

THE STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH IDIOMS

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Abstract

This study examines the structure and meaning of Nigerian English (NE) idioms, focusing on the relationship between the literal meanings of constituent words and their figurative interpretations. Despite extensive studies on idioms in Standard British English (SBE) and a few in NE, there is limited research on how semantic structure influences idiom meaning in NE. This study addresses this gap by identifying the structural forms of NE idioms and examining the connection between structure and meaning. A total of 1,116 idioms were collected from ten literary texts by Nigerian authors and from spoken data gathered through participant observation at social events within the Lagos metropolis. Using Compositional Theory, idioms were classified into four types: Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI), Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI), Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI), and Opaque Idioms (OI). The results show that of the 1,116 idioms, 705 (63.2%) were SBE idioms and 411 (36.8%) were influenced by Nigerian Indigenous Languages (NIL). Across both categories, CTI constituted the largest group (858 idioms, 76.9%). However, a striking contrast emerged: 96.2% of SBE idioms were CTI, while NIL idioms were almost evenly split between CTI (43.8%) and QMI (49.1%). Opaque idioms were extremely rare (0.9% overall). Spoken texts from social events yielded a higher proportion of NIL idioms (80.6%) than most literary texts, indicating that the spoken domain is a primary site for indigenized idiom production. The study concludes that NE idioms are predominantly compositional, but NIL-influenced idioms exhibit a distinctive preference for quasi-metaphorical forms requiring cultural and contextual knowledge for interpretation.

Keywords: Nigerian English, idioms, compositionality, quasi-metaphorical idioms, language contact, New Englishes

Introduction

When asked for the definition of idioms, most people are still quick to make reference to the relationship between their structural frozenness and their meanings. However, this kind of focus is only true for a small number of idioms. There are so many other classes of idioms whose constituent words, their semantic structure, and their meanings have varying degrees of

relationship. As true as this is for Standard British English (SBE)—the standardized variety of English used in formal writing, education, and media in the United Kingdom—so is it true for Nigerian English (NE) idioms. NE is a distinct variety of English that has developed in Nigeria, characterized by lexical, structural, and semantic features influenced by Nigerian indigenous languages (such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa) as well as the socio-cultural context of Nigeria.

However, despite extensive studies on idioms in SBE and a few in NE, there is limited research on not only the structure but also how the semantic structure influences idiom meaning in NE. This study addresses this gap by identifying the structure and examining the connection between the structure and meaning of NE idioms. Idioms are veritable aspects of language use in Nigerian languages, and as such it is expected that their use in NE would reflect this. This study is anchored on the Compositional Theory (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989; Cacciari, 1993; Glucksberg, 1990).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To identify the different structural forms of NE idioms using the Compositional Theory,
- ii. To examine the relationship between structure and meaning in NE idioms.

Background to the Study

The society determines the acceptability of language usage. Without society, there is no language. Language is dynamic, and the socio-cultural environment in which it is used affects its form and usage.

The emergence of Nigerian English (NE) is a predictable development of language contact—a natural response to pressing linguistic and socio-cultural needs. English has had to share functions with indigenous languages, creating a need to express new ideas and modes of thought unavailable in the native variety. Additionally, English is being taught by non-native speakers who were themselves taught mostly by non-native speakers. As a result, many native English items are realized in Nigerian ways. Where there is no equivalent in English to express needed nuances, the need to communicate compels Nigerian speakers to resort to expressions appropriate for the Nigerian context.

Several linguists have examined factors responsible for the emergence of NE. Adekunle (1974) argued that because English is in a new ethnolinguistic environment, its contact with local Nigerian languages and speech habits results in its assimilation into local culture. Banjo (1971) argued that English cannot be a linguistic island, so it must react and adapt to its new social and linguistic environment. Adetugbo (1977) noted that Olagoke's (1981) observation about natural language skill development and Adegbija's (2004) view about the formal nature of English learnt by

Nigerians might have contributed to spelling pronunciation in NE usages. NE speakers had already acquired set habits in their native languages, making the learning of English prone to interference, especially in phonology (Dadzie, 2004b).

Despite variations inherent in the English spoken by Nigerians from different linguistic zones (Eastern, Western, and Northern), linguists have described certain characteristic features of NE that cut across these zones (Adetugbo, 1979; Bamgbose, Banjo, & Thomas, 1995). Every language has its own peculiar syntactic structuring. Dadzie (2004a) argued that the frequency of such expressions generated from complications eventually leads to their acceptance as characteristics of NE. Nigerians as L2 users of English, apply logical rules to handle grammatical complexities, regarding English as an extension of their native languages.

Language, Culture, and Nigerian English

Language is a reflection of culture, and some linguists see culture as being reflected in language. Therefore, in identifying or characterizing a dialect, the role of the cultural context is significant. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language determines thought and perception. What these early grammarians were not aware of in their time were the issues of language transfer and imposition of colonization, which both lead to language and cultural imposition. A change in language may change our expression of things in nature but not necessarily our cosmos, which is already a product of the environment in which we acquire our L1.

Moreover, users of a foreign language are often faced with what Adetugbo (1977) refers to as cultural interference. He says that the relationship between language and culture is that they are inseparable. Therefore, it is very easy to transfer meanings from L1 to L2 to express cultural patterns, values, ideas, concepts and situations that are different or non-existent in the English native environment. NE cannot, but exhibit features of the cultural life and patterns of social behaviour of the people who use it—features which Adetugbo (1977) emphasizes are not mere deviations from the norm but characterize standard NE.

In an L2 situation like Nigeria, one significant factor responsible for language variation is socio-cultural in nature. In the first instance, there are over 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Varieties of NE are easily identified on the phonetic level (Adetugbo, 1977). These varieties are based on the major ethnic groupings in the country: Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Igbo, Edo, etc. However, the more educated the speaker, the fewer the traces of regional accents in his speech.

NE reflects the influences of the various indigenous languages in the country, even though some are more significant than others. Idioms in the different ethnic groups are different, but they still have a lot in common. These common grounds are found in the speech patterns of near-native speakers, whose speech patterns form the yardstick for measuring standard NE. The wisdom contained in such idioms is common to the significant contributing languages of NE. So one finds

that such idioms are easily identifiable by most NE speakers, irrespective of the region they are from.

Defining Idioms and Compositionality

Wood (1986) defines idioms as fixed expressions whose accessibility is dependent on the ease with which speakers are able to process them. This means that even though idioms are fixed in terms of conceptual possibilities, some are more fixed than others. This corroborates what Cacciari (1993) says, that idioms are not created equal. To Wood, idiom fixity forms a continua where we find some that are totally 'frozen' at one end and those that are not at the other end.

In the case of Irujo (1986b, 1993), her view is that idioms are conventionalized expressions whose meanings cannot be determined from the meanings of their parts. It is important to note here that she did not say that the constituent parts of idioms do not contribute to the overall understanding of the idioms, but that they cannot be determined by them. This suggests that other factors need to be considered in addition to the meaning of the constituent parts.

Glucksberg (1993) explains that all idioms, by their definition, have two meanings: the linguistic meaning of the words and phrases themselves, and the stipulated, idiomatic meanings. The meanings of constituent words of an idiom and its underlying structure are both available and play a role, when necessary, for communicative purposes (for instance, when a speaker is faced with an unfamiliar idiom).

Cacciari (1993) says idioms belong to the family of fixed phrases, clichés, proverbs, indirect speech acts and speech formulas that share some degree of conventionalization of meaning but differ in semantic and syntactic properties. She presents a new set of linguistic and psychological studies that abandons the idea that idioms are non-compositional. At the end of her experiment, she identifies five strategies used by participants to comprehend idioms: look for another similar idiom; interpret one constituent literally; look for a cause-and-effect relationship; consider the semantics of the constituent words; and visualize the image of the action or state described.

The implication of the results of this study is that the ability to comprehend idioms is not restricted to the process of simply retrieving an idiom's meaning from lexical memory. Therefore, semantic as well as pragmatic constraints are vital to idioms' use beyond the scope of a single paraphrase. A second experiment with fifth-grade children provides evidence that idioms differ according to their semantic structure and that children are sensitive to these differences. This serves as the pivotal point for this research to differentiate between types of idioms in NE in terms of their semantic as well as their syntactic characteristics.

Types of Idioms by Compositionality

The issue of compositionality of idioms figures prominently in linguistic and psychological discussions of idiomaticity. Compositional idioms have been proven to be more easily understood

than non-compositional ones (Gibbs et al., 1989). Based on this, Glucksberg (1993) identifies three structural meaning types: compositionally opaque idioms (COI), compositionally transparent idioms (CTI), and quasi-metaphorical idioms (QMI).

Compositionally Opaque Idioms (COI)

The relations between the idiom elements and the meanings are not apparent. But the meaning of the constituent words constrains their interpretations and usages. For example, the meaning of 'kick' in 'to kick the bucket' constrains the use of the idiom to refer to somebody kicking the bucket 'silently' or 'suddenly' but not 'sharply', nor can the person kick the bucket all week because the idea of dying cannot be done over and over. Despite the non-compositionality that earlier scholars have attributed to it, it can still undergo some form of modifications, as in:

The man kicked the bucket suddenly.

The man silently kicked the bucket.

Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI)

There is a one-to-one semantic relation between the idiom words and the components of the idioms' meanings. This is usually because of the metaphorical correspondences between the idiom words and the components of the idioms' meanings. For instance, the word 'break' in 'break the ice' corresponds to the idiomatic sense of changing a mood or feeling, and 'ice' corresponds to social tension. This class of idioms is referred to as normally and abnormally decomposable idioms by Gibbs et al. (1989), where normally decomposable idioms are those that have 'quasi-literal' relations between elements and meanings, and abnormally decomposable idioms are those whose relations are more or less metaphorical.

Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI)

The literal referents of the idioms are instances of the idiomatic meanings. Examples of idioms in this group are:

To give up the ship.

To carry coal to Newcastle.

To count one's chickens before they are hatched.

To bury the hatchet.

This type of idioms convey meaning through their allusional content by calling to mind the prototypical instances of an entire category of people, events, situations, or actions. Therefore, certain factors need to be considered before each type can be used either in its original or variant form, and a sweeping statement that all idioms cannot undergo these processes would not be entirely true.

Cacciari (1993) differentiates between types of idioms according to their semantic as well as their syntactic characteristics because they all behave differently in terms of ease of comprehension and interpretation by users. She classifies idioms as Quasi-Metaphorical, Opaque, and Transparent. Gibbs (1993) declares that some idioms are analyzable, and it is this that enhances their immediate, "on-line" interpretations. Also, decomposable idioms might be easier to comprehend than non-decomposable ones.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive case study approach, to identify and examine the relationship between the structure and meaning of Nigerian English (NE) idioms. The data collected for this study were gathered as part of a larger study which spanned over a decade. In this study, the data are used for a different purpose. The target population for this study are idioms in NE.

A list of idioms was initially gathered from texts on NE. Armed with these, the researcher attended various social events and ceremonies, such as wedding receptions and traditional wedding ceremonies, in the Lagos metropolis, where the researcher physically observed these ceremonies to identify the idioms in use during these social events by everyday people. The idioms in use during these social events were documented both through participant observation and with the aid of discreetly placed electronic devices, which were later transcribed. The use of these idioms was also verified by monitoring programmes and news in both the electronic and print media to ascertain their use by other NE speakers, especially within the Lagos metropolis.

In addition to these, idioms were collected from selected literary texts written in English by Nigerians. These selected literary texts are replete with idioms of different forms. Of the three genres, prose and drama texts were selected because, apart from the fact that they are good sources of the written language in its most refined form as a result of the high skills of the authors of the selected texts, both have simulations of the spoken language as used by ordinary people, and they are assumed to be as close to the spoken form as possible.

Ten literary texts were selected for this study. In selecting the texts, we considered the level of education, the professions, and the language skills of the authors. The selected authors are highly competent users of the English Language as they are all teachers of English Language or Literature in different tertiary institutions in and outside Nigeria for some time in their careers. We selected a total of six Nigerian authors, both male and female, at a ratio of 2:1 in favour of males. This is informed by the fact that the ratio of male literary authors to their female counterparts is approximately two to one. The selection of texts only from the genres of prose and drama to the

exclusion of poetry is due to the fact that poetic license used as a tool in the writing of poems makes poems inappropriate for a study of language as used by ordinary people in society.

Below is a breakdown of both the primary and secondary sources for this study. Idioms whose source is SBE were verified with selected texts on English idioms. As for those that have their source in Nigerian languages, they were first checked in selected NE texts, some of which are found to be in regular use at social events, in the electronic and print media, and in some of the selected literary texts used in this research.

Theory Justification

This study is anchored on the Compositional Theory (CT) of idiom processing. Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting (1989) argued that those expressions whose literal meanings offer no clue as to the figurative meanings are more difficult to access than those whose figurative and literal meanings are close. The former are tagged decomposable idioms, while the latter are tagged non-decomposable idioms. When an idiom is decomposable, readers assign independent meanings to its individual parts and will quickly recognize how these meaningful parts combine to form the overall figurative interpretations of the entire phrase (Gibbs et al., 1989, p. 285). The users of language do not shut down their normal language processing mode when they encounter idioms. The consensus among researchers who use this theory is that idioms are processed as any other phrase or sentence. The meanings of individual words that make up the idiom contribute to the overall figurative interpretation of the string.

Cacciari (1993) suggested that the relationship between the literal meaning of the individual words in the string of an idiom and the idiomatic or figurative meaning varies from one idiom to another. Some idioms still have vivid synchronic relation to literal meaning, while some do not. In between, different levels of relationship can be identified between the literal meanings of the words and the figurative meanings of the idioms that they are the constituent parts. The ability of native speakers to produce idiomatic variants deliberately or inadvertently shows that the analyzability of an idiom is the extent to which the speakers of the language can trace the relations between the literal and figurative levels of meaning.

This had earlier been confirmed by Glucksberg (1990) when he stated that the literal meaning of the constituents makes some contributions because they can be exploited in creative modifications of the conventional idioms. Even those idioms whose idiomatic meanings seem to be dissociated from the literal meanings appear to be so because the connections are buried in the history of the language and the culture of the people (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991) and not because the connections do not exist. This theory is therefore justified for this study because it provides a framework for analyzing the degree of relationship between the literal meanings of constituent words and the figurative meanings of NE idioms.

Ethical consideration

All participants were observed and recorded at public events with their awareness, and no identifiable personal information is disclosed.

Analytical Procedure

Relying heavily on linguistic evidence provided in the findings of researchers in the 1990s on the study of idioms in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) situations, the idioms were categorized into two classes:

- a. The ones which are found in the selected English dictionaries of idioms are listed as SBE idioms; and
- b. Those absent in such dictionaries are listed as those informed by Nigerian Indigenous Languages (NIL). These exhibit some level of influence of the context of Nigerian languages, culture, and people.

The test of compositionality was then carried out on the two groups of idioms in order to:

- i. Determine their different forms and the level of relationship between the meaning of the constituent words and their figurative meanings. This yielded the following forms:

One-to-one relationship - Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI): those whose constituent words are direct indicators of the idiom meanings.

Partial relationship - Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI): those whose constituent words have partial indications of the idiom meanings.

No apparent relationship - Opaque Idioms (OI): those whose words give no clue as to the meaning of the idioms.

Conventional relationship - Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI): those that are references to metaphorical incidents and events outside of the context but are indirectly relevant to the context.

After the idioms gathered were subjected to the processes above, we obtained a total of one thousand, one hundred and sixteen (1,116) idioms, with seven hundred and four (705) of them being SBE idioms and four hundred and eleven (411) showing indications of the influence of Nigerian Indigenous Languages (NIL). Out of these, only one hundred (100), constituting approximately nine percent (9%), are presented in this study.

Results

A total of 1,116 idioms were identified and analyzed across ten literary texts and spoken data from social events within the Lagos metropolis. Of these, 705 (63.2%) were classified as Standard British English (SBE) idioms, while 411 (36.8%) showed influence from Nigerian Indigenous Languages (NIL). Table 1 presents the distribution of idioms by source and type. All the tables used in this paper were drawn by the researcher based on the data collected during the course of this study.

Table 1

Distribution of Idioms by Source Text and Type (SBE vs. NIL)

S/N	Source	Total Idioms	SBE	NIL
1	Achebe, C. (1966). <i>Arrow of God</i>	144	41	103
2	Achebe, C. (1964). <i>A Man of the People</i>	129	85	44
3	Soyinka, W. (1963). <i>The Lion and the Jewel</i>	56	34	22
4	Soyinka, W. (1972). <i>The Man Died</i>	118	102	16
5	Adimora-Ezeigbo, A. (Year). <i>The Last of the Strong Ones</i>	158	113	45
6	Adimora-Ezeigbo, A. (Year). <i>House of Symbols</i>	122	108	14
7	Alkali, Z. (1984). <i>The Stillborn</i>	77	63	14
8	Alkali, Z. (1986). <i>The Virtuous Woman</i>	96	86	10
9	Eghagha, H. (Year). <i>Death Not a Redeemer</i>	75	31	44
10	Rotimi, O. (1991). <i>Hopes of the Living Dead</i>	40	21	19
11	Spoken Texts: Social Events	103	21	83
	Total	1,116	705	411

Note. SBE = Standard British English idioms; NIL = Nigerian Indigenous Language-influenced idioms. Publication years for Adimora-Ezeigbo and Eghagha should be added if available.

As shown in Table 1, the literary text with the highest number of idioms was Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (158 idioms), followed by Achebe's *Arrow of God* (144 idioms) and

Achebe's *A Man of the People* (129 idioms). The text with the fewest idioms was Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* (40 idioms). Spoken texts from social events yielded 103 idioms.

Regarding the distinction between SBE and NIL idioms, *Arrow of God* contained the highest proportion of NIL-influenced idioms (103 out of 144, or 71.5%), while *The Man Died* contained the highest proportion of SBE idioms (102 out of 118, or 86.4%). Spoken texts from social events also showed a strong presence of NIL-influenced idioms (83 out of 103, or 80.6%).

Following the test of compositionality, the idioms were further categorized into four structural-semantic types based on the level of relationship between the literal meanings of constituent words and their figurative meanings. Table 2 presents the distribution of idioms across these four types for both SBE and NIL categories.

Table 2

Distribution of Idioms by Compositional Type and Origin

Type	SBE	NIL	Total
Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI)	678	180	858
Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI)	13	26	39
Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI)	7	202	209
Opaque Idioms (OI)	7	3	10
Total	705	411	1,116

As Table 2 reveals, the majority of SBE idioms (678 out of 705, or 96.2%) fell into the category of Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI), where the constituent words directly indicate the idiom meanings. Only 13 SBE idioms (1.8%) were classified as Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI), while seven (1.0%) were Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI) and seven (1.0%) were Opaque Idioms (OI).

For NIL-influenced idioms, a different distribution emerged. While 180 NIL idioms (43.8%) were classified as CTI, a substantial number (202 idioms, or 49.1%) fell into the Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI) category — those that reference metaphorical incidents and events outside of the

context but are indirectly relevant to the context. Twenty-six NIL idioms (6.3%) were Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI), and only three (0.7%) were Opaque Idioms (OI).

Across both categories, Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI) constituted the largest group overall, with 858 idioms representing 76.9% of the total data set. Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI) were the second largest group at 209 idioms (18.7%), followed by Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI) at 39 idioms (3.5%), and Opaque Idioms (OI) at 10 idioms (0.9%).

A notable finding is the contrast in QMI distribution: only 7 SBE idioms (1.0% of all SBE idioms) were classified as QMI, whereas 202 NIL idioms (49.1% of all NIL idioms) fell into this category. Conversely, CTI dominated the SBE category (96.2%) but represented less than half (43.8%) of NIL idioms.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal several important patterns regarding the structure and meaning of Nigerian English idioms. The distribution of idioms across the four compositional types — CTI, PTI, QMI, and OI — demonstrates that the relationship between constituent words and figurative meanings varies considerably between SBE idioms and NIL-influenced idioms in NE.

The dominance of Compositionally Transparent Idioms (CTI) among SBE idioms (96.2%) aligns with the predictions of the Compositional Theory. As Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting (1989) argued, when an idiom is decomposable, readers assign independent meanings to its individual parts and quickly recognize how these meaningful parts combine to form the overall figurative interpretation of the entire phrase. The overwhelming presence of CTI in the SBE category suggests that SBE idioms retained in NE are precisely those whose literal meanings offer the clearest clues to their figurative interpretations. This may be because such idioms are more easily acquired and retained by L2 speakers of English in Nigeria.

Conversely, the most striking finding is the high proportion of Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI) within the NIL-influenced category (49.1%). These are idioms that reference metaphorical incidents and events outside of the context but are indirectly relevant to the context. This finding supports Cacciari's (1993) observation that some idioms still have vivid synchronic relation to literal meaning while some do not, and in between there are different levels of relationship. The QMI category in NIL idioms appears to occupy a middle ground where the connection between literal and figurative meanings exists but is mediated by cultural knowledge and metaphorical reasoning.

The prevalence of QMI among NIL idioms is not accidental. As Adetugbo (1977) noted, NE speakers had already acquired set habits in their native languages, thereby making the learning of English prone to interference. What this study adds is that this interference is not merely phonological or syntactic, as Dadzie (2004b) focused on, but extends deeply into the semantic and metaphorical structures of idiom formation. Nigerian speakers, when creating or adapting idioms

that draw from indigenous languages, appear to privilege quasi-metaphorical structures that require cultural and contextual knowledge for full interpretation.

The relatively low numbers of Partially Transparent Idioms (PTI) across both categories (3.5% overall) and Opaque Idioms (OI) (0.9% overall) suggest that truly non-decomposable idioms are rare in both SBE and NIL categories within NE usage. This aligns with Glucksberg's (1990) assertion that the literal meaning of constituents makes some contributions because they can be exploited in creative modifications of conventional idioms. Even when an idiom appears opaque, the connections are buried in the history of the language and the culture of the people (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991), not because the connections do not exist.

The contrast between the spoken texts and literary texts is also worthy of discussion. Spoken texts from social events yielded 103 idioms, with 80.6% being NIL-influenced. This is significantly higher than the NIL proportion in most literary texts, with the exception of Achebe's *Arrow of God* (71.5% NIL). This suggests that the spoken domain remains the primary site for the generation and maintenance of NIL-influenced idioms, while written literary texts vary considerably depending on the author's stylistic choices and ideological commitments to indigenizing English.

Findings

This study was guided by two objectives: (i) to identify the different structural forms of NE idioms using the Compositional Theory, and (ii) to examine the relationship between structure and meaning in NE idioms. The following findings emerge from the analysis.

One: NE idioms have different structural forms.

We identify the following forms in the NE idioms studied:

- i. Single word idioms (SWI)
- ii. Long word idioms or compounds which may or may not be replaceable by single lexical units (LWI)
- iii. Phrases or phrasal idioms (PI)
- iv. Whole utterances or sentences whose meanings rely on the meanings of the words and additional meanings which are metaphorical (SLI)

This classification is an indication that though they are idioms, they have structures which can be identified and classified like other forms in the language.

Two: NE idioms behave differently depending on the relationship between the meaning of the constituent words and their idiomatic meanings.

Idioms in NE are not merely expressions whose meanings are not deducible from the meanings of the words that make them up. These idioms have different forms, and they behave differently in terms of the extent of the relationship between the meaning of the words that make them up and the idiomatic meaning of the idioms. Our observation through the analysis of these idioms makes it clear that the relationship between the literal meaning of the individual words in the string of an idiom and the idiomatic or figurative meaning varies from one idiom to another. For some idioms, Compositionally Transparent, there is a vivid synchronic relation to the literal meaning, while for some, Opaque, there is none. In between these two extremes are those that are Partially Transparent and those that are Quasi-Metaphorical. The meanings of individual words that make up the idioms in NE contribute to the overall figurative interpretations of the string. This is in line with Glucksberg's (1990) opinion that the literal meanings of the constituents make some contributions because they can be exploited in creative modifications of the conventional idioms. This is clearly illustrated by the ability of speakers of NE to produce idiomatic variants deliberately or inadvertently.

Three: There is a systematic pairing between structural forms and compositional types in NE idioms.

In terms of the different relationships identifiable in the idiom meanings, we observe that:

- a. SLI, PI, or LWI are CTI, PTI, and QMI because the words contribute in varying degrees to the computation of the meaning of the idioms.
- b. SWI are usually OI both in SBE and NIL idioms.

Four: NE idioms have both SBE and NIL sources.

The idioms of SBE origin are seven hundred and five, while those from NIL are four hundred and eleven. This is an indication that while English might be the source of NE, the Nigerian indigenous languages are significant contributors to its form and meaning. The varieties of a language are usually multidimensional even in a native-speaker environment. Therefore, to expect that NE speakers would exhibit only one variety, considering the numerous ethnic (linguistic) groups in Nigeria, is to underestimate the force of the influence an L1 can exert on the linguistic performance of a speaker. Even in a native environment, no language can be a single, identifiable non-diatypic entity (Adetugbo, 1977). NE reflects the influences of the language from which it derives its name as well as the various indigenous languages in the country, even though some are more significant

than others. Idioms in the different ethnic groups are different, but they still have a lot in common. These common grounds are found in the speech patterns of near-native speakers, whose speech patterns form the yardstick for measuring standard NE. The wisdom contained in such idioms is common to the significant contributing languages of NE. So one finds that such idioms are easily identifiable by most NE speakers, irrespective of the region they are from.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered for linguistic research, lexicography, pedagogy, and further inquiry:

1. Dictionaries of Nigerian English, such as Igboanusi (2001), should expand their coverage of Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms (QMI), which constitute nearly half of all NIL-influenced idioms identified in this study. Current dictionaries tend to prioritize CTI-type idioms, thereby underrepresenting the quasi-metaphorical structures that are distinctive of Nigerian English creativity.
2. Teachers of English as a second language in Nigeria should incorporate instruction on the four types of idiomatic structures identified in this study, with special attention to QMI. Learners should be made aware that quasi-metaphorical idioms require cultural and contextual knowledge for full interpretation, and that this is not a deficit but a feature of Nigerian English as a distinct variety.
3. The Faculties of Arts and Education in Nigerian universities should revise their English language curricula to include modules on the structure and meaning of NE idioms. The current over-reliance on SBE idiomatic norms in teaching materials does not reflect the reality of NE usage as documented in this study.
4. Given that Quasi-Metaphorical Idioms constitute 49.1% of NIL-influenced idioms, researchers should undertake a dedicated study examining the specific Nigerian indigenous languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and others) that serve as sources for these quasi-metaphorical structures. Such a study would illuminate the extent of language contact and transfer at the semantic level.
5. Comparative research should be conducted between Nigerian English idioms and those of other New Englishes (Ghanaian English, Cameroonian English, Indian English) to determine whether quasi-metaphorical idioms are a feature of New Englishes generally or a distinctive characteristic of Nigerian English specifically.
6. A dedicated corpus of Nigerian English idioms should be developed, drawing from spoken data across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones rather than primarily from Lagos metropolis. Such a corpus would enable larger-scale quantitative analysis and allow for regional variation to be mapped.

7. Following the framework of Gibbs (1991) and Irujo (1986a, 1986b, 1993), experimental studies should be conducted to measure the processing speed and comprehension accuracy of CTI versus QMI idioms among different groups of NE speakers (L1 speakers of Nigerian languages, L2 learners, and educated NE speakers).

8. Journals publishing on World Englishes and Nigerian English should encourage authors to include explicit statements about the idiomatic provenance (SBE vs. NIL) of the data they analyze, as the current study demonstrates that these two categories behave very differently in terms of compositional structure.

Conclusion

This study set out to identify the different structural forms of Nigerian English idioms and to examine the relationship between structure and meaning using the Compositional Theory. NE idioms are not a monolithic group of non-compositional expressions but rather a heterogeneous set of structures whose meanings relate to their constituent parts in varying degrees. Compositionally, they range from transparent (CTI) through partially transparent (PTI) and quasi-metaphorical (QMI) to opaque (OI). Crucially, a systematic pairing exists between structural forms and compositional types: SLI align with QMI, PI with PTI, LWI with CTI, and SWI with OI. When Nigerian speakers draw from their indigenous languages to create idioms, they preferentially employ quasi-metaphorical structures that require cultural and contextual knowledge for interpretation. The spoken domain, as evidenced by the high proportion of NIL idioms from social events (80.6%), remains the primary site for the generation and circulation of these indigenized forms.

The theoretical implication of this study is that the Compositional Theory, originally developed using SBE data, is robust enough to account for the structure and meaning of NE idioms, but it must be extended to accommodate the quasi-metaphorical category, which is far more prominent in NE than in SBE. The practical implication is that dictionaries of Nigerian English, language teachers, and curriculum developers must move beyond treating idioms as fixed, non-compositional units and instead recognize the predictable relationships between structure, compositionality, and meaning documented in this study.

Nigerian English idioms are predominantly compositional in structure, but NIL-influenced idioms exhibit a distinctive preference for quasi-metaphorical forms that reflect the cultural life and patterns of social behaviour of the Nigerian people. These are not mere deviations from a native norm but are characteristic features of standard NE. NE idioms are expressions (words, phrases or clauses) which have conventionalized meanings other than the meanings of the words that make them up but which are greatly affected, in varying degrees by their constituent words. The level of relationship between the semantic structure and the meanings of the words that make them up determines the accessibility of their meanings to the users.

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