

AN EXAMINATION OF THE POLYSEMOUS NATURE OF IDOMA PERCEPTION
VERB OF VISION ‘MÁ’: A COGNITIVE SEMANTIC APPROACH

Lucy Oyidu Ikwu, Theresa Dora Idoko and Benjamin Iorbee

^{1,2&3}Department of Languages and Linguistics, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University,
Makurdi

Abstract

This paper examines the polysemous nature of the Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’ from a cognitive semantic approach. The objectives of the paper are to identify the various extended meanings of the verb, show their relatedness and ascertain if the arguments in the sentence structure contributes to the polysemous nature of the verb. The paper employed the conceptual polysemy model proposed by Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999). This theory looks at conceptual polysemy (the conceptual mapping of elements from the source domain to the target domain) as well as graduable polysemy (the arguments in a sentence that adds to the polysemous nature of a lexical item). Data was elicited through observation and literature materials. The findings show that the Idoma perception verb of vision apart from its prototypical meaning has other extended meanings such as SEEING IS TASTING, SEEING IS HAVING, SEEING IS WATCHING OVER, SEEING IS DISCUSSING, SEEING IS MEETING, SEEING IS EXPERIENCING, amongst others. Furthermore, the paper revealed that the meanings are related to the prototypical meaning and the arguments in sentence structure also brings about the polysemous nature of the verb.

Keywords: Cognitive Semantics, Perception, Verb of vision, Idoma, see ‘má’

Introduction

Human beings are naturally endowed with faculty to acquire and use language. Language is the human form of communication comprising of sounds and words and ways of combining them which is agreed upon and understood by a community. Cruse (1990) states that “a language is a system of conventional signs all aspects of whose structure- phonology, morphology, syntax, or whatever – exist ultimately to serve the sovereign function of conveying meaning” (p.76). The essence of language cannot be overstated because human beings become social beings in the society who are able to communicate and this ability to use language distinguishes humans from other animals whose form of communication is not organised (Eze, 2023). Language is human specific, and there is an understanding, though an unwritten one, by members of a community as to what the various symbols mean in a language and its organization to make meaning. Communication and establishment

of social relationships are then possible with language.

In the structure of the human language, there are lexical items across various lexical categories that are polysemous and verbs are not an exception. Verbs are lexical categories that express actions, or state of affairs. Studies on cognitive linguistics particularly cognitive semantics in Idoma are scarce. This paper looks at the polysemous extended meanings of the Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’ from a cognitive semantic perspective. This paper would, therefore, add to the available literature regarding cognitive semantics and the Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’. The Idoma language is a West Benue-Congo language spoken by the Idoma people found majorly in Benue State, North-Central Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper employed the conceptual polysemy model proposed by Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999). According to this model, meaning extensions occur in forms of conceptual and graduable polysemy. In the

case of conceptual polysemy, cognitive devices such as metaphor, and property selection process enables the mappings that take place between different domains of experience. Graduable polysemy is a situation where extended meanings happen due to the interaction of the different elements in a sentence. This can be classified into: (i) unpredictable polysemy where the choices of arguments are not enough to enable possible interpretation, (ii) verb-driven extensions where verbs govern the choice of arguments and meanings and (iii) argument-driven extensions where arguments and other elements in a sentence lead to meaning extension.

The descriptive research design was adopted for this paper. This design enables the description of certain facts and characteristics about a given group of people which in this case is to systematically describe the various meanings of the Idoma perception verb of vision 'má'. Data for this study was elicited through observation (participant and non-participant in natural settings such as market, family gathering discussions and friendly discussions) and literature materials such as 'Ikpela kidoma mla oyibo (Idoma-English vocabulary). The meanings were noted and written. This research adopted the Central Idoma Dialect owing to the fact that there are various dialects of the language and the Central Idoma Dialect is neutral and mutually intelligible. The metaphoric extended meanings are written in uppercases while the data is glossed using word for word interlinear alignment with English as the metalanguage.

Literature Review

The acquisition of knowledge about the innate characteristics of language in a scientific manner is known as linguistics. According to Agbedo (2015), "it is scientific because it involves a systematic study of the nature, structure, meaning, use, variation changes and historical developments of language" (p.14). The field of linguistics has extended to include other areas such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive

linguistics and so on. These branches look at language use in the society, language and the brain, language and the mind amongst others. Cognitive linguistics is a branch of linguistics which surfaced in the late 70's and early 80's. This branch is connected to multiple distinct disciplines such as cognitive science, cognitive psychology and neuropsychology. It looks at the connection between language, mind and the collection of events and or activities in the world (Gachugi, 2018). Furthermore, the views in cognitive linguistics were brought about by descriptions on how humans categorise words using prototypes and family resemblance. Cognitive principles such as metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specification and image schema transformations, therefore, show the connection or the relatedness of the various polysemous senses of a word and these various senses are then considered as a category based on certain features that are common among the senses (Xabibullaevna, 2023).

Cognitive linguistics is divided into cognitive semantics (the focus of this study) and cognitive grammar. Saeed (2009) states that "cognitive semanticists take the view that we have no access to a reality independent of human categorization, and therefore, the structure of reality as reflected in language is a product of the human mind" (p.357). Ogwudile (2016) opines that "an important tenet of cognitive semantics is that the mental structures that the meanings of words relate to those that we experience when we perceive – what we see, hear and touch, etc. – different things" (p.197). In essence, the concepts in the mind are connected to the languages used as language reveals the various concepts in the mind. Furthermore, these concepts are not separated or detached units in the mind but are related to real life experiences or some sort of background knowledge. In cognitive semantics, meanings of lexical items form a subclass of many possible concepts in the mind, and meaning is encyclopaedic as dictionary meaning of words only points to

meaning constructions which is at the conceptual level.

Verbs are part of lexical categories that express things done, activities or circumstances at any given time. Faniran (2016) says that “verbs are said to be action words or doing words. In fact, verbs can be regarded as actions that are embedded in grammatical structure” (p.10). To Okoye (2019), “the relevance of the verb in a language makes it possible for it to be used in isolation with a reasonable conveyance of meaning. The verb also signifies an activity or process performed or undergone. In addition, the verb is the central part of predication, hence its crucial semantic role in the sentence” (p.123). Adeniyi, Umaru & Imoh (2023) adds that “the verb is technically defined as a member of the syntactic class of words that typically signals events and actions; constitute a minimal predicate in a clause and governs the number and types of other constituents which may occur in the clause” (p.183). Verbs are, therefore, absolutely necessary in expressing actions and state of affairs. They are content words that can be used on their own and are still meaningful or used in longer grammatical constructions. It is that lexical item or part of a sentence that talks about the subject of a sentence, that is, they function as predicates and are the head of verb phrases. In addition, verbs are key in ascertaining the semantic relations with its arguments.

Verbs can be subcategorized in various ways: intransitive, transitive, ditransitive, regular, irregular, auxiliary, dynamic, stative etc. Chafe (1970) classified verbs into state verbs, process verbs, and action verbs. Action verbs are divided into action-process and experiential verbs. Further classification shows that emotional, cognitional and perception verbs fall under experiential verbs. Ibrahim & Almajir (2022) state that “perception is the ability to notice things and understand the true nature and position of someone or something using our senses” (p.54). To Sarage and Sarage (2020), “perception verbs have important functions

because these verbs are directly related to real experience” (p.1333). Essentially, perception verbs express real life experiences through the sensory organs such as the eyes, ears, skin, nose, etc.

Perception verbs of vision can be said to be verbs concerned with the physical ability to see or perceive the world using the eyes which is one of the sense organs. According to Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999), the eyes are the first element in the visual system. Eyes capture light-stimulus for vision- and generate messages about it” (p.133). In the same vein, Almajir (2024) agrees saying ‘ido’ eye is an organ of sight which is responsible for converting light into impulses that are transmitted to the brain for interpretation. An eye is an opening for information to reach the heart” (p.102). From the foregoing, there is the ability to detect, be aware and have some sort of knowledge using the eyes.

Some studies have been carried out on perception verbs from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Gachũgĩ (2018) examined conceptual metaphors and perception verbs in Gĩkũyũ. The objectives were to examine polysemy as it exists in perception verbs and the relationship between the concrete and abstract meanings through conceptual metaphor in Gĩkũyũ, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. The perception verbs were classified into three (experience, activity, and phenomenon-based) using Viberg’s classification. Using the model by Ibarretxe-Antunano, the verbs of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell were analysed. There were various extended meanings across the verbs: to imagine, to judge, to meet to take care of, to witness, to understand, to know, to affect, to inspire, to experience pain to mind other people’s business etc. Furthermore, it was revealed that the sense of vision has more extended meanings followed by hearing, and touch while smell and taste have few extended meanings. There are also situations where the verbs are reduplicated to express the extended meaning and verbs from different senses have the same extended meanings. This study is on a Bantu

language, focusing on all the verbs of perception while this current study is on a West Benue-Congo language, Idoma, with the focus on only the perceptive verb of vision.

Ogwudile (2018) analysed the verb 'gba' in Igbo semantics. The objective of the study was to investigate the meaning properties of the Igbo verb 'gba' in various linguistic constructions such as verbal complex structures, compound verb structures, sentences that contain the verb 'gba' and Igbo inherent complement verb (ICV) constructions using the cognitive principle of image schema. The study which was descriptive analysed the data using metaphor and image schemata (path, containment and force). The study revealed that the verb 'gba' is not empty and with appropriate complements, the verb 'gba' can be result in other semantic extensions. Furthermore, these schemata which are components that make up metaphors are experientially based conceptual constructs. These constructs can be metaphorically extended from the physical and concrete domain to the psychological and abstract domain. This study is similar to the current study as they are both on cognitive semantics and verbs. The difference lies in the type of verbs, the languages and the frameworks used.

Sarage and Sarage (2020) explored conceptual metaphor in perception verb 'LOOK': a cognitive linguistics study. The objective was to analyse the metaphors related to the verb 'look' using some commitments and principles in cognitive linguistics. The main source of data was the 4th edition of the Advanced Learner Dictionary which provided definitions of the verb and phrasal verb constructions with 'look'. The identity method and substitution technique were used for analysis. The study showed the verb 'look' has 19 meanings and these meanings were grouped into three: TO LOOK IS TO THINK, TO LOOK IS TO FEEL, TO LOOK IS TO DO. Also, the study shows a relationship between the meaning of the prototypes and group

meanings. The semantic verb network adheres to the commitments of generalization and cognitive commitment in cognitive linguistics. This study is similar to the current study as both examine a verb of perception relating to sight. However, the difference lies in the frameworks used for analysis and the languages.

Ibrahim & Almajir (2022) did a study of polysemy and metaphor of Hausa perception verbs of vision: a cognitive linguistic approach. The study sort to identify how polysemous extensions of Hausa perception verbs bring about the conceptual metaphor of vision. The study examined verbs concerned with visual sense modality: gani, gaanàa, gaanèe, shidaa and duubàa and employed the conceptual polysemy model proposed by Ibarretxe-Antunanao (1999) and the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) propounded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Data collection was done using participant observation and literature materials. The study revealed that the polysemous extended meanings of the Hausa perception verbs arose due to the correlation of two domains in human experience such that there are extended meanings such as: SEEING IS THINKING, UNDERSTANDING, EXAMING, STUDYING, MEETING, FINDING OUT, BELIEVING and so on. These extended meanings show conceptual metaphors that denote mental activity, experience activity, social activity and evidential experience. Also, the findings confirm the relationship between perception and cognition. The similarity between the former and current study is that both studies are on perception verbs of vision, The difference lies in the different languages: the former is in Hausa, and the current study is in Idoma. Also, the former study used two theories while the current study would use one theory which is one of the theories used by the former study.

Ibrahim (2024) did a cognitive linguistic investigation into selected Hausa cognition verbs in order to show how polysemous extensions of Hausa cognition verbs bring about conceptual metaphor and metonymy.

Data was elicited through participant observation and literature materials and the conceptual polysemy model proposed by Ibarretxe-Antunano (1999) was employed as the theoretical framework for the study. It was revealed that Hausa verbs of cognition have systematic (metonymic) and non-systematic (metaphoric) polysemous extensions. The Hausa verbs of cognition that are metonymic are *san*, *tuna*, *fuskantaa*, *nàzartàa* and *gaanè*. These verbs are extended to mean ATTENTION FOR COGNITION, UNDERSTANDING FOR COGNITION, EXAMING FOR COGNITION and STUDYING FOR COGNITION. The Hausa verbs of cognition that are metaphoric are *gwadà*, *kiimàntaa* and *fuskantaa*. These verbs are extended to mean COGNITION IS MEASURING, COGNITION IS EXAMING, COGNITION IS PHYSICAL EVALUATION, COGNITION IS MOTION amongst others. From the study, verbs of perception are

The Prototypical Meaning ‘má’

This Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’ literally means to see using the eyes, one of the sensory organs of the human body. This can be seen in the sentences below:

1. Alenyi Má Ili ipú ẹ k a.
pa
Alenyi See cloth inside bag the
Alenyi saw the cloth in the bag.

2. Egede má Iduh ẹne.
Egede see Iduh yesterday
Egede saw Iduh yesterday.

Polysemous Extended Meanings of ‘ma’

SEEING IS TASTING

3. wa k al má Ọnyẹ odlé a.
ú ọ
com of us se swee foo th
e e t d e
Come let us taste the food.

The verb ‘má’ is extended beyond the field of vision to another form of perception which is taste through the mouth. That is, from a physical domain to another physical domain. The ability to detect, identify and

more polysemous showing a relationship between cognition and perception. Also, metaphoric extensions are more prevalent and are as a result of argument-driven extension, verb-driven extension and unpredictable polysemy. The similarities between the former and the current studies is that they both examine verbs and use the same theoretical framework for analysis. The difference, however, lies in types of verbs examined and the languages. The former is on verbs of cognition in Hausa while the current study is on a verb of perception in Idoma.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The prototypical meaning of the Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’ is first presented followed by the various extended meanings. A total of 12 expressions with ‘ma’ in Idoma were identified to have extended meanings and are analysed using the model of conceptual polysemy.

perceive things directly using the eyes is systematically extended to tasting food. The meaning extension lies not only in the presence of the verb ‘ma’ but also due to the other arguments in the sentence ‘Ọnyẹ odlé a’. This is an instance of argument-driven extension under graduable polysemy.

SEEING IS HAVING

4. Ọnyẹ k an m ije ooda no
. che a o á o.
Onye sa sh se mon to no
che y e e ey contri t
bute

Onyeché says she has no money to contribute.

The verb ‘má’ is extended to mean having, the availability or non-availability of something which could be money or property. The idea of having conscious knowledge through the eyes is extended to having conscious knowledge about what someone has. Here, there is a case of verb-driven extension as the verb play a pertinent role than other arguments in the sentence.

SEEING IS WATCHING OVER

5. Bee i má oyí a gam
 be see child the for me
 Watch over the child for me.

In example 5 above, the verb ‘má’ is polysemously extended to mean watch over. The verb of perception here which is physically seeing something or someone is extended to physically following the direction of something or someone with the eyes in order to keep the thing or person safe. There is also the mental responsibility attached. There is an extension from the physical domain to both physical and mental domain. The arguments that follow the verb add to the extended meaning giving rise to argument-driven extension.

SEEING IS DISCUSSING

6. Wa kú aḷo má.
 come of us see
 Come let us discuss.

The perception verb of vision ‘má’ means to discuss. The perceptual activity of seeing is mapped to discussing. Here, we have a case of argument-driven extension under graduable polysemy as ‘wa’ contributes to the meaning extension.

SEEING IS MEETING

7. Aḷo ge má oje ẹ́tá.
 we will See 3 o clock
 We will meet at 3 o clock.

In example 7 above, the verb is extended to mean meeting with someone face-to-face. This is an arrangement suggested by the

SEEING IS VISITING

10. Uloko nyḶ le ọ má inẹ́chi.
 Uloko go Have he/she see hospital
 Uloko went to visit him/her in the hospital.

The verb ‘má’ is extended to mean visit. The semantic content of the verb ‘nyḶ and ‘inẹ́chi’ in the sentence brings about the extended meaning of not just seeing someone but visiting someone is probably ill. There is that awareness, knowledge and ability to perceive using the eyes which is mapped unto visit as during a visit, it is mostly to see how someone is doing physically. This is done using the organ of sight. The arguments in the sentence adds to the extension bring about a case of argument-driven extension.

SEEING IS WITNESSING

11. Ehi má ọ eko no je ẹ́ kp a.
 Ehi See him/her time he/she take Bag The
 Ehi witnessed when he/she took the bag.

time given. The idea of detecting through the physical sense of sight is extended to making contact. Due to the context the verb ‘má’ occurs, it brings about the extended meaning of ‘meet’. This is an instance of argument-driven extension as the time stated adds to the extended meaning.

SEEING IS EXPERIENCING

8. Ó ge msá ọ.
 He/she Will See it
 He/she would experience it.

The verb polysemously means to experience something which could be pleasant or not. Also, the subject of the sentence undergoes an experience which could be mental or physical. The physical domain is mapped onto the mental or physical domain. This can be likened to situations where some people pass through physical and mental tortures. The other elements in the sentence are not enough to lead to the meaning extension, therefore, this is a case of unpredictable polysemy.

SEEING IS BEEN CAREFUL

9. Bee i má ọ.
 Be see It
 Be careful.

In example 9 above, there is a call to be attentive and avoid a dangerous situation or mishap. The perceptive verb from a physical domain is mapped to a physical domain of using the eyes to notice and be vigilant after all, the eyes is used to see. This is an instance of verb-driven extension.

The verb in 11 is extended to mean witnessing an event or an action. The physical domain of vision is mapped to a physical domain of attesting to an action or event using the eyes. The arguments in the sentence causes an argument-driven extension.

SEEING IS HAVING AN OPINION

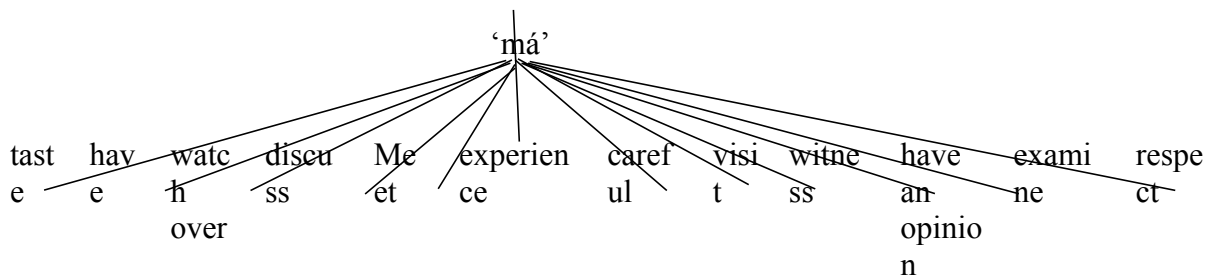
12. Abaà má ọ liya?
 how See It opinion
 What is your opinion?

Seeing is extended to mean having an opinion that is from a physical domain to an abstract domain. The idea of seeing physically is extended to reasoning where mental images are formed in the mind. This is a verb-driven extension as the verb is the most decisive regarding the meaning extension.

SEEING IS EXAMINING

13. Bi wa kum má ọ.
 Hold come my see It
 Bring let me examine it.

The verb in (13) is extended to mean examine and not just looking at something.



Conclusion

This study has looked at the cognitive semantic analysis of the Idoma perception verb of vision ‘má’ to explore the various meanings attached to the verb. From the analysis, 12 extended meanings were identified and there were mappings from the domain of physical perception of sight to other domains such as perception, cognition etc. The semantic content of the verb and other lexical items in a sentence also adds to the extended meanings. This goes to buttress the point by Dalieva (2024) who says “the

Using the eye sight is mapped to being watchful and noticing things possibly to find faults or criticise it. This mapping is from a physical domain to a physical domain and it is an argument-driven extension as the arguments contribute to the meaning extension.

SEEING IS RESPECTING

14. Ó má iyínu noo.
 He/she see himself/herself Not
 He/she is not respecting him/herself.

In (14) above, seeing is extended to mean respect. The idea of been aware and perceiving through the physical sense of sight is extended to respect; to look upon something in a particular way which could be positive or negative. This is a case of unpredictable polysemy.

Based on the analysis, the extended meanings are in one way or the other connected to the prototypical meaning as there is an element of perception using sight. The diagram below shows the polysemous extension of the Idoma perception verb of vision:

role of content cannot be overstated, as it influences significantly which meanings of polysemous word is activated in a particular instance” (p. 313). Most of the extended meanings are argument-driven, followed by verb-driven extensions and lastly unpredictable polysemy. Indeed, metaphor plays an important role in meaning extension in Idoma as it is one of the cognitive principles used to conceptualise the world.

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