwé mǎmèrè nù. ‘Hold it there, let me tell you what happened’.

28a. Íííí! That is really true!

b. Íííí! Éghú Nnéómá mǎrù ụmù ásàá. ‘So, what they have been saying is true!. Nneoma’s goat has calved seven kids.’

1.8 Conclusion

From the examples above, one can see that non-lexical vocalics can be used alone, or they can be used to prime the sentence that they precede, as in the (b) parts of the



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examples in the data. In other words, non-lexical vocalic vowels can be used to substitute what could be said verbally. From the data above, some of the non-lexical vocalics in Ngwa exhibit contrast in tone as in (8a), *Ààá!* ‘No!’ and (9a), *Ààà?* ‘What?’. The contrast occurred in the tone of the last vowel, which in (8a), is high, but in (9a), is low. Some of the non-lexical vocalic vowels also occurred as synonyms of each other. For instance, (1a). *Òòó?* ‘What/what is it?’ and (2a). *Ùùú?* ‘What/What is it’, are semantic variants of each other in Ngwa non-lexical vocalic vowels. Because of the brevity of non-lexical vocalic vowels, it can be seen that they are used in the Ngwa dialect to regulate and manage communication event. From the data, the non-lexical vocal vowels when used in isolation have stronger emphasis, since it semantically contains the information that could have been verbally expressed. The data in this paper also shows that language is a subtle and complex device used by man to effect communication. Hence this paper has demonstrated that non-lexical vocalic vowels in Ngwa are a means of conveying different shades of meaning in the dialect. It was also found that some non-lexical vocalic vowels occur at word final position, where they are used to re-emphasise the verbal part of the expression. Thus, non-lexical vocalics in Ngwa are used to reinforce verbal expressions. Finally, this paper has proven that competency in the Ngwa dialect, includes the proper use of the non-lexical vocalics in this dialect of the Igbo language. It further recommends research of such occurrence in other languages of the world.

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