

**LEXICAL SYNONYMS IN IGBO LANGUAGE: A DENOTATIVE APPRAISAL**

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**Abstract**

The concept of synonym is one of the meaning relations found in lexical semantics as a sub-field of semantics. Words in a language may semantically relate or differ. Meaning relation is not considered using only one word. Two or more words are often considered to bring out their similarities and differences. Synonym is a meaning relationship between two or more words that have different sounds and spellings but have similar or exact meaning. It has been argued that such lexical relation that has an exact meaning and can have the same communicative effect in all contexts does not exist if, they exist they are very rare. The study wants to find out whether there is/are exact synonym in Igbo. The synonyms used come from the researcher's intuitive knowledge of the Igbo language and its diverse dialects. The study is interested in the denotative sense of the synonymous words and not their connotative implications. The study adopts descriptive approach in its analysis. It finds out that exact/absolute synonyms exist in Igbo and that they are even more in number than near synonyms. The study suggests 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. This will help to expand the Igbo vocabulary.

**Key words:** Language, Lexical semantics, Igbo vocabulary, synonyms

**1. Introduction**

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that studies meaning. Palmer (1981) defines the term "semantics" as the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning, and since meaning is part of language semantics is a part of linguistics. According to Okolo and Ezikeojiaku (1999), semantics may be defined as the study of meaning. In defining

semantics as a study of meaning, Ndimele (1999), adds that semantics studies the meaning of words and sentences. On the same plain, Anyanwu (2008) says semantics studies the meaning of words, sentences and phrases. Therefore, the study of semantics includes the study of meaning at word, phrase and sentence levels.

Linguistics study provides us some important evidence for semantic analysis. A study of semantics entails studying the nature of semantic presentation, relationship among words, phrases, and sentences. “In human language, words may not only have meaning properties in isolation, they often bear some meaning relations with each other (Ndimele, 1999)”. “By meaning relation, we mean that words have something in common with other words (Osuagwu, Dike, Nwaozuzu, Nwaogu and Okoro, 1997:90)”. According to them, one of the important relations a word has is synonym or sameness of meaning. Synonym does not exist in isolation. Two or more words sharing the same semantic similarities are measured as synonyms of each other. Synonymous words are most times interchangeable in communicative effects. The use of synonyms spices communication. Using a particular word severally in communication, especially a synonymous word makes communication boring. For avoidance of repetition of a particular word, synonym is employed.

The researchers are to x-ray lexical synonyms in Igbo in their denotative natures. By denotative, we mean using the synonymous words in the actual idea they originally refer or represent. That is also to say that the synonyms are used literally. Synonyms

with connotations, ambiguities, idiomatic or figurative usages are not going to count in this study. Ndimele (1997) and Anyanwu (2008) refer to as conceptual, cognitive, logical, central or primary meanings. According to Ndimele (1997), denotative meaning 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. Anyanwu (2008) also says that conceptual meaning is concerned with the inherent linguistic meaning central to communication, which the speakers of a language associate with an expression.

In this study, denotative lexical synonyms in Igbo are to be argued based on the arguments of scholars like (Cruse 1986) that exact synonym does not exist; if it exist it is very rare. Scholars like Quine (1951), Cruse (1986), Lyons (1995), Ndimele (1999) and Alanaza (2017) believe that partial synonyms are very common. They are emphasizing that exact synonyms may exist but there may be dissimilarities in some respects. When there is difference of any type, it is no more true, complete, absolute, total or perfect synonym.

This work is anchored on denotative lexical synonyms in Igbo. The synonyms are x-rayed to find out whether there are exact synonyms in Igbo; if these exact synonyms can maintain exact meaning with each other in every context and sentential

arrangement. The researcher would have used an Igbo dictionary for data collection but observed that, what the dictionaries cover may not be enough because, dictionary compilation dominantly depends on the compiler who may only compile words within his/her reach with little or no attention to synonyms. Moreover, there are no provisions for synonyms in bilingual (English/Igbo) dictionaries available. Such bilingual dictionaries include: Oli, Nwaozuzu and Mbah (2013), Mbah, Mbah, Ikechukwu, Okeke, Nweze, Ugwuona, Akaeze, Onu, Eze, Prezi and Odii (2013), Akponye (2014) and Igboanusi and Mbah (2017). Given the levels of proficiencies of the researchers in Igbo language, the researchers decide to use both the dialects and the standard form of Igbo synonyms to x-ray about near/partial synonyms and true/total/absolute/complete/perfect in Igbo. This is to find out facts about absolute synonyms. This paper is arranged into: Introduction, concept of synonyms, appraisal of synonyms, findings and conclusion.

## **2. Concept of Synonyms**

Alanazi (2017) quoting Saeed (2003) says that in the field of lexical semantics, synonym is a type of sense relationship between words, whereby these words have similar basic sense. For Alanazi, these words usually differ in the sense that each one has added implication or rather connotation which is distinct from other words. However, scholars such as Cruse (1986) and Quine (1951), maintain that true synonyms do not exist and are impossible to find.

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Ndimele (1997:56) contends that the term synonym is referred to sameness of meaning. He further says that the degree of semantic similarity between words depend to a large extent, on the number of semantic properties that they share. Osuagwu, Dike, Nwaozuzu, Nwaogu and Okoro (1997) observe that one of the important relations a word has is synonym or sameness of meaning. They say that a good dictionary should be able to tell us that a car and automobile mean the same, aeroplane and aircraft mean the same thing, lucky and fortunate mean the same etc. Similarly, Okolo and Ezikeojiaku (1999) express that:

A more interesting relationship is synonymy, in which the meaning of words are supposedly alike but the pronunciation are different. Specifically, two words are synonymous if they have the same set of semantic features; we might refer to synonyms as lexical paraphrase. Example include lineage and ancestry, big and large, nice and good, remember and recall, buy and purchase and youth and adolescent.

From the examples above, it is observed that the English synonyms cited cannot always be used exactly the same way and can sometime have slight distinguished features.

Akidi (2014) states that synonyms are two or more words that have different spellings and sounds/pronunciations but the same in meaning. In Igbo, Okasusu (1985) calls it myiri, Emenanjo, Umeh and Ugorji (1990) also term it 'myiri'. Akponye (2014) named it Oyiri. These terms are synonyms of each other; they are referring to resemblance or similarity in Igbo.

O'Grady and Archibald (2011) describe synonyms as words or expressions that have the same meaning in some or all contexts. This definition implies that there can be

absolute synonyms or near synonyms. Anyanwu (2008) asserts that synonym is a sense relation between items that have the same meaning and the emphasis is on identity of meaning rather than on similarity of meaning. Anyanwu also states that synonyms characteristically occur together in certain types of expressions, being often employed as explanations or clarifications of the meaning of other words.

The concept of synonym discussed above signals that there may exist true synonyms and near synonyms. Schotter (2013) says that semantic preview benefit may be observed in English, but only if the preview and target are very similar in meaning – i.e., are synonyms of each other. Let us look into the two types of synonyms observed:

### **2.1 Near Synonyms**

Near synonyms can also be termed broad or partial synonyms, Lyons (1995) says that near synonyms are words very similar but not identical in meaning and also differ in their associative meaning. These words have the same communicative effect in some contexts but not in all contexts. Anyanwu (2008) opines that partial synonyms are words that are identical in meaning (e.g. happy and glad) but fail to meet the condition of total/absolute synonymy. Ndimele (1997) makes it clear that near or broad synonyms are those words which have the same reference but differ in their associative meaning. He also, says that near or broad synonyms are those that have the same communicative effect in some context but not in all contexts. He adds that near synonyms are rampant. Alanazi (2017), says that words like empty and vacant denote not filled or occupied,

not containing people or thing. We can say vacant job but will not say an empty job. This categorizes vacant and empty as partial synonyms. Liu (2013) observes that synonym or partial synonymy is a very common linguistic phenomenon found cross-linguistically. Cruse (1986) asserts that synonyms are lexical items whose senses are identical in respect of ‘central’ semantic traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what may be provisionally described as ‘minor’ or ‘peripheral traits.

## **2.2 Exact Synonyms**

Exact synonyms are also known as absolute, true, total, complete synonyms and so on. Quine (1951) emphasizes that two words can be regarded as complete synonyms if they have all meaning components in common. For Alanazi (2017), it is possible for words to share the majority of their meaning components with other words, but not in all. Ndimele (1997:56) states that total or absolute synonyms are those words which mean exactly the same thing and have the same communicative effect in all the contexts in which they are used. He continued by saying that synonyms can be used in identical environments all the time without a change in meaning. Some of Ndimele’s examples for total synonyms include: anybody/anyone, nobody/no one, hardly/scarcely, frequently/often, noon/midday, rarely/seldom and so on. For Anyanwu (2008), ‘two lexical items would be absolute synonyms (i.e. would have identical meanings) if and only if all their contextual relations were identical. The researchers are of the view that absolute synonyms are two or more words that have an exact meaning in all measures.

Ndimele (1999) says that absolute synonyms are hard to come by. Cruse (1986) doubts the existence of total synonyms and says if it exists, it is very rare.

### Appraisal of Synonyms in Igbo

In this research synonyms are appraised to form opinion about the existence of total/absolute/ complete/perfect synonyms in Igbo; and the synonyms are appraised to find out whether broad or near synonyms are more rampant than total synonyms. The researchers will find out how far these arguments can be observed in Igbo. The researchers will trace the above to find out whether perfect synonyms are observed in Igbo language and come out with conclusions.

### Near Synonyms

The excerpts below are used to illustrate near synonyms in Igbo

1a) àzú ùlò  
b) Òwèrè } backyard

2a) ghúò  
b) síè } cook

3a) búde  
b) páta  
ch) búta } lift/carry

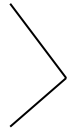
4a) kwá  
b) dú } sew

5a) té  
b) híṓ }

6a) kú  
b) gbú } fetch water

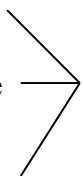


7a) sú  
b) sá



wash cloth

8a) òshí itè  
b) ékwú ígwè  
c) ákwúkwà



tripod stand

The examples 1-8 are near synonyms. Number 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, are paired. The excerpts of their synonyms are found in twos while 3 and 8 are grouped in threes because the synonyms are found in threes from the excerpts.

In example 1, àzú úlò and òwèrì mean the same thing in some contexts and not in all contexts. Two of them mean backyard or the back of the building. Two of them can be used in the same way grammatically, but have slight difference in meaning. Example gaa n'azú úlò weta efere, gaa n'oweri weta efere (mean go to the backyard and bring plate). While azu ulo is sometimes refers to as the back of the building, oweri refers to the back of the fence from the backyard.

In the example 2, *ghúò* and *siè* means cook. They are synonyms, but it is not everything that can be cooked that can use the same terms. Yam, rice, cocoa yam, beans etc can use the two terms but soup cannot use the two terms. Examples – *ghuo ji, ede*, beans (ie cook yam, cocoa yam, beans etc), equally *siè* can be used for yam, cocoa yam, beans soup etc (sie ji, cocoa yam, beans, soup etc. You can only say *siè ofe* but you cannot

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say *ghùò ofe*. That is, soup cooking cannot go with *ghùò*. Therefore, *ghùò* and *siè* are near synonyms.

In example 3, *búté*, *pátá* and *bútá* means carry/lift. They have to do with something that is heavy. While in Owerri dialect, *pátá* is being used for both something that is too heavy and heavy. Here, *pàtà* can be used for carrying something with hands, vehicle, barrow, head, etc. In East Central Group of Dialects according to Nwaozuzu (2008) and Inland East Igbo according to Ikekeonwu as quoted by Akidi (2014), *bú* means to carry something either too heavy or slightly heavy with hand, barrow, vehicle, basin etc. In this area, *pátá* is used for only carefully carrying a heavy something with two hands by one or more than two people. *Bútá* is also used in standard Igbo as being used in the East central and inland dialects of Igbo. Therefore, *búté*, *pátá* and *buta* are near synonyms.

In Example 4, *kwá* and *dú* are near synonyms in the sense that they mean to sew. But while *kwá* means in the East Central Dialect/Inland East Dialect sewing a new cloth with machine or stitching of wound *dú* means the use of hand to sew torn old cloth. In Owerri dialect, ‘*dú*’ is used for sewing both old and new cloth.

In the example 5, *té* and *híó* (rub) are near synonyms. The two mean to rub. While *té* does not need force, *híó* needs extra force in some dialects. In some dialects, they are

exactly the same. In the dialects they are near synonyms despite the fact that they can be used in the same grammatical descriptions in all contexts.

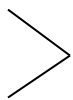
The example 6, kú and gbú are also near synonyms, although the two terms mean the same thing (i.e. to fetch water). While kú means the use of cup to fetch or get water gbú means the use of bowl or basin to deep into a container or river to fetch water. That is the water or liquid is more than that that could be fetched with cup.

In example 7, sù and sá means to wash clothes. Some dialects use sù. Some dialects use sá, example sáá akwa, sùó akwa (i.e. wash cloth). While only clothes can use sù (wash) sá can be used for car, plate, clothe, etc. Both sù and sá can be used in the same sentential arrangement yet they are near synonyms.

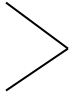
The lexical relations cited as examples show that near synonyms have the same reference but differ in their associative meaning. They also have the same communicative effects in some contexts but not in all contexts (Ndimele, 1999). The above analysis supports Ndimele's concept of near or broad synonyms words which have the same reference but differ in their associative meanings. The lexical relations above have the same communicative effect in some contexts but not in all contexts. The near lexical synonyms are not rampant in Igbo.

### 3.2 Appraisal of Total Synonyms


The excerpts below are used to illustrate total/exact/true/complete/absolute synonyms in Igbo to find out whether they exist in Igbo. If they exist, are they rampant? The excerpts below are used to illustrate synonymous in Igbo language in order to discover whether there are exact/total/complete/absolute synonyms in Igbo language.

- 9a) ògbó  
b) ébírí
- 
- age mate

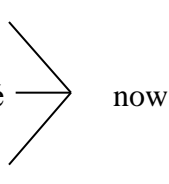
The two lexical items in number 9 mean exactly the same thing and can be used in identical environments all the time without a change in meaning. Example: *mụ na gị ọ bụ ọgbọ, ụmụ na gị ọ bụ ebiri* (are we mates)

- 10a) ótù  
b) òfú  
c) ñnáā
- 
- one

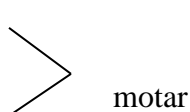
Were ofu, were ofu, were nnaa (take one). The three lexical items are absolute synonyms. They maintain the same meaning in every sentential arrangement. They can be interchanged to still mean the same thing.

- 11a) ósósósō  
b) ñgwáńgwá
- 
- quick

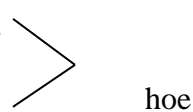
The two lexical items are absolute synonyms. They mean exactly the same thing in all effects. They can be interchanged in sentences to maintain absolutely the same meaning.

- 12a) ùgbúà  
b) ònwéé  
c) kítàà
- 
- now

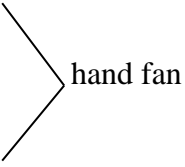
The three lexical items have exactly the same meaning. Anyhow they are used, they will still maintain the same meaning. They are Igbo synonyms. Ugbu a is the standard form, nnwee comes from East central group of Igbo dialect and kitaa is an Onitsha variety of the Igbo language. The lexical items can be interchanged with each other in sentences. Example bịa ugbu a, bịa nnwee, bia kitaa (come now). Ugbu a ka ọ bịara, nnwee ka ọ bịara, kitaa ka ọ bịara (he/she came now)

- 13a) íkwè  
b) ódō
- 
- motar

Motar can be called íkwè or odo in Igbo. They can also be used in the same form and in all effects and still maintain exactly the same meaning.

- 14a) ógù  
b) òtí
- 
- hoe

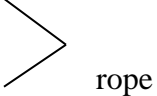
Ógù and òtí mean the same thing in all contexts. They have the same meaning and can be interchanged in sentences to spice the sentences. Jiri ógù bịa ọrụ, jiri oti bịa ọrụ (come to work with hoe). Ọgù and oti are absolute synonyms.

- 15a) àkùpe  
b) ñkùfe  
c) ñkùcha
- 
- hand fan

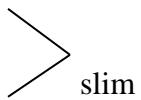
Àkùpe, ñkùfe and ñkùcha mean exactly the same thing in all effects. They can also be used in exactly the way in sentences. They are all Igbo words with regional distinct variations found within the Igbo language.

- 16a)) ñchà  
b) ñkpà                      scissors

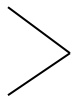
Ñchà and ñkpà have truly the same meaning. They can be used in virtually the same way in sentences in every context in East central group of dialects.

- 17a) érírí  
b) ékwéré
- 
- rope


Érírí and ékwéré are perfect synonyms in the sense that they can be used the same way in all effects and still maintain the same meaning. They mean exactly the same thing in all effects, contexts and situations.

- 18a) ñgálingá  
b) gírígírí
- 
- slim


The two lexical items are also the same thing in all effects. One may say that somebody is slim, that is, mmadu ò gírígírí or ò ò ñgálingá, o mere gírígírí or o mere ñgálingá.

- 19a) úbì  
b) úgbō
- 
- farm


Ubi and ugbo are the same in all effects. They can be used in the same in contexts and sentences. While East Central Dialect calls it ‘ubi’, Onitsha dialect calls it ugbo.

- 20a) òmú  
b) òkpúkpa
- 
- newly sprout palm front


The two lexical items are perfect synonyms in all ramifications in East Central Dialects of Igbo.

- 21a) ákùkù  
b) ágà
- 


The above lexical items are synonyms of each other in all senses. They share exact denotational meaning.

- 22a) ùbàrá  
b) m̀m̀ánù
- 


Ubara and mmanu are synonyms of each other. They are absolutely the same. They have the same communicative effect in all the contexts in which they are used as argued by Ndimele (1997) in his total or absolute synonyms representation.

- 23a) kíríkírí  
b) íríghírí
- 
- tiny


Kíríkírí and íríghírí are total synonyms that can be used in all communicative effects and contexts and still maintain the same meaning.

- 24a) ùkpóró  
b) ñkítí
- 
- nothingness


The above examples are perfect synonyms in the sense that they mean exactly the same thing and can be used in the same way in communicative effects and contexts and still have the same meaning.

- 25a) kwùshí  
b) chere
- 
- wait

The verbs chere and kwùshi are also true synonyms that can be interchangeable in different contexts and sentential arrangements and maintain the same meaning.


- 26a) ñzúzú  
b) ìbèribè
- 
- silliness/stupidity

The above examples are absolute synonyms because they mean totally the same thing. According to Ndimele (1999), absolute synonyms have the same communicative effects in all the contexts in which they are used. Nzuzu and iberibe are virtually the same no matter how they are measured.


- 27a) ótōsí  
b) àchàrà
- 
- bamboo

The two lexical items are synonyms of each. They mean exactly the same thing in all effects.




- 28a) ñkàtà  
b) èkètè
- 
- basket

Ñkàtà and èkètè are perfect synonyms. They can be used in identical environments all the time without a change in meaning (Ndimele 1999).

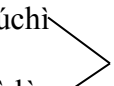
- 29a) èfè  
b) ùwé  
c) m̀weyì
- 
- cloth


The three lexical items are total synonyms. They mean virtually the same thing. The words can be used interchangeably in different sentences; contexts etc and still retain the same meaning.

- 30) éfè  
b) óhéré
- 
- chance


The two synonyms mean exactly the same and can replace each other in all effects. Efe and ohere mean exactly chance. Nye m ohere, nye m efe (give me chance) They can be used interchangeably without alteration of meaning.

For the sake of space, the analysis of the total synonyms from no 31 to the last no will be given later i.e. at the end of the examples.

- 31a) ùhúrúchì  
b) m̀gbèdè
- 
- evening


- 32a) ànyásì  
b) ùjìshì
- 
- night

33a) mbá  
b) òóló




no

34a) ípā  
b) ògúgù




palm stick

35a) kwurū  
b) gùzò




stand

36a) úrí  
b) égwú




song

37a) ágbílū  
b) ùgórò




bitter kola

38a) ùbé mgbā  
b) ùbé òkpòkó




black pear

39a) òmèhè  
b) ònwéghì



nothing

40a) náánī  
b) sòòsò



only

The examples in 31 to 40 above are perfect/complete/true/total/absolute/synonyms. They conform to the meaning of total synonyms according to Quine (1951), Cruse (1986), Ndimele (1999), Anyanwu (2008), and Alanazi (2017). All the examples from 30 to 40 just like from 10-29 are perfect synonyms. The pairs of the total synonyms of each number mean exactly the same thing with each other, can be used in the same manner in all sentential arrangements, can be used interchangeable without alteration of meaning.

## Conclusion

The study has endeavoured to appraise some near/broad synonyms as well as total/absolute synonyms in the Igbo language. The study appraised these synonyms to find out whether the views of the mentioned scholars in the study about total synonyms

stand in Igbo language. The study discovered that Igbo has exact synonyms that have exact meaning in all contexts. The total synonyms are more of nouns and verbs, more especially nouns. The synonyms x-rayed can be used interchangeably grammatically without any alteration in the meaning. Some synonyms are dialectical. Some are combination of both the standard form and dialect, because the Igbo dialects make up the standard form. Synonyms are used to make communication pleasant. Total synonyms make works to be precise and help to avoid repetition. In absolute, synonyms meaning and perception do not change in Igbo language.

Lexical synonyms are preferably used denotatively rather than connotatively in Igbo. Igbo is rich in synonyms because of the diversity of dialects. Though some synonyms vary from dialect to dialect, they are perfect synonyms when compared with the different dialects.

It is observed that it is not all the Igbo dictionaries that accommodate synonyms as can be attested with the dictionaries like Oli, Nwaozuzu and Mbah (2013), Mbah, Mbah, Ikechukwu, Okeke, Nweze, Ugwuona, Akaeze, Onu, Eze, Prezi and Odii (2013), Akponye (2014) and Igboanusi and Mbah (2017).

The work concludes that there are absolute/total/true/exact/perfect/complete synonyms in Igbo. There are synonymous lexical items that have the same meaning in all effects no matter the environment, context or communicative effect. These synonyms maintain their meanings no matter how they are exchanged in sentences and contexts. Even total

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synonyms are more in number in Igbo than near synonyms as can be attested by excerpts used for analysis. The near synonyms have just little differences, just, because of their grammatical arrangements and contexts.

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