

**DEVELOPING ANALYTIC  
CATEGORIES FOR IDIOMS IN  
AFRICAN LANGUAGES: EXAMPLES  
FROM CENTRAL NIGERIA**

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# Linguists versus languages

- It is helpful to think of African languages having two registers. The first is what speakers are made to say in examples and at conferences and the second is what people actually say
- The function of the first is to create abstract systems suitable for analysis and to present at meetings like this and eventually build their inventors careers in linguistics
- The second is the messy stuff of actual utterances constructed from a disorderly heap of found linguistic objects and constantly deviating through the lens of register, fashion and a host of linguistic considerations
- The object of this presentation is to focus on a largely ignored category, the idiom.

# Defining idioms

- The usual definition of 'idiom' is 'a group of words established by usage whose meaning cannot deduced from the individual words'.
- Idioms are one of those categories that linguists find it extremely difficult to deal with; they misbehave both syntactically and semantically.
- They don't fit into established categories of oral literature, as they are too short to be proverbs. They are often omitted from dictionaries, as it is hard to tie them to a particular headword.
- An important feature of idioms is that they can be partly fitted into pre-existing grammatical structures. Unlike proverbs they do not represent a fixed collocation, but rather a sanctioned association which can be expressed with some flexibility

# Why are idioms excluded? I

- As a consequence, discussion of idioms in African languages is extremely limited
- This holds for linguistics in general, but is particularly so in African languages, where the dominant syntax-oriented model of description has a tendency to drive out the irregular and unpredictable.
- This is unfortunate, as idioms are the lubricant of everyday speech, tools to make individual performance idiosyncratic and memorable.
- Moreover, because their existence is unpredictable, they cannot be elicited by usual fieldwork techniques.

# Why are idioms excluded? II

- Idioms have two other characteristics which make them omissible; their enthusiasm for bodily functions and their humour.
- Although it is usual to be po-faced about references to sexual organs and faeces, these do appear rather often in idioms, paradoxically reflecting on the linguist not the language.
- Humour is in some ways worse, since linguistics is nothing if not serious.
- Idioms are bound up with register and other socially-defined categories; for example in Tarok, adult men are expected to use idiom-heavy speech, especially when in rhetorical mode. Women are not expected to use them so frequently

# Developing analytic categories I

- As a consequence, analytic categories for idioms are rather underdeveloped. Clearly, not all idioms are the same, both serving different pragmatic functions and observing different linguistic structures.
- This paper is an attempt both to provide data on African idioms, and to explore some ways to think about and categorise their behaviour.
- It is based largely on new field data from three languages; Rigwe, Tarok and Mwaghavul.
- Thanks to Daniel Gya (Rigwe), Selbut Longtau (Tarok) and Jacob Bess and Nathaniel Dapiya for their suggestions adopted in this paper and to Andy Warren for access to his idioms database

# Developing analytic categories II

- There are a number of possible frameworks for classifying idioms, depending on the perspective of the researcher.
- Very typical is classification by *salient lexeme*; where a noun or verb is at the head of a phrase, this is deemed to create a class.
- Most well-known in the literature are body-part idioms; thus if an idiom refers to a body part such as the head or the heart, then it is classed with similar idioms.
- This method faces the problem of determining the salient lexeme; in the Mwaghavul idiom 'my head climbs up to bite God' which lexeme should be chosen?

# Developing analytic categories III

- Another approach is by grammatical structure; most idioms are either noun phrases or verb phrases, less commonly adjectival phrases and exclamations.
- Again it is difficult to see what analytic mileage can be gathered from this; speakers clearly are less interested in grammatical structures than in what the idiom is doing.
- It is unlikely that idioms will fit into any grammatical category; some are standalone observations, others are integrated into the framework of sentences.
- Idioms have also been classified by rhetorical trope; metaphor, metonym, litotes and so on. Idioms are certainly characteristic of a type of oral culture where such tropes evolve.

But this classification also reflects its source culture and categories; few speakers would recognise the difference between idioms on this basis.



# Analytic frames for classifying idioms

Frame	Definition
Salient lexeme	Classified by the most salient lexeme in the expression, for example, a body part
Grammatical structure	Classified by the dominant grammatical structure, such as noun phrase, verb phrase, exclamatory phrase
Rhetorical trope	Classified by the rhetorical trope embodied in the expression, for example, metaphor
Pragmatic	Classified by the pragmatic function of the idiom; expressing how it operates within a discourse context, for example as euphemism, humour, expressive variation

# Pragmatic classification of African idioms

Category	Description
Expressive variation	An oblique or circuitous method of referring to something containing a striking image
Euphemism	A way of referring to something offensive, problematic or taboo in manner which is conversationally acceptable
Humorous reversal	An oblique way of referring to a person or concept which is humorous or ironic
Characterisation	A way of characterising a person or thing obliquely, through metaphor or simile
Cryptic speech	An oblique way of referring to a person or concept which conceals it from outsiders (e.g. initiated men talking about masquerades)
Formula	A set phrase which begins or ends socially structured discourse (such as a folktale) or formalised greetings

# Developing analytic categories IV

- Expressive variation is given its own category, but all idioms have an element of surprise, overturning of expectations and enlivening discourse.
- 'New' idioms often start life as creative humorous expressions. A recent English expression is 'charisma bypass' to refer to someone who behaves in a lifeless or unexciting manner.
- This does not yet have the established usage that would make it an idiom; if it is still around in a couple of decades it may make that transition, but if it falls out of use, it will simply be an ephemeral expression, recorded in historical dictionaries.
- Most crucial to interpreting these categories is the importance of understanding the cultural background to individual societies.
- This is particularly true of references to faeces and body parts; on the whole these simply do not carry the cultural freight common in European languages. Hence they are referred to bluntly in proverbs and idioms and the complex range of euphemisms developed in English and other European languages to refer to them is absent.

# Expressive variation

- Expressive idioms are oblique or circuitous references to something which contains a striking image that enlivens speech but for which a particular pragmatic context cannot be defined.
- English 'raining cats and dogs' might be an example of this.
- The key element is variation; idioms prevent the repetition of a concept and ensure discourse is not 'boring'.
- This type of expressive idiom is related to slang, which is usually considered to be an informal register, sometimes with associations of social class.
- Thus in English, the form 'ain't' for 'isn't' is defined as 'slang' by social classes which do not use this form. However, for the social strata where it is used, it is a perfectly well-formed expression.

# Tarok

- The meaning of this is 'to feel inconsequential' and it is used by a leader or elder to express the feeling that his subjects are treating him lightly or as of no importance.

**rí**      **anyí**      **mpwàkàp**

eat      liver      toad

**tur**      **ìmìmyàng**      **á**      **mi**      **ka'lúr**

remove      dew      from      my      nose

The sense of this is 'to relieve of a burden'.

# RIGWE

❖ Rigwe has a rich array of body idioms used to express emotional states.

à	nín	□cía	rié
it	me	saves	heart

I am uneasy about this

Idioms do not always have a set formula, but can be restructured to focus on different elements. For example, in these two formulations of what is essentially the same idea, in the first, the blood is given prominence, while in the second, it is the falling that is in focus.

# RIGWE

róʃwò

blood

nín

me

□kpi

falls

ɱjè

stomach

blood falls on my stomach

I am afraid

à

it

nín

me

□kpi

fall (pl)

róʃwò

blood

[á]

on

ɱjè

stomach

Lit. It drops blood on my stomach.

It scares me.

# MWAGHAVUL

❖ the concept of innocence is expressed with;

sár	pààt
hand	five

In sentence context these two words are split up;

sár	f̃na	mo	pààt
hand	my	pl.	five

my hands are five

The sense is that 'I have five fingers'. The speaker holds up his hands splaying out the fingers to protest his innocence.



# MWAGHAVUL

❖ Still more dramatic is;

káá	kàà	at	Naan
head	climb up	bite	God
my head went up and bit God			

This would be hard to guess, but it means that ‘I experienced a severe shock and became very afraid’. Presumably the repetition of *kaa* with different tones played a role in the formation of the idiom.

# Euphemism

- ❖ Euphemisms referring to something offensive, problematic or taboo in manner which is conversationally acceptable.
- ❖ Sex and defecation often feature in euphemisms, and this seems to be, if not universal, widespread around the world.
- ❖ Other euphemisms are more culturally specific; they might refer to something socially unacceptable, such as being a drunkard, stealing or being promiscuous,
- ❖ or something dangerous, for example, diseases or dangerous animals, or related to spiritual ideas, such as the death of an elder.

# TAROK

In Tarok the verb **dòk** usually means ‘to touch’. However, it has a secondary meaning ‘to drink (alcohol) excessively’. A typical comment might be;

UTali	i	dòk	ndəp	dòk
Tali	he	drink	water	drink

Tali drinks water excessively

In this remark, the water is understood to be beer, and the whole is taken to mean that Tali is a drunkard.

# RIGWE

Euphemism in Rigwe clusters around sex, death and defecation. Some example are;

àá	□ɥa	úvù
he	went	back yard

He went to defecate

This is very similar to Hausa *bayan gida* and may possible be a calque. The following euphemism for copulation looks extremely biblical and could possibly be a borrowed idea;

àá	□ɲ <sup>w</sup> ε	ne	ɲú
he	lay	with	her

He had sex with her

# MWAGHAVUL

Death also attracts euphemistic idioms in Mwaghavul. For example;

gwàr	ni	wùrí	ki	sham	Ngààroo
someone	it	he	PROG	go down	Ngaaro
he is dying					

Ngaaro is a town on the Mwaghavul frontier with Ngas, but its association with dying is unclear unless it is simply because it is at the periphery of Mwaghavul territory.

# Characterisation

- ❖ Another type of idiom may be described as 'characterisation'. The speaker wishes to encapsulate the qualities or character of the referent through a metaphor, simile or other comparison.
- ❖ This is most common with animal types, which have a culturally established character through folk-tales.
- ❖ English comparisons with this type take in 'pig', 'dog' and 'lemon' for example.
- ❖ However, the comparison may also reflect the actual characteristics of the animal in question.

# RIGWE

A typical expression in Rigwe, where the hare is a trickster in folk-tales;

ŋ <sup>w</sup> é	kí	rĩ	àná	ní	ʃ <sup>w</sup> è
you	him	see	that	is	hare

As you see him, he is a hare

The implication is that you may not know that someone is wise (i.e. like a hare).

# Cryptic speech

- ❖ Cryptic speech is the use of circumlocutions or lexical substitutions to prevent outsiders understanding what is being discussed.
- ❖ This may be in the context of traditional religion, or in terms of gender opposition, one sex concealing their meaning from the other.
- ❖ Another context can be talking in front of strangers who may speak the language but can still be excluded by idiomatic expressions.



# TAROK

□ A significant structural feature of Tarok society is the **orìm**, ancestors or association of elders. When the **orìm** are out, women must stay in their houses.

□ When men wish to talk about the **orìm** and women are present, there is a whole vocabulary of lexical substitutions developed for this purpose.

□ One example is;

**agbai** a locative meaning 'outside' but also referring to the shrine of **orìm**,

as in **Uwa fa agbai**. He has gone outside.

and **Onəmgbak oma ga agbai**. The elders have gone to the **orìm** shrine.

# RIGWE

Rigwe does not have anything corresponding to **orìm** language. However, it does have a range of idioms used to refer to strangers beside the usual term, *̀nne ítfè* lit. 'person strange'. Such cryptic terms often do not correlate with the actual sense of the words. E.g.

bààrà

large flat

i.e. a stranger

̀nmgbaatsìe

stone

Used when a stranger sitting in the midst of speakers of the language but cannot participate in the discussion as he does not understand the language.

# RIGWE

Another similar image is;

tɔ́éŋ̀

grains [of]

stranger

brɛ̀

finger millet

Finger millet grains have a dark colour in comparison to other grains such as guinea corn or millet, so also strangers in the midst of Rigwe speakers.

# Folktale formulae

In the telling of folk-tales it is very common to open and close with idiomatic expressions. Sometimes, these have a meaning, but they also be without any sense to the speakers except in this context. Rigwe, for example has the following opening and closing formulae;

Introduction:	sûsúku`
Response:	dèrènte
Conclusion:	rùṅgús

None of these have any known meaning.

# Greetings formulae

Greetings often include formulaic expressions which resemble idioms. Two Rigwe examples are;

kò	míntṣè	bí	rábra	wò.
not	morning	has	lie (deception)	not.

lit. The morning cannot lie.

We'll see each other tomorrow. [i.e. Goodbye]

and;

nṣí	rí	hó	ne	gbâ.
we	will	hear	from	cock.

lit. We shall hear from the cock.

Goodbye

## Does cultural knowledge help you interpret idioms?

- Idioms sometimes refer to synchronic cultural knowledge and sometimes not.
- For example, the English idiom 'It's all gone pear-shaped' only goes back to the 1920s in some form. Yet there is no convincing explanation for it.
- Similarly, a small proportion of African idioms can be 'explained' by speakers in an etymological sense
- But speakers can almost always explain the pragmatic context
- And to this extent the metaphor embedded in the idiom becomes entwined with the context of use

## Why should theoretical linguists be interested?

- Theoretical linguists attempt to draw out rules from speech for broader analytic purposes, such as typology and the analysis of syntactic structures.
- Idioms are the grit in the oyster, the parts of discourse that don't fit neatly into these categories. An interest in genuine human language helps evolve a broader model of discourse, as well expanding the possibilities for syntactic structures.
- Research on traditional rhetoric in New Guinea has often pointed to speech as a series of linked 'packages' consisting of semi-formulaic utterances and cognitive grammar seems to have some of the same insights.
- African languages have all too often been worked on out of context, with expatriate informants, and this tends to produce circular analyses.
- The linguist unconsciously seeks particular and fashionable structures and the speaker obligingly produces them. Idioms are one way to climb out of the well.

## Why should applied linguists be interested?

- Applied linguists, whether developing languages for use in education or involved in translation, need to be aware of the richness of expression in individual languages.
- If their texts and teaching materials reflect only a very remote version of the way people actually speak and leave out all the more elaborate and picturesque expressions, then their materials will seem dry and lifeless.
- Languages with a long written tradition, such as English, often uphold a distinction between 'correct' or 'proper' English and what people actually say.
- There are multiple views about the function of such a distinction, but there is no doubt that it reflects power relations within a society.



# Why should applied linguists be interested?

- Oral cultures may have complex speech registers, but they rarely divide speech into different types of 'correctness'.
- Understanding the pragmatics of idioms helps write text materials that exploit the rich resources of a language and draw in readers, as well as giving insights into its cultural background.

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