Ekegusii Sense Relations in a Lexical Pragmatic Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to delineate the sense relations in Ekegusii using the Lexical Pragmatics Theory. Using primary data from native speakers, the paper attempts to establish the role of context in comprehending the sense relations in Ekegusii and the type of milieu required in their comprehension. Narrowing and broadening processes of the theory are used to discuss the various sense relations in Ekegusii; that is, antonyms, homonyms and polysemy. The impact of tone is explored besides the role of context in disambiguation of antonyms, homonyms and polysemous words in Ekegusii. The paper concludes that the gap between the idea communicated and the idea encoded can be attributed to lexical pragmatic processes of narrowing and broadening. Thus, the concept encoded by a lexical item is not always the same as the concept expressed by the use of that lexeme on a given occasion. The encoded concept just acts as a starting point for inferential comprehension and language use does not give direct insight into meaning.

Key words: Ekegusii, Antonyms, Homonyms, Polysemous, Lexical Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Ekegusii¹ is a Bantu language spoken by the Abagusii who reside in Kisii and Nyamira counties (see, e.g. Basweti et al. 2015). According to the 2009 National Census, Ekegusii has an estimated number of native speakers totaling 2.2 million (Kenya Bureau of Statistics 2010). According to Nurse & Phillipson (1980), Ekegusii is one of the Lacustrine Bantu sub-group from Eastern Nyanza/Suguti. The identity of Ekegusii in the Eastern Nyanza sub-group which, includes the Kuria, Zanaki, Ikizu, Nata, Shashi and Ngurimi, is the fact that it has substantive vocabulary borrowed from the neighbouring non-Bantu languages such as Kipsigis, Maasai and Dholuo (Nurse & Phillipson 1980, Ogechi 2002).

The new updated Guthrie list (NUGL) online classifies Ekegusii under the code JE42 (Maho 2009:63). The list classifies the language alongside other sister languages such as Idaxo (JE411), Logooli (JE41), Isukha (JE412), Tiriki (JE413) and Kuria (JE43) all spoken in Kenya and Simbiti (JE431) spoken in Tanzania. In the initial zonal classification of languages Guthrie (1848) classifies Ekegusii as a central Bantu language in relation to other languages including: Lulogooli, Ameru (Kenya) Kuria (Kenya and Tanzania) Ware, Ikizu, Ikoma, and Sanjo (Tanzania).

Despite a long debate on the existence of dialects in Ekegusii, Bosire (1993) classifies Ekegusii into two dialects, the Rogoro dialect and the Maate dialect. The main difference between these two dialects is manifest in vocabulary and pronunciation. The Rogoro dialect is mainly spoken in the northern while the Maate dialect in the southern parts of Gusililand. The Rogoro dialect is considered to be the standard form because it is the one used in print and news broadcast, and is taught in schools.

The existing literature on Ekegusii transcends the major subfields of linguistics such as, semantics (Kemunto 2016), morphophonology (Bickmore 1997, 1998, 1999; Mecha, 2004; Osinde 1988), morphosyntax (Basweti 2005, 2014, 2015; Mose 2012), and pragmatics (Basweti 2018; Omoke 2012). Ekegusii linguistic research has also covered the sociolinguistics of the use of the Bantu language in its interaction with other languages used by the speech community such as English (the official language), Kiswahili (the national language) and an informal urban variety referred to as sheng (Ogechi 2002). However, research on sense relations has been done in other Bantu and Nilotic languages. Mwebia (2006) has analyzed sense relations in Kimur, Munga (2009) analyzed sense relations in Kikuyu and Anyim (2010) analyzed sense relations in Dholuo.

¹The term ’Ekegusii’ can be used to refer to the language spoken by the Abagusii and issues related to the culture of the Abagusii. However, in this paper, the term will be used to refer to the language spoken by the Abagusii.
This paper seeks to find out how antonyms, homonyms and polysemous words in Ekegusii are gaining new meanings in various contexts. The investigation is guided by Lexical Pragmatics Theory. The theory was first propounded by Blutner (1990). It was later developed by Cartson in 1997 and 2002 and by Wilson in 2003. Lexical pragmatics is the interface between semantics (meaning of words) and pragmatics (meaning in context). The theory investigates the mechanism by which words are modified to arrive at the speaker’s intended meaning. Aitchison (2003) points out that, ‘words, unlike numbers, do not have fixed absolute values’. For example, new words are coined, and people understand them. We use nouns, adjectives or prepositions as verbs, and people understand us. We also borrow words from other languages and they are understood. We use words approximately, metaphorically or hyperbolically and people understand us (Wilson 2011).

2. Lexical pragmatic processes

There are two key lexical pragmatic processes: narrowing and broadening. These processes are vital in our analysis of the meanings of Ekegusii lexical items. This is so because in every occasion a lexical item is used, it tends to express to some extent a different ad hoc concept, which is not encoded but pragmatically inferred. That is to say, the concept encoded by a lexical item is not always the same as the concept expressed by the use of that lexeme on a given occasion. The encoded concept just acts as a starting point for inferential comprehension and language use does not give direct insight into meaning.

This assertion is supported by Wilson (2003) who argues that:

“Lexical pragmatic processes are triggered by the search for relevance, they follow a path of least effort, they operate via mutual adjustment of explicit content, context and cognitive effects, and they stop when the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance are satisfied or abandoned” (Wilson 2003: 282).

Considerations of relevance play a crucial role in determining the degree and direction of narrowing. Thus, the following section will focus on lexical narrowing based on Ekegusii data.

2.1. Lexical narrowing

Words are frequently used in ways which depart from their linguistically encoded meanings. In particular, the meanings can either be narrowed or broadened. In lexical narrowing, a word is used in a more restricted sense than the semantically encoded one, resulting in a narrowing of the linguistically specified denotation. It is applicable where a word is used to pick out only a part of the linguistically specified denotation.

The effect of narrowing is to highlight a particular part of the linguistically specified denotation. It helps in choosing the most appropriate meaning of a word from among the many options available. Therefore, when the encoded meaning is too general to satisfy the hearer’s expectation of relevance, (s)he can narrow it, thus increasing cognitive effects, until the utterance is relevant in the expected way. So by saying 'Omoke is a man,’ a speaker can communicate that ‘Omoke’ is man enough to be worth mentioning in the circumstances. The comprehension process would involve constructing an ad hoc concept, MAN*, modeled on the concept MAN, but with a narrower denotation and greater cognitive effects (cf. Wilson 2011).

Consider example (1) below where the pair of antonyms in (1a) and (1b) can be expressed in sentence (1c) and (1d), respectively.

1. a. *Etwoni* ‘cock’
   b. *Omoswa*2 ‘hen’
   c. Omosacha oria n’*etwoni*. ‘That man is a hero.’
   d. Omosacha oria n’*omoswa*. ‘That man is a *coward.*’

The core meaning of the two antonyms is ‘cock’ and ‘hen’ as shown in example (1a) and (1b). However, through metaphorical extension, *etwoni* ‘cock’ will acquire a semantic meaning of ‘a hero’ while *omoswa* will acquire the meaning of a ‘coward’. Thus, the two antonyms will become polysemous. Consequently, in context, one will need to narrow down the meanings of the lexemes to the only desired ones. The context will help in picking out the intended meaning of the lexical items mentioned as demonstrated in the next paragraph.

In examples (1c) and (1d) above, the subject is a man. Therefore, he can neither be a hen or a cock literally. For that reason, the encoded meaning is too general to satisfy the hearer’s expectation of relevance. This compels him / her to narrow it, thus increasing cognitive effects, until the utterance is relevant in the anticipated way. The comprehension process would involve

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2 The noun *omoswa* may also mean *engoko* ‘hen’ which connotes promiscuity when referring to man.
constructing ad hoc concepts\(^3\), etwoni ‘COCK\(^*\)’ and omoswa ‘HEN\(^*\)’ modelled on the concepts COCK and HEN but with a narrower connotation and greater cognitive effects. The formation of the ad hoc concepts is depended on encyclopedic and lexical information accessible in the memory of the hearer while the encoded concept acts as the starting point for inferential understanding. This brings the hearer into the right direction of the interpretation of the antonyms and guides the understanding process to the preeminent relevant conclusion. In example (2) below the general meanings of -noru and -reu are ‘fat’ and ‘thin’, respectively.

2. a. -noru ‘fat’
   b. -reu ‘thin’

Just as in example (1) the two words can acquire new meanings. For example, -reu ‘thin’ will also mean weakness. In an utterance, the word can be realized as follows:

3. Oboreu bwane nogokwana amang’ana amange.
   ‘My weakness is talking too much.’

In this context -reu means weakness. However, -noru which is the opposite of -reu is not conversely used to mean strength as it was the case in example (1). This means the sentence or utterance: “Obonoru bwane nogokwana amang’ana amange,” will not make the opposite sense of the example in (3) and therefore it is unacceptable grammatically and seldom will an Ekegusii native speaker produce it.

On the other hand, homonyms in Ekegusii can be analysed by using the process of narrowing. For example:

4. a. Enda ‘stomach’
   b. Enda ‘jigger’

In example 4(a), the pair consists of homographs with different tones. In speech the two words can be distinguished by employing the different tones but orthographically the words are identical. Therefore, the reader has to use context for him or her to be able to pick the speaker’s meaning. If it is a case of reading aloud, the speaker ought to give the word(s) the correct pronunciation with the requisite tone placement. Otherwise use of the pair in a sentence may create ambiguity as illustrated in (5).

5. Eria n’enda.

Sentence (5) could mean: ‘That is a stomach.’ Or ‘That is a jigger.’

Lastly, narrowing of meaning can be seen in polysemous words as exemplified in (6):

6. a. Omorisia ‘shepherd’
   b. Omorisia ‘religious leader’

Syntactically, the word omorisia can be used as shown in (7).

7. Oria n’omorisia.

This sentence is ambiguous, it could mean either: ‘that is a ‘shepherd’ (literally)’ or ‘that is a ‘shepherd’ (a religious leader-metaphorically)’. Again, in this case, context helps the narrowing process.

The examples above show that most words are used in ways that depart from their literal meanings. They imply that lexical narrowing is quite a flexible process: the encoded meaning may be narrowed to different degrees and in different directions, depending on the particular occasion of use. The main goal for lexical pragmatics is to explain what triggers the narrowing process, which direction it takes, and when it stops.

There is also a case of narrowing where a super-ordinate term is used to refer to a sub-ordinate term. The terms involved in this kind of relationship present a type of hyponymy. In Ekegusii there are super-ordinate terms which undergo narrowing and end up

\(^3\) An ad hoc concept is the intended but un-encoded concept.

\(^4\) The noun enyamoreo ‘AIDS’ is a coinage from this adjective.
taking one of the meanings of one of its subordinates. In example (8) below, **ekeriero** is a super-ordinate term which entails any ‘accompaniment for ugali’ or ‘stew’.

8. 

![Diagram](image.png)

**Ekeriero** ‘stew’
- **Ekeriero** ‘Meat stew’
- **Ching’ende** ‘Beans stew’
- **Ekabichi** ‘Cabbage stew’

Among the Abagusii **enyama** ‘meat’ is the best type of stew one can think of, hence, it is synonymous with **ekeriero** in many circumstances. Compare with example (9) below.

9. 

![Diagram](image.png)

**Eng’iti** ‘Animal’
- **Eng’iti** ‘snake’
- **Esimba** ‘lion’
- **Eng’ombe** ‘cow’

The illustration above demonstrates that the term **engiti** is used both as a hyponym as well as a hyperonym. Therefore, when the term is used to refer to a ‘snake’, it is a type of narrowing.

Another example of narrowing can be seen in the antonym **-kendu** ‘cold’ which becomes polysemous in context. The word has the meanings in example (10) below.

10.  
    - **-kendu**  
      a. **Mochari** ‘mortuary’  
      b. **Echera** ‘prison’  
      c. **Obokong’u** ‘sorrow’  
      d. **Obuya** ‘decency/smartness’  
      e. **-nyiu** ‘damp/wet’  
      f. **Obwoba** ‘fear’

In a phrase the pair can be used in the following ways:

11.  
    a. **Obekirwe enkendu**,  
        ‘(S)he has been taken to mortuary.’  
    b. **Engaki y’obokendu**  
        ‘A time of sorrow’  
    c. **Egari enkendu**  
        ‘A sleek vehicle’  
    d. **Ebituma ebikendu**  
        ‘Damp maize’  
    e. **Gosiarera obokendu**  
        ‘To instill fear’

Example (11a) literally means ‘(s)he has been put in the cold.’ However, in this circumstance **-kendu** is used ambiguously because it may mean a **mortuary**, a police cell or prison. The second phrase (11b) literally means ‘a cold season,’ which would
metaphorically mean ‘a time of grief.’ Example (11c) literally translated would mean, ‘that is a cool car’ yet, the intended meaning is ‘that is a sleek car.’ In Phrase (11d), -kendu means ‘damp’ or ‘wet.’ In the last phrase (11e) -kendu means ‘fear.’

2.2. Lexical broadening

Lexical broadening is a case where a word is used in a more general sense than the encoded one (Falkum 2007). Lexical broadening can be seen where a word is used to refer to objects, events or actions that strictly speaking fall outside its linguistically specified sense. Broadening, like narrowing, is triggered by the search for relevance, and involves the construction of ad hoc concepts based on information made accessible by the encyclopedic entry of the encoded concept. Sometimes, the particular subset of encyclopedic assumptions that lead to an interpretation that is relevant in the expected way result in a broadening rather than a narrowing of the linguistically specified denotation. There are various varieties of lexical broadening as illustrated below.

2.2.1. Approximation

This is a nominal type of expansion of meaning. It involves the use of a word with a fairly strict denotation to apply to a penumbra of cases that austerely speaking fall outside its encoded sense. Gradable antonyms in Ekegusii provide good illustrations of approximation. For example:

12. a. Obosio bwa Barasa nigo bore raondi.
   ‘Barasa’s face is round.’
   b. Esindani eri tiyarenge ndoro.
   ‘That injection was painless.’
   c. Basweti nigo amenyete ang’e na Tryphena.
   ‘Basweti lives near Tryphena.’

In (12), the words in bold are approximations of meaning. It is known that a person’s face cannot be completely round. We also know that an injection normally causes some pain. Therefore, the use of raondi ‘round’ and tiyarenge ndoro ‘painless’ in the sentences above is a kind of approximation. The speaker’s intended meaning in sentence (12a) is ‘Barasa’s face is almost round’ whereas in sentence (12b) the speaker’s meaning is ‘the injection was almost painless.’ In (12c), the adjective ang’e ‘near’ is also used approximately because one cannot certainly quantify ang’e ‘near.’

2.2.2. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is seen as a more fundamental type of broadening which allows the communicated concept to depart much further from the encoded concept. For example:

13. a. Igoro enchara konya yang’itire nabo nare gokora enchogu engima.
   ‘Yesterday I was starving I could finish a whole elephant.’
   b. Damaris nerinani.
   ‘Damaris is a giant.’

In sentence (13a) and (13b) the words in bold make the sentences come out as an exaggeration. Even if one is dying of hunger, (s)he cannot eat a whole elephant in one day. We also know that ‘Damaris’ cannot be rinani ‘a giant.’ However, one can deduce the speaker’s intended meaning. In (13a) the speaker communicates that (s)he could eat a lot while in sentence (13b) (s)he means that ‘Damaris’ is very big.

2.2.3. Category extension

This involves extending one word to cover other related words. In category extension, the name of a prominent category member is extended to apply to the whole broader category to which it belongs. Category extension is found in taxonomic sisters in Ekegusii as with (14) below.

14. Echae⁵ ‘tea’
   Tea for – Milo, soya, cocoa, coffee

⁵Echae can also be used to mean a bribe.
The use of echae ‘tea’ in this context may mean any beverage. It could be tea, milo, soya, coffee, cocoa, or even chocolate. People seldom talk of taking milo, coffee, soya, cocoa or chocolate, instead, echae is used to connote any of the beverages. In context, one may use the lexeme echae ‘tea’ as follows:

15. Rero n’echae tokonywa.
    ‘Today we shall take tea.’

Another example of category extension is seen in hyponymy relationships. This occurs when a term in the sub-ordinate level is also used to refer to the super-ordinate level in a hyponymy.

16.

\[
\text{Engoko ‘chicken’} \\
\text{Engoko ‘hen’} \\
\text{Etwni ‘cock’}
\]

The word engoko in Ekegusii may be used to refer to ‘a hen’ specifically or ‘chicken’ in general as shown in example (16). Therefore, engoko is a general term for chicken through category extension.

2.2.4. *Neologism*

All languages grow and change. They accommodate ideas and concepts which are alien. Ekegusii has many neologisms. For example:

17. a. *Enyamoreo* ‘HIV and AIDS’
    b. *Emoreka* ‘vehicle’
    c. *Rikondo* ‘loud speaker’

The word enyamoreo ‘HIV and AIDS’ is coined from the verb ‘korea’ which means ‘to be emaciated’ because HIV and AIDS initially used to make its victims to be skinny. Emoreka ‘vehicle’ is a coinage from the verb moreka which means ‘illuminate’. The Omogusii might have found the name suitable for its referent because of its sharp light at night.

2.2.5. *Metonymy*

This is a sense relation which involves the transfer of a name of an object or an entity that is closely associated with it such as ‘crown’ for ‘monarch’ (Bredin 1984). The relationship may be in terms of container-contained, cause-effect, possessor-possessed and so on. Tompkins (2003) has defines metonymy as “a symbol or name used in place of an idea, often represented by another symbol or name”. Both Bredin (1984) and Tompkins (2003) overtly express the confusion in distinguishing metonymy from synecdoche. Like metonymy, synecdoche is a rhetorical trope whereby a part represents a whole; for instance, a quality associated with a particular ethnicity or gender represents the actual ethnicity or gender (Tompkins 2003). This type of metonymy is used in Ekegusii. For example, use of Kisii (the major town/urban centre in Gusiland) to signify Gusiland. Somebody may say that (s)he was in Kisii last week. This does not necessarily mean that (s)he was in Kisii town, it could mean that (s)he was in any part of Gusiland.

3. *Conclusion*

This paper set out to analyse sense relations in Ekegusii The paper adopted lexical pragmatics as its tool for description and interpretation of data. The pragmatic processes of narrowing and broadening were used in the analysis. The analysis revealed that, lexical pragmatics theory is adequate in handling the analysis of antonyms, homonyms and polysemous words in Ekegusii using the process of either narrowing or broadening. The paper established that lexical pragmatic processes seem to apply unexpectedly and automatically to fine tune the interpretation of every word. Pragmatic inference continually makes up for the gaps in the vocabulary especially when the lexemes are in use. Nonetheless, the analysis is by no means the ultimate study on sense relations since the field is still a rich resource for future research possibilities.
References