



**MADONNA
UNIVERSITY**

**INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL**
OF EDUCATION AND ARTS

VOL. 1 , NO 4

2023



International Journal of Education and Arts Vol.1 , NO 4 Nov. 2023

Unveiling Polysemy without Ambiguity: A Semantic Analysis of Lexical Items in the Umumba Ndiagu Dialect of Igbo Language

¹**Nwafor, Ebele Angela**

Madonna University Nigeria

ebyausfine@gmail.com

²**Nwafor, Odinaka Janefrances**

University of Nigeria Nsukka

nwaforodinakajanefrances@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate phenomenon of polysemy within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, a lesser-explored linguistic variant and a sub-dialect of the Igbo language spoken in Enugu State, in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. Polysemy, the coexistence of multiple meanings within a single word, presents a challenging yet fascinating area of study in linguistics. Through a comprehensive semantic analysis, this paper aims to ascertain whether polysemy exist in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of Igbo without ambiguity by uncovering the extent and nature of polysemy in this dialect. The research employs qualitative method to identify and analyse polysemous lexemes within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect. Utilising data collected through native speaker interviews, the study establishes a semantic inventory of polysemous words and investigates the various senses these words evoke. The Wittgenstein's Use Theory of Meaning, propounded in 1933, which states that "the meaning of an expression is a matter of the way this expression is put to use by its competent users", was used as the theoretical framework of the study to analyse the lexical items

found in the dialect. Findings indicate, among others that polysemy can exist in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of the Igbo language without ambiguity with the aid of use and context. The study recommends taking into account local linguistic phenomena in their cultural and cognitive contexts in order to enhance comprehension. The study serves as a stepping stone for further exploration of polysemy in other dialects and languages, in other to foster a deeper appreciation of the diverse and multifaceted nature of human communication. This will contribute to the expansion of the Igbo lexicon and provide valuable support to lexicographers working on creating a comprehensive Igbo dictionary.

Keywords: Dialect, Lexical item, Polysemy, Umumba Ndiagu, Use Theory of meaning.

Introduction

Language serves as a fundamental element of human communication, operating as a multifaceted and refined vehicle for the expression of thoughts, concepts, and affective states. Languages offer a broad variety of linguistic phenomena that influence the way we perceive and convey meaning throughout the vast linguistic variance. One such phenomenon is polysemy, a semantic phenomenon that allows a single word to carry numerous connected meanings. The study of polysemy is vital for unravelling the numerous layers of language, but it also holds the key to understanding how humans process and make sense of the multifaceted aspects of the world around them.

The intricate network of polysemy in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, which is a linguistic variant situated within the vibrant cultural and linguistic context of Enugu State was addressed in this paper. Like many other dialects, the Umumba Ndiagu dialect demonstrates the subtle interplay between language structure and cultural context, resulting in a tapestry of meanings that improves

communication among its speakers. Through a rigorous semantic analysis, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of polysemy within this particular dialect by conducting a thorough semantic analysis. Additionally, it attempts to investigate the cognitive processes that allow speakers to effectively comprehend and traverse the intricate network of interconnected meanings.

The research objectives include:

1. Identifying polysemous words in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect.
2. Analysing the numerous meanings associated with these lexical items within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect.
3. Exploring contextual factors impacting polysemy in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect.
4. Assessing the significance of polysemy in communication.

The stated aims of the study were carried out with the use of the following research questions:

1. What is the extent of polysemy in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, and how does it compare to other dialects or languages?
2. How does the occurrence of polysemy in Umumba Ndiagu contribute to the richness and complexity of its semantic structure?
3. To what extent does cultural and historical context influence the polysemous meanings of words within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect?
4. How do speakers of the Umumba Ndiagu dialect manage the numerous meanings of polysemous terms in their everyday conversation, and what tactics do they employ?

This research focuses solely on the literary interpretations of the exemplified words, disregarding their extensional or metaphorical meanings, to determine if polysemy can exist in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of the Igbo language without causing ambiguity.

Umumba Ndiagu is a municipality situated inside the Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. This region is

located in the south-eastern part of the country. The people in question belong to the "Waaawa" clan, which is a subgroup of the northern Igbo land community. They are alternatively known as the "Ndi Waaawa" or "Waaawa" people. The inhabitants of Umumba Ndiagu were renowned for their agricultural practises and expertise in wine production, constituting a community whose historical records have predominantly remained unrecorded in written form. Based on the researcher's understanding, there is currently no existing study on the phenomenon of polysemy within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of the Igbo language. This information gap has motivated the researcher to do an investigation in order to address it.

In order to enhance the clarity of the study, the researcher emphasises the significance of synonyms and homonyms, as these linguistic phenomena often engender confusion among individuals. Furthermore, the researcher provides illustrative examples to elucidate these concepts. The Umumba Ndiagu dialect exemplifies the intricate and multifaceted characteristics of polysemy within a linguistic framework.

Conceptual Framework

Polysemy

Polysemy is a fundamental characteristic of language whereby a single word exhibits several interrelated meanings. Irrespective of the diverse linguistic perspectives on the definition of meaning, polysemy is a phenomenon that occurs when a single word, functioning as a lexical unit in a language's lexicon, possesses multiple interconnected meanings. The interpretations of these meanings can vary from being easily discernible to having subtle nuances. Polysemy has been a subject of interest among scholars in the fields of linguistics, philosophy of language, and psychology for a considerable period of time. This interest stems from the complex difficulties it presents for theories related to semantic representation, language processing, semantic compositionality, and communication. The following are several scholarly definitions of polysemy:

O'Grady and Archibald (2011) stated that polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon characterised by the presence of many interconnected meanings within a single word. Ejele (2003) refers polysemy as the coexistence of several interconnected semantic and morphological variations inside a single word, characterised by identical pronunciation and written form. According to Ingrid (2011), conventional viewpoints commonly perceive polysemy as a circumstance in which separate meanings are listed within a solitary lexical term. The process of understanding a word with several meanings entails the task of choosing the correct meaning based on the surrounding context, which can be facilitated by referring to a list of meanings known as sense enumeration lexicons. In addition, Taylor (2003) opines that polysemy can be defined as the phenomenon in which a single language word is associated with two or more related senses.

Furthermore, Agbedo (2015) defines polysemy as a word having several meanings, which typically have a historical background or intellectual ties. Agbedo further notes that polysemy involves a collection of distinct meanings tied to a single term. When a word can be understood in several ways, it is considered polysemous. For example, Agbedo uses the term "bank" to highlight its numerous meanings: property along a river, depositing money in a financial organisation, the establishment for securing money, and a row of keys.

Ndimele (2001) also believes that polysemy entails a connection of meanings, where a single term bears numerous seemingly related senses. For instance, "ear" can imply both as a part of the human body and a portion of a plant, while "head" might connote a leader of a group, a physiological part, or a part of a currency. A fundamental factor in establishing polysemy is the requirement that the senses of a word be "related." Saeed (2009) highlights that while both polysemy and homonymy involve many senses of a term; polysemy is present when these senses are perceived as interrelated.

These researchers jointly emphasise the necessity for the several meanings of a polysemous term to have a fundamental semantic link, thereby suggesting a shared origin or cohesive element. According to Finegan (2011), the concept of polysemy is applicable when two words possess identical or closely associated meanings. In order to differentiate between polysemy and homonymy, Palmer (1981) recommended identifying a central or core meaning.

Synonyms

According to scholarly definitions, synonymy refers to the relationship between words that possess similar or closely associated meanings (Nordquist, 2017). Nevertheless, Stanojević (2009) contends that characterising synonymy as a "identity of meaning" lacks precision as it fails to account for the complete absence of absolutely similar meanings. Murphy's (2003) definition of synonyms is predicated upon the notion that they are terms that exhibit a high degree of semantic alignment. The notion of synonymy encompasses not just individual words but also phrases and sentences. Stanojević further stated that synonyms can be classified into three categories: lexical, phrasal, and propositional. It is worth noting that the first category, lexical, encompasses the second category, phrasal. Lexical synonymy refers to the phenomenon where lexical units, such as bound morphemes, lexemes, and phrases, can be used interchangeably in certain contexts while maintaining the same meaning. In contrast, propositional synonymy pertains to clauses and phrases that possess the same propositional content and can be rephrased..

Murphy (2003) opines that there are three conditions that must be met in order to establish absolute synonymy:

1. All interpretations possess identical connotations.
2. Synonymous in all contexts.
3. The objects being compared possess complete similarity in every aspect of significance.

According to Palmer (1981), the notion of absolute synonyms is called into question due to several factors. These factors include dialectal variations, such as the use of different terms like "fall" and "autumn," stylistic modifications, various emotional connotations associated with words like "politician" and "statesman," and differences in collocation situations. Therefore, Palmer posits that achieving genuine absolute semantic equivalence is improbable for lexical units derived from literary works.

Homonyms

A homonym presents a challenge because it falls into three distinct categories of words: Firstly, they are words that share the same pronunciation but have different spellings and meanings, such as "to," "too," and "two." Secondly, they can also be words that share both pronunciation and spelling but have distinct meanings, like the bird "quail" and the action "quail" (to cringe). Lastly, they can be words that are spelled the same but differ in pronunciation and meaning, like the ship's "bow" and the "bow" used for shooting arrows.

Fontes and Schwartz (2014) posits that homonyms encompass words that exhibit similarities in sound or spelling, while maintaining different definitions. A more stringent interpretation identifies homonyms as words that are simultaneously homographs (sharing the same spelling regardless of pronunciation) and homophones (sharing the same pronunciation regardless of spelling) – essentially having both identical pronunciation and spelling while carrying distinct meanings.

According to O'Grady and Archibald (2009), the term "homonym" refers to a linguistic phenomenon, where a single word form is associated with multiple unique meanings. Okolo and Ezikeojiaku (1999) suggest that a fundamental requirement for homonyms is their shared pronunciation despite possessing distinct meanings. According to Cristal (1997) and Ndimele (2001), homonyms can be defined as lexical units that share the same form but

possess different meanings within the context of semantic analysis. The perspectives of these scholars align when it comes to the notion that distinct interpretations might be included inside a shared linguistic structure. This suggests that homonyms must be articulated in a consistent manner, devoid of any deviations in pronunciation or orthography.

Literature Review

Lahlou (2022) evaluated how widely polysemy is integrated into chosen English textbooks by assessing the real-life usage of the most frequently employed words from these textbooks. The results indicated that the top 100 most commonly used words in both Close-up and Full Blast Plus 4 exhibit significant frequency levels (ranks) in the BNC. Interestingly, despite the difference in academic levels, 65 out of the top 100 most commonly used words were found to overlap between Close-up and Full Blast Plus 4.

The study done by Crossley et al. (2017) aimed to compare the priming effects on different senses of polysemous terms among English first language (L1) speakers and advanced second language (L2) speakers. The findings suggest that proficient second language (L2) speakers, in contrast to native first language (L1) speakers, do not form comparable connections within the bilingual lexicon for these multiple meanings, as evidenced by other lexical correlations.

Gerhard (2018) examines the lexical elements in Hebrew, focusing on the imbalanced nature of etymological analysis for Hebrew words. The research findings suggest that Hebrew dictionaries, such as the Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), can perpetuate this mistake by reading words as having many interconnected meanings when in fact they should be regarded as having unrelated meanings similar to homonyms.

The primary objective of Durst et al (2005) study was to examine the role of lexical time in the development of discrete meanings inside semantic memory. The results of the study suggest that individual lexical items possess intricate categories of meanings

that are maintained within semantic memory, also known as the lexicon. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a precise set of standards for discerning the classification of a separate sense while avoiding an excessive proliferation of unjustified interpretations.

In a study carried out by Pylkkänen (2006), a combination of behavioural and magneto encephalographic data was employed to investigate the phenomenon of priming across distinct senses of a word. The findings are consistent with theoretical models that propose a combination of shared and differentiated elements in the representation of polysemy. The senses that are related share a common abstract lexical representation, but they are listed separately inside that representation.

Theoretical Framework

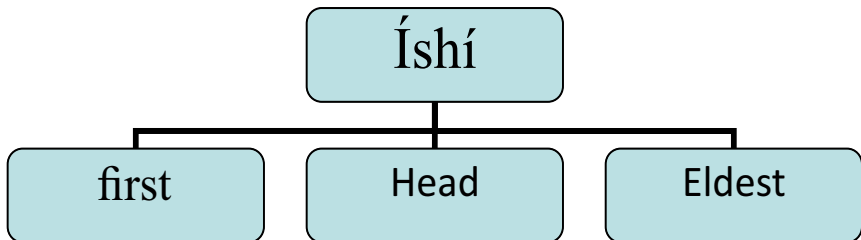
The study employs Wittgenstein's "Use Theory of Meaning" as its theoretical basis. Wittgenstein posits in his work entitled "Philosophical Investigations," that the significance of a language expression is dependent upon the particular context in which it is used. The utilisation of the use theory, as introduced by Wittgenstein, emerged as a means to address the challenges presented by the referential and mentalist theories. In his work "Philosophical Investigations," Wittgenstein introduces a foundational concept of language in which words establish a connection with objects, suggesting that the meaning of a word is intrinsically linked to the object it denotes. The author juxtaposes this perspective with his subsequent viewpoint, which places greater emphasis on the pragmatic utilisation of language in various settings, hence dismissing the concept of a theoretical or concealed significance. Wittgenstein's objective is to elucidate the concept of word meaning by establishing a connection with its usage. This aligns with his perspective that the meaning of a word is determined by its function within language, hence obviating the need for a distinct abstract meaning.

Methodology

The research was carried out in Umumba Ndiagu, a municipality situated in the Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The language under scrutiny is a relatively understudied linguistic variety, specifically classified as a sub-dialect within the Igbo language. The selection of the town for this study was based on the researcher's understanding that no existing literature has addressed the polysemy of their language. The research utilised a qualitative approach for data analysis. The data was gathered through comprehensive field research and interviews with native speakers in order to determine the presence of polysemy in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, as is the case with languages in general.

Data analysis

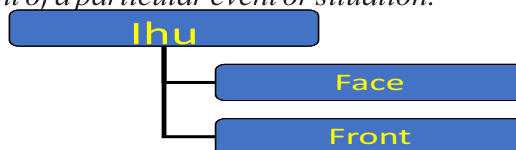
Lexical Items collected from the Umumba Ndiagu dialect and their meaning in different senses:



1.

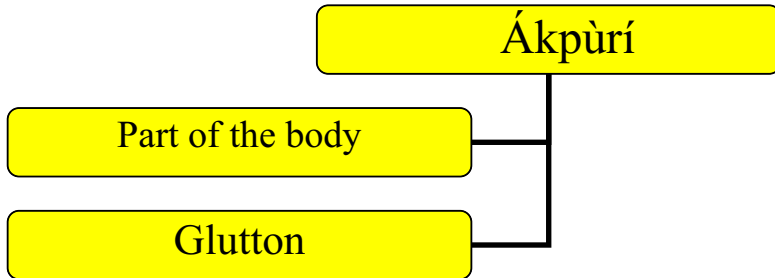
In the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, *the term "Íshí" is employed to refer to the initial individual or object within a group. Additionally, it is an integral component of the human anatomy. The individual who holds the highest seniority within a family, community, organisation, or similar entity is commonly referred to as "Íshí". Additionally, this same term is employed when discussing or addressing the commencement of a particular event or situation.*

2.



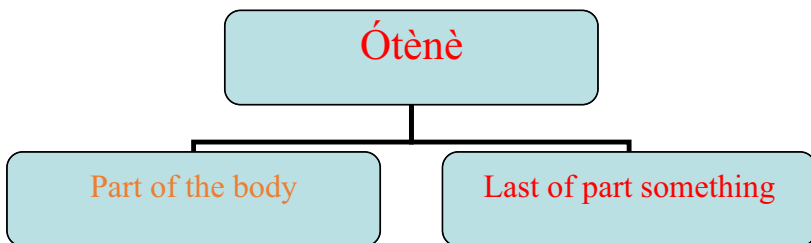
Umumba Ndiagu dialect used the term "Ihu" to denote the facial part of human body, often known as the face. Moreover, the term "Ihu" is equally employed to denote the portion or aspect that is oriented towards the front.

3.



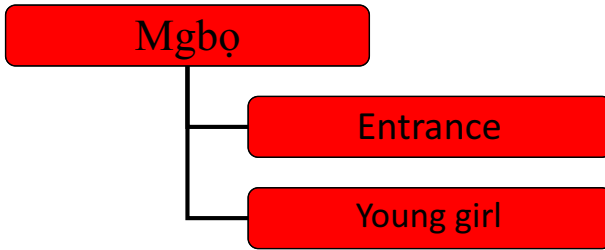
In the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, the term "Ákpùrí" is employed to indicate the anatomical region responsible for supporting the head. Moreover, within the context of this particular dialect, the term is commonly employed to refer to an individual who consistently exhibits an insatiable desire for food and unnecessary items.

4.

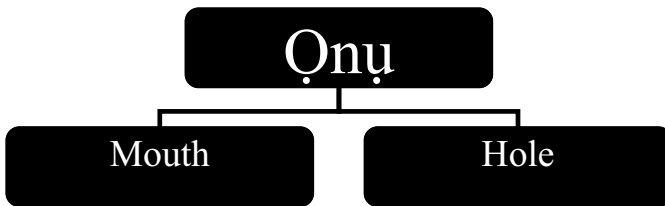


a. The term is employed to denote the part of the body through which both humans and animals eliminate waste material.

b. The term is equally used employed to denote the final portion of anything.



- a. *The term is employed to denote the part of the body through which both humans and animals eliminate waste material.*
- b. *The term is equally used employed to denote the final portion of anything.*

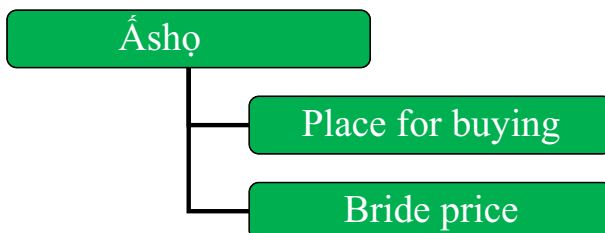


5.

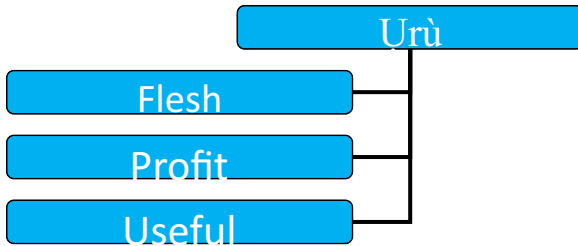
In the Umumba Ndiagu dialect, the term "Mgbọ" is used to denote the physical entity often referred to as a door. Equally, it is commonly employed to refer to a youthful unmarried woman.

6.

The lexical item "Ọnū" in Umumba Ndiagu dialect denotes the oral cavity, commonly referred to as the "mouth," an anatomical structure



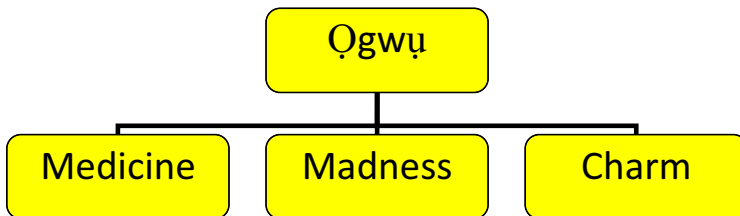
found in both humans and animals, serving as the primary means through which food is ingested and consumed. It also serves as a pathway for animals to enter or escape.



7.

In this particular dialect, the term "Áshọ" is employed to denote both a marketplace and the customary payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family as part of the marriage process.

8.

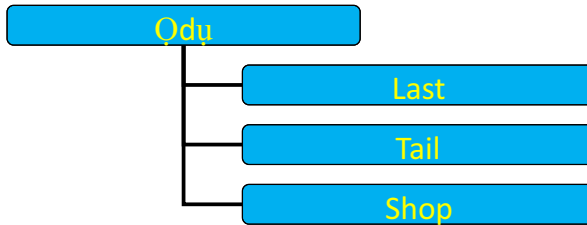


The term "Urù" carries various meanings within the dialect, and the precise interpretation of each meaning can only be determined based on the contextual usage. An individual who possesses an excess amount of body fat can be referred to as "Onye ma ọ bụ ìhe nwere ụrụ anụ" in Igbo language. Similarly, an individual who derives financial gain from business or any other endeavour is commonly referred to as "Urù". Furthermore, anything that possesses utility is likewise referred to as (ìhe bara ụrụ) in the dialect.

9.

The term "Ọgwụ" exhibits polysemy within this particular dialect, wherein its meaning varies depending on its usage and contextual factors. Specifically, it can refer to a medicinal substance employed

for the treatment of illnesses, as well as a charm that is traditionally made for the purpose of causing damage or providing protection. Furthermore, in situations where an individual exhibits inappropriate behaviour, it is customary to inquire about their emotional state by posing the question, "Are you mad?" (*Ogwu a na egbuke gu*).



10.

The lexemes under consideration have polysemous links. *The part of the body known as “Ódú” tail in animals serve the aim of assisting their ability to sit, and are frequently found at the back of their bodies. “Ódú ahia”(shop) , a commercial facility where merchants meet to display and sell their wares. In another context, “Ódú” refers to the last, as in “Ódú nwa”, the last child who was born in the family*

Discussion

Polysemy can be observed in the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of Igbo, when several meanings are present without the inclusion of extensional, idiomatic, metaphorical, or ambiguous interpretations. The meanings of various lexical relations are distinctly conveyed through specific usages and contexts. For example: The lexemes under consideration have polysemous links. The part of the body known as “Ódú” tail in animals serve the aim of assisting their ability to sit, and are frequently found at the back of their bodies. “Ódú ahia”(shop) , a commercial facility where merchants meet to display and sell their wares. In another context, “Ódú” refers to the last, as in “Ódú nwa”, the last child who was born in the family. According to Ndimele (1997), it is argued that the various meanings associated

with a polysemous term are interconnected and share a common foundation. This example illustrates the idea that the various meanings of a polysemous word are interconnected and share a common core. The key to understanding polysemy lies in the specific grammatical context and usage, which differentiates the intended meaning of polysemous words.

Additionally, the study demonstrates that polysemous words must possess interconnected meanings across all of their many senses as Anyanwu (2008) opined that polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon that arises from the inherent economic nature of languages.

Conclusion

The study has effectively achieved its purpose through the finding that polysemy is capable of conveying several meanings without any ambiguity or elaboration. The use of words possessing many connotations by individuals who possess a high level of proficiency in this particular language variant facilitates effective communication and enables the articulation of one's thoughts and ideas. Under typical conditions, individuals involved in dialogue can have confidence in the ability of their interlocutors to accurately and consistently understand the intended significance of a term that may have several interpretations in a distinct context through the prompt use of contextual signals.

The linguistic features of the Umumba Ndiagu dialect have received little scholarly attention, necessitating further research to explore its numerous areas of study. The thing being examined does not occur in a vacuum. The Umumba Ndiagu dialect possessing the characteristics of polysemy is viewed as advantageous as it enhances efficiency and adaptability within the lexicon. The researcher proposes the inclusion of polysemous words from the Umumba Ndiagu dialect in the development of the official Igbo dictionary by lexicographers.

Reference

- Agbedo, C. U. (2015). *Introduction to general linguistics: Historical Perspective*. Nsukka: AC Resource Konsult.
- Crossley, S. A., & Skalicky, S. (2017). Making sense of polysemy relations in first and second language speakers of English. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 23(2), 400–416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006917728396>
- Durst, U. & Vyvyan Evans (2005). The Structure of Time: Language, Meaning and Temporal Cognition. *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 13(2), 414–421. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.13.2.11dur>
- Fontes, A. B. & Schwartz, A. I. (2014). Bilingual access of homonym meanings: Individual differences in bilingual access of homonym meanings. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 18(4), 639–656. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728914000509>
- Finegan, E. (2012). *Language: its structure and use* (6th ed.) Australia: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Hicham Lahlou (2022) *A Corpus Analysis of Polysemy in CEFR-based English Textbooks*
- Murphy M. L. (2003). *Semantic relations and the lexicon*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ndimele, M.O. (2001). *Reading on language*. Port – Harcourt: M & J Grand Orbit Communication
- Nordquist R. (2017). *Synonymy definition and examples*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/synonymydefinition-1692019>
- O' Grady, W. and Archibald, J. (2011). *An introduction to*

contemporary linguistics analysis.(6th ed) Toronto pearson.

Okolo, B.A. and Ezikeojiaku, P.A. (1999). *Introduction to language and linguistics* Benin city: Muidex publishers.

Pylkkänen, L., Llinás, R., & Murphy, G. L. (2006). The Representation of Polysemy: MEG Evidence. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 18(1), 97–109.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/089892906775250003>

Palmer, F. (1981). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saeed, J.I. (2009). *Semantics*. (third edition). Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing

Stanojević M. (2009). Cognitive synonymy: A general overview. *Facta Universitatis*

Linguistics & Literature, 7(2), 193–200.

<http://facta.junis.ni.ac.rs/lal/lal200902/lal200902-05.pdf>

Taylor, J. R. (2003). Polysemy's paradoxes. *Language Sciences*, 25(6), 637–655.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0388-0001\(03\)00031-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0388-0001(03)00031-7)

- Schools: Gaps Between Policy and Practice Meridian. A Middle School Technology Journal, 6 (2).
- Nick, S. (2019, November 3). *Learn Java 12 Programming: A step-by-step guide to learning essential concepts in Java SE 10, 11, and 12*. <https://www.amazon.com/Learn-Java-Programming-step-step-ebook/dp/>
- NPE (2004). Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy in Education 4th Lagos: Nigerian Education Research and Development Council, 2004.
- Rouse, M. (2019 March 24). System software. March 09, 2019 from <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/system-software>
- Sarah, L. (2016). Definition object-oriented programming (OOP). Retrieved May 1, 2016 from <https://www.techtarget.com/contributor/Sarah-Lewis>
- Savitch, W. (2017). *Java: An Introduction to Problem Solving and Programming Plus MyProgrammingLab*. <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=3161>. Retrieved in May 15, 2019
- SWEBOK (2019). Software Engineering Body of Knowledge (Version 3). Retrieved 24 May 2019 from www.swebok.org. IEEE Computer Society.*
- Yang, J., Lee, Y., Hicks, D. & Chang, K. H. (2015). Enhancing object-oriented programming education using static and dynamic visualization. In *2015 IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference (FIE)* (pp. 1-5). IEEE.

