The Semantic Expansion of ‘Wife’ and ‘Husband’ among the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria

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Although one of the existing studies on Nigerian or African kinship terms has argued that semantic expansion of such words constitutes an absurdity to the English society, none has argued for the necessity of a specialized dictionary to address the problem of absurdity to the English society, the custodian of the English language. This is important especially now that the language has become an invaluable legacy which non-native speakers of the language use to express their culture as well as the fact that the English people now accept the Greek and Hebrew world-views through Christianity. This paper provides additional evidence in support of semantic expansion of kingship terms like ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ not only in a Nigerian or an African language but also in Greek and Hebrew languages. The paper argues that if English is to play its role as an international language, it will be desirable if our lexicographers can publish a specialized dictionary that will take care of kinship terms, as it is the case in some other specialized dictionaries on the different professions such as medicine, nursing, linguistics and agriculture, to mention but a few, so as to guide against ambiguity or absurdity that may arise in language use in social interactions.

Keywords: culture, language, interpretation, society, specialized dictionary

One conclusion that can be drawn from studies conducted on kinship terms is that although kinship terms are products of a family relationship or a close feeling between people that develops as a result of common origins or attitudes, the cultural norms or world-views that guide the use vary from one ethnic group to another (Evans-Pritchard, 1948; Oyêtađé, 1995; Abiódún, 2000; Igboanusi, 2004; Ìkotún, 2009). For example, Igboanusi (2004, p. 223) claims that while the word ‘mother’ may be used to refer to any female friend or relation of one’s own mother, one may have several ‘mothers’ in the Nigerian or African world-view but not in the English society because the use of such words may appear or sound ridiculous to the English-speaking society. As Igboanusi (Igboanusi, 2004, p. 223) rightly says, there are several Nigerian or African words that have semantic expansion or extended meanings when used in social interactions and the use of such words may sound unintelligible to the English society when English is used to express such Nigerian or African world-views or culture. In this paper also, our concern is on the semantic expansion or extended meanings of some kinship words in Yorùbá, Greek and Hebrew and areas that will be covered will include:

1. focus on the Yorùbá words ‘ọko’ (henceforth husband) and ‘īyawọ’ (henceforth wife) and it will be shown that the extended meanings they have in Yorùbá, Greek and Hebrew may appear or sound ridiculous to non-African, non-Greek and non-Hebrew.

2. it will also be shown that any of the kinship terms or words, when used, must co-occur with any of the possessive pronoun qualifiers such as ‘mi’ (my), ‘wa’ (our), ‘re’ (your (sgl)), ‘yiń’ (your (pl)), ‘re’ (his/her (sgl)) and ‘won’ (their/his/her (pl)) before the kinship words or terms can be better understood.

3. finally, it will be the submission of this researcher that if English is to be fully accepted as an international language, it is important that the English lexicographers with the assistance of culture translators must be prepared to re-work the dictionary entries to also include African, Greek and Hebrew world-views or cultural aspects of word or language use that are devoid of current grammatical or conventional usage since English is now used to express cultural norms of several or almost all ethnic groups in the world today as well as the fact that the Christian culture is now shared or endorsed by the English-speaking Christians.
At least, four perspectives on semantics have been identified by linguists (Katz and Postal, 1964; Chomsky, 1965; Bierwisch, 1970; Halliday, 1985; Mey, 2001). But, the perspective of semantics we agree with and which is of interest to us in this paper is the one that recognizes the combination of the context of culture and the context of situation in language study (Malinowsky, 1923; Firth, 1962; Brown and Gilman, 1968; Fasold, 1990). Several studies that have been carried out in African and non-African languages attest to the fact that the knowledge of a language is a composite of the knowledge of structure and use in the socio-cultural context (Abiodun 1992; Oyetade, 1995; Ikotun, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). Our position that the knowledge of a language is a function of the knowledge of structure and use in the socio-cultural context is further supported by Mey (2000), Igboanusi (2004) and Adegbi (2005). For example, Mey (2000, p. 7) says, among others, that not even the smallest utterance or a single word can be understood in isolation. She argues further that it is the user and his or her conditions of production and consumption of language that, in the final analysis, determine the way his or her words are understood. Studies carried out by Malinowsky (1923), Firth (1962) and Adegbi (2005, p. 54) too claim that two kinds of context are associated with contextual meaning namely, the context of culture and the context of situation. Similarly, Adegbi (2005, p. 54) argues that the conditions of meaning in a context of culture (or social context) must specify the conventional (socio-cultural) rules of behaviour which participants must share before they can effectively or successfully communicate with each other. Adegbi (2005, p. 54) further adds that the conditions of meaning in a situational context must also specify relevant features of immediate and wider experiences of the specific participants in addition to the conventional rules.

However, before Adegbi (2005, p. 54), Igboanusi (2004, p. 223) argues that in semantic expansion, English words are made to acquire extended meanings. According to him, African writers often reflect African contexts in the use of certain English items so that such items now acquire extended meanings in the novel. He says that semantic expansion is, therefore, a good source of difficulty for the non-African reader. One of the examples of language use that inform Igboanusi’s (2004, p. 223) position is the use of the word ‘mother’ or ‘mothers’ among Africans. As already shown in the introductory section of this paper, while the word ‘mother’ may be used to refer to any female friend or relation of one’s own mother, one may have other senses of the word ‘mother’ in the Nigerian or African world-view but not in the English society. Although Igboanusi’s (2004) position is very valid, it can be further argued that the extended meanings from ‘mother’ or ‘mothers’ can be better or correctly drawn when such words are used in conjunction with possessive pronoun qualifiers in social interactions. For example, it is not unlikely that there is a difference between the word ‘mother’ and the noun phrase ‘my mother’. While the use of the word ‘mother’ may not necessarily refer to the speaker’s biological mother, the use of the noun phrase ‘my mother’ by the speaker may. So, what may be a source of ambiguity to the non-African is the use of the noun phrase ‘my mother’ when the use does not refer to the speaker’s biological mother but to any female person even when the addressee is still a baby girl. Therefore, to address the issue of cultural misunderstandings in culture-dependent language use, a specialized dictionary with the translators’ commentary is suggested. However, in this paper, in further support of Igboanusi’s (2004) claim, extended meanings of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ in Yoruba, Hebrew and Greek, especially when they are used with possessive pronoun qualifiers, are examined.

Method

Data collection

The Yoruba data for this descriptive work were drawn from four sources. Some data were taken from some Yoruba drama books. The drama books entitled Òyàwò Alärède and Orogún Ṣìlài namely, Òjọ-Òlùbóòrò (1993) and Têla (2008) respectively. Some data were drawn from some Yoruba plays that were shown or staged on DSTV Yoruba Channel 157. Participant observation was also considered to complement the data drawn from Yoruba drama books and DSTV Yoruba Channel 157 programmes. The participant observation used in this paper involved the presence and participation of the researcher in linguistic interactions with native speakers of Yoruba on the focus of this paper. The Yoruba native speakers comprised some Yoruba sub-ethnic group members namely, Ògbá, Òjèsà, Ọkùrè, Ọǹdó, Ọkókó, Ọjèbú, Ọ̀yo and Èkò. The research covered a period of three years namely 2013, 2014 and 2015 and the conversations were recorded without the knowledge of the co-participants. It will also be recalled that participant observation guarantees natural language use or unguided language use in social interactions. The data that will be considered for Hebrew and Greek were drawn from the New World Translation version of the Holy Bible. The data that will be analyzed were drawn from Psalms 45: 14-15, Revelation 14: 3-4, 2 Corinthians 11: 2 and Isaiah 54: 5. Our choice of examples from Hebrew and Greek languages is meant to confirm our position that the use of kinship terms is almost a global phenomenon especially with the spread of Christianity.

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Results and Discussion

The findings and the analysis of this research are shown in sub-sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below. The different senses the words ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ can have when used among the Yorùbá people are presented. Two of the data were taken from a Yorùbá textbook while the remaining two were drawn from recorded speeches. For example, the information in the introductory section to language use in the data shown below exemplifies a discussion between a real wife and a real husband.

(Nínú ilé Odéjobí, oré Bàbá Ode, Wọn sẹẹ jeun osán tán ni. Odéjobí ati iyawó ré, Àdufè, wà lehiniku lé, wón ń najú. Odéjobí ló báre oró...)

Odéjobí: Olódumare, ibo lojú Re wá?
Iwo l’Oba adédaá, Oba asédaá.
Iwo nikan sọso l’Oba asékanmákú
Awọn tí ko mo Ọ kò moyí Re,
Gbogbo ohun tí Ò se ló gún régé...
(Tela, 2008, p. 23)

4.1 The semantic expansion or meanings of ‘wife’ in Yorùbá

In Figure 1 below, the various uses or meanings of the word ‘wife’ among the Yorùbá people are presented. In English, however, the word ‘wife’ is semantically realized as [+female, +woman, +married].

Again, four excerpts that explicate evidence of language use in support of the information drawn from participant observation shown in the figure above are presented. Two of the data were taken from a Yorùbá textbook while the remaining two were drawn from recorded speeches. For example, the information in the introductory section to language use in the data shown below exemplifies a discussion between a real wife and a real husband.

(Traduction)

(In Odéjobí’s house, a friend to Bàbá Ode. They have just had lunch. Odéjobi and his wife Àdufè are at the back of his house. Odéjobi starts to speak...)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real Husband to the wife</th>
<th>Parents of the wife’s husband and the older and younger siblings of the real husband whether male or female</th>
<th>The real husband’s parents’ parents and their immediate and extended family members whether male or female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the real husband and his wife are not from the same Yorùbá sub-ethnic group like Ijọṣa, Òyọ, Ègbá Ekiti, every member of the husband’s sub-ethnic group is a husband to the wife.</td>
<td>An elderly male or female person can address a female child as his or her wife if the speaker has a male child.</td>
<td>All the real husband’s friends including members of the real husband’s club or clubs are the wife’s husbands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An elderly male or female person can address a female child as his or her wife if the speaker has a male child.</td>
<td>If the real husband and his wife are members of different ethnic groups like Yorùbá and Hausa or Yorùbá and Igbo, all members of the husband’s ethnic group are the wife’s husbands.</td>
<td>Whether ethnically related or not an elderly male person can address a female child as his wife as a form of acknowledgement or greeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the real husband and his wife are members of different ethnic groups like Yorùbá and Hausa or Yorùbá and Igbo, all members of the husband’s ethnic group are the wife’s husbands.</td>
<td>Whether ethnically related or not an elderly male person can address a female child as his wife as a form of acknowledgement or greeting.</td>
<td>If the real husband and his wife are from two different countries like Nigeria and Ghana, Nigeria and America, anybody that has come from the real husband’s country is a husband to the wife.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The Various Uses of the word ‘Wife’ among the Yorùbá People.
4.2 The semantic expansion or meanings of ‘husband’ in Yorùbá

The different senses which the word ‘husband’ in Figure 2 connotes are also presented in this subsection. The word ‘husband’ in English is [+male, +married].

Two excerpts and one data in support of the information in Figure 2 above are presented as follows. For example, as shown in lines 1 and 4 in the excerpt below, a female person can address another female person as ‘òkò mi’ (my husband).

Mojèrè:  Ohá dérefà, é dàkùn, tí a bá dé Òfà, mo fè ra bùréè dé fún ará ìlè. Nó ó tí mì owò sì tòsí.
Dèrefà:  Ò è bá tí mò pé é kò nó dá wà dùró. Sè e mò pé alè tí lè.
Ìyà-àgbà:  Òkò mì, ó bá sì ti ra bùréè tì ní Ìlòrin… (Èsò-Ólúbóròdè, 1993, p. 7)

Translation
Mojèrè:  Mr driver, please, when we get to Offa, I will like to buy bread for the people at home. I would have brought out the money (before we get to the bread seller’s stand).
Driver:  If you know you won’t waste our time. It is already night.
Ìyà-àgbà:  My husband, you ought to have bought the bread way back in Ìlòrin.
However, in the excerpt below, language use by Àdùfe, a woman, shows a discussion between a real wife and her husband as shown in line 1 of the excerpt. The phrase 'baálé mi' can also be realized as 'o̩kò̩ mi' (my husband).


**Translation**
Àdùfe:  My husband, it is worth ruminating over, it is enough a topic for discussion. What manner of consolation do you offer someone whose mother was killed by a lion? Do you maintain your own mother was killed in a similar way? May the Almighty God direct our ways.

The information drawn from participant observation in Figure 2 that if the husband is not from the same area or town with the wife, all members from the real husband’s area/town are the wife’s husband is supported by the data drawn from the recorded speeches shown below.

**Speaker A:**  Hin pelè n’iбе é o.
**Speaker B:**  È pelè o. Èjẹsà ni yìn?
**Speaker A:**  Èjẹsà ní mèrè.
**Speaker B:**  Ah, eyin oko mi niyèn!
**Speaker A:**  Èjẹsà loko yìn?
**Speaker B:**  Bèni....

**Translation**
**Speaker A:**  (Greeting in Èjẹsà dialect) Hello, here.
**Speaker B:**  Greetings. Are you an Èjẹsà person?
**Speaker A:**  I am an Èjẹsà person.
**Speaker B:**  Ah, you (pl) are my husband!
**Speaker A:**  Is your husband Èjẹsà?
**Speaker B:**  Yes...

However, the various uses which a good Yorùbá dictionary should have for the word ‘wife’ do not mean that the Yorùbá culture encourages wife-swapping or that the ‘wife’ plays wifely duties to any of the ‘men’ whether male or female, young or old.
apart from the real husband that the English society understands. The Yorùbá culture simply encourages oneness, harmonious communal living, love and good neighbourliness. This means that the information in the two figures above should be divided into two categories. The information in the first category deals with the real ‘wife’ or ‘wives’ and the real ‘husband’ which usage can easily be understood or be intelligible to the English society. The information in the second category may be a source of confusion to the English society because the use is culture-dependent.

4.3. The uses of ‘Wife’ and ‘Husband’ among Greek and Hebrew

It is not only in Yorùbá or African languages that reference is made to culture for word or language interpretation. As already shown in the introductory section of this paper, what is true of African languages is also true of some other world languages. Some of these world languages include Greek1 and Hebrew2. Our discussion below highlights how ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ are used in Greek and Hebrew. Earlier, it was mentioned that our data would be drawn from the New World Translation version of the Holy Bible. The data include information drawn from Psalms 45: 14-15, Revelation 14: 3-4, 2 Corinthians 11: 2 and Isaiah 54: 5. For example, the study draws our readers’ attention to the word ‘virgins’ in Psalms 45: 14-15 and Revelation 14: 3-4. In Psalms, it is stated:

In woven apparel she will be brought to the king. The virgins in her train as her companions are being brought in to you. They will be brought with rejoicing and joyfulness. They will enter into the palace of the king.

The book of Revelation also says (see also 2 Corinthians 11: 2):

And they are singing as if a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one was able to master that song but the hundred and forty-four thousand, who have been brought from the earth. These are the ones that did not defile themselves with women; in fact, they are virgins. These are the ones that keep following the Lamb no matter where he goes. These were bought from among mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.

The use of the word ‘virgins’ as shown in the verses above may be a source of inappropriateness to the owners of the English language because the word, as contained in the English dictionary, can be semantically realized as [+human –sex i.e a human being who has not had any sexual relationship with any person]. But, by our knowledge of the Bible, the list of those who will be followers of Christ will include people like Peter, John and several others who married and gave birth to children (Mark 1: 30; John 10: 16). Similarly, in English society, the word ‘husband’ connotes a man who is married to a wife or wives and the wife or wives must be female and not male. But, what is true of the English society is at variance with what is true of Greek and Hebrew societies as shown in 2 Corinthians 11: 2 and Isaiah 54: 5 below.

For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, for I personally promised you in marriage to one husband that I might present you as a chaste virgin to the Christ (2 Corinthians 11: 2).

For your Grand Maker is your husbandly owner, Jehovah of armies being his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Repurchaser. The God of the whole earth he will be called (Isaiah 54: 5).

In Corinthians also, it is stated that Christ is the ‘husband’ of the Church and the Church comprises both male and female worshippers while the nation of Israel is given unto God as a wife and the nation too consists of male and female. It can be argued that the way the English people see the world around them is different from the way the Yorùbá, Greek and Hebrew people see the world around them. Therefore, since English is now used to express several cultural systems that are not native to it and since the English people now accept the Greek and Hebrew world-views through Christianity, it may be necessary for the language to incorporate the non-native cultural systems into its linguistic analysis. Our position is in tandem with an earlier study carried out by Akindelé and Adégbité (2000, p. 46) in which they claim that:

There is no gainsaying the fact that English has become a Nigerian language. The language has become an invaluable legacy of the British which has provided Nigerians with yet another means of expressing their culture.

Our argument here is that it is not only Nigerians that use English to express their culture; citizens of other countries also use it. It is even reported in

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1 Information in the books of Matthew to Revelation was written in Greek.
2 Information in the books of Genesis to Malachi was written in Hebrew.
some Nigerian dailies or Newspapers that the use of English is now a serious threat to the survival of many indigenous languages that are used in British colonies (The Nation of May 17, 2016, p. 4 and July 24, 2016, p. 50; The Sunday Tribune of April 10, 2013, p. 22; The Nigerian Tribune of October 9, 2014, p. 27 and March 6, 2016, p. 5&10). However, one question that has not been addressed in this paper is: are there other ways through which kin address each other or one another among the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria? The answer to this question can form the focus of another paper.

Conclusion

Attempts have been made in this paper to provide evidence in support of semantic expansion of the use of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ not only in a Nigerian or an African language, but also in Greek and Hebrew languages. It has been argued that the use of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ by Yorùbá, Greek and Hebrew people indicates that the way the Yorùbá, Greek and Hebrew see the world around them is different from the way the English society sees the world around it. It is also our position in this paper that the various uses which a good Yorùbá, Greek or Hebrew dictionary should have do not mean that the Yorùbá, Greek or Hebrew culture encourages wife-swapping or that the ‘wife’ plays wifely duties to any of the ‘men’ whether male or female, young or old apart from the real husband that the English society understands. Our conclusion, therefore, is that English lexicographers with the assistance of culture translators should publish a specialized dictionary that will take care of kinship terms as it is the case in other specialized dictionaries on the different professions like medicine, linguistics and agriculture, to mention but a few. This suggestion is necessary especially now that the English language has become an invaluable legacy which non-native speakers of the language use to express their culture as well as the fact that many English people now accept the Greek and Hebrew world-views through Christianity.

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