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**Ambiguity in Ikwere: An Exploration**

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**Abstract**

Ambiguity in any language of the world is a clog in the wheel of effective communication. As a first attempt in this area of semantics in the language; this paper specifically treats polysemy and homonymy as the lexical components of ambiguity in Ikwere, an Igboid language spoken in Rivers State of Nigeria. It also analyzes some structural ambiguities resulting from certain syntactic structures. The data for this study are obtained through direct interviews with competent language consultants and through the participant observation method. The descriptive method of interlinear morpheme- to- morpheme glossing is employed in the analysis of ambiguous constructions. The work identifies polysemy in nouns and verbs in the language. Of notable significance is the polysemous behaviour of the verb *ri* 'eat', which is analyzed as having a core sense and twelve (12) different metaphorical or figurative extensions of the core. The paper further observed homonymous nouns, adjectives, verbs and a number of ambiguous sentences. As a way of disambiguating ambiguous expressions in the language, the work suggests three likely strategies namely: substitution of the subject-pronoun with the appropriate noun subject; completing the phrase or sentence for additional information, and supplying additional

sentence. It is believed that this paper will not only serve as a stepping stone for further research in the language, it will also contribute to the body of literature in semantics.

**Key Words:** Ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, polysemy, homonyms, structural ambiguity

### Introduction

Since the beginning of linguistic thought, it has been agreed upon that every one of the constitutive elements of any natural language is prone to continual fluctuation and modification. Even though language changes are both constant and all-pervading, the very process of the replacement of forms and rules is often indiscernible and difficult to comprehend.

We live in an ever-changing and fluctuating world, in which both society and its broadly understood environment are intrinsically linked with creation and erosion, and where nothing remains invariable. On the level of language, such impermanence in historical and cultural background is inevitably revealed in the expansion of the vocabulary stock and the modification of meanings of individual lexical items which go in different quantitative and qualitative directions.

The above statements lend credence to the dynamism of language- the vehicle with which meaning is conveyed. If many renowned scholars attest to this unstable and changing nature of language, there is no gainsaying trying to prove that ambiguity is evident in languages.

Communication is said to be complete when the hearer or receiver of a message understands the message from the sender the same way the sender intended. However, the use of certain elements of grammar (words, phrases and sentences) in language (communication) often leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Hence, when one says something and the listener gives it another interpretation or finds it difficult to understand what the speaker meant, this leads to confusion and adversely affects the intent of the speaker. There are complications most times because the speaker and hearer are not on the same frame of reference, which is a prerequisite for communication to be complete. The researchers embarked on this work having identified certain elements of the grammar of Ikwere to be ambiguous and when wrongly used can be clogs in the wheel of effective communication.

Ambiguity as a term is a linguistic condition which originated from both Latin and French in the early 16th century. The Latin word *ambiguus* means 'shifting' or 'doubtful' while the French word *ambigere* means 'go round', 'wonder about' and 'argue'. From the Latin word we can say that ambiguity is the quality of an expression having more than one possible meaning or interpretation. It seems to be a common phenomenon in language since words and sentences can have more than one meaning. Ambiguity in language arises when the users of a language consciously or unconsciously use in their speech and writing, expressions that lend themselves to double or multiple interpretations.

Ambiguity affects both word categories and categories larger the word. According to Ejele (1996, p. 129):

Ambiguity arises when a word or a sentence has more than one meaning; when it relates to a word it is called lexical semantics, when it relates to a phrase, it is called phrasal ambiguity and when it relates to a sentence, it is called sentential ambiguity.

Sometimes, ambiguity can be used intentionally in communication to avoid a clear answer, tread cautiously and as a means of avoiding undesirable consequences. This is glaring in presupposition, a term used in pragmatics and also a form of ambiguity. Crystal (1991, p. 276) describes the term as what a speaker assumes in saying a particular sentence, as opposed to what is actually asserted. It is what the speaker assumes his hearer already knows.

This paper studied ambiguous expressions in Ikwere. It specifically treats Polysemy and Homonymy as the lexical components of ambiguity in the language and also looks at structural ambiguities resulting from certain syntactic structures.

### **Methodology**

Data for this work was obtained through interviews with competent language consultants (native speakers). Ambiguous expressions were obtained by guiding the language consultants as to the kind of words or constructions sought, if found in the language. In addition to this process, the researchers also used the participant observation method to obtain some aspects of the data. The data for the ambiguous sentences were analyzed using the descriptive method of interlinear morpheme-to-morpheme glossing. This descriptive method of data analysis is based on the native speakers' intuition of their language and does not subscribe to any form of subjectivity. The data is represented orthographically and vowel nasalization is signaled by inserting 'n' between the consonant and vowel of the affected syllable.

### **The Concept of Ambiguity**

Man is a complex being and as complex as man's nature is so is his thoughts and actions. It is thus impossible for a hearer or listener to actually read what is in the mind of the speaker. This fact is succinctly put by Empson (1977, p. 2) who said "the thought is complicated, or at least doubtful, whereas the feeling is direct".

It is this complex nature of man that brings to the fore the concept of ambiguity which is generally believed to occur when there is no one to one correspondence between an expression and the meaning the hearer decodes. In his own view, Lyons (1968, p. 212) stated that ambiguity can be accounted for in terms of its functions either as the constituent structure or as the distributional classification of the element or both. The following expression illustrates this:

1. Visiting relatives can be boring

Example 1 above could have these two interpretations:

- i. Going to visit relatives (the act of visiting relatives) can be a boring activity
- ii. Relatives who visit can be boring.

### **Types of Ambiguity**

Different scholars put up different views as to the types of ambiguity. Ndimele (2005, pp. 77-79) identifies two types of ambiguity which are lexical, and structural ambiguity. According to him, lexical ambiguity is the type of ambiguity "...which results when a construction has more than one meaning due to the presence of a particular word in that construction". Example (1) we treated above suffice for

lexical ambiguity. In the case of structural ambiguity, Ndimele asserted that “this type of ambiguity arises when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association”. Structural ambiguity may also arise due to how the whole sentence is arranged or organized or the way a particular word or phrase is placed in a sentence.

The following examples in Omega (2011, p. 136) illustrate structural ambiguity.

2. She cannot bear children
  - (i) She is unable to give birth to children
  - (ii) She cannot tolerate children
3. All the guests won't eat the rice
  - (i) Not all the guests will eat the rice (i.e. some will eat, others will not)
  - (ii) None of the guests will eat the rice
4. The president fired the minister with zeal
  - (i) The president fired the minister who was zealous
  - (ii) The president zealously (enthusiastically) fired the minister
  - (iii) The president inspired the minister to be zealous

Ndimele (2005, pp. 77-79) agrees with Crystal (1997, p. 17) that there are two types of ambiguity: lexical and structural when he stated that “lexical ambiguity is the ambiguity which does not arise from the grammatical analysis of a sentence, but is due solely to the alternative meanings of an individual lexical item”. Crystal in this light, sees structural ambiguity as “a term used in linguistics to refer to a construction with more than one grammatical interpretation in terms of constituent analysis”.

### **Causes of Ambiguity**

Different factors can give rise to a situation where a word, phrase or sentence will have multiple meanings or different interpretations. Some of the factors are: Homonymy: this refers to a lexical meaning relation holding between lexemes that have the same phonetic characteristics, but have two or more meanings which are unrelated. This implies that homonyms are the lexical equivalence of sentential ambiguity (Hurford 1992, p. 403).

Homonyms can create ambiguity. Yule (1996, p. 121) asserts that homonymy is used when one form (written and spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings. Example of homonyms are bat (flying creature) bat (used in sports), race (contest of speed) race (ethnic group), pupil (at school) pupil (in the eye), mole (on skin) mole (small animal). Fromkin, et al (2003, p. 179) posit that words like tale and tail are homonyms. Homonyms are different words that are pronounced the same, but may or may not be spelled the same. Vain, vein, and the two are homonyms despite their spelling differences. Bussmann (1996, p.210) also supports that homonymy is a type of lexical ambiguity involving two or more different words. Saeed (2007, p. 63) also attests that homonyms are unrelated sense of the same phonological word. He grouped homonyms into different categories when he says that there are

different types of homonym depending on their syntactic behavior, and spelling, for example, a) lexemes of the same syntactic category, and with the same spelling, e.g. lap ‘circuit of a course’ and lap ‘part of body when sitting down’. b) Lexemes of the same category, but with different spelling: e.g. the verb ring and wring, talk and torque, clique and click. c) Lexemes of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb keep and the noun keep. d) Lexemes of different categories, and with different spelling: e.g. not, knot. Omego (2011, p. 128) reports that linguists distinguish between two kinds of homonymy- homography and homophony. Homography according to Ejele (1996, p. 124), is a term used to describe a situation where a set of lexemes have the same spelling but different meaning and pronunciation. Example the word *lead*. This word could mean a heavy metallic element and can also mean something that serves as a guide. Malmkjær (2000, p. 460) states that if terms are only ambiguous when written down, they are said to be homographs. Finegan (2004, p. 195) also supports that homographs have the same spelling but different meanings (and pronunciations), such as *conduct* as a verb and *conduct* as a noun, where the verb has primary stress on the second syllable and the noun has it on the first syllable. Fromkin, et al (2003, p. 180) also attest that homographs are words that are spelled the same, but have different meanings, such as *dove* the bird, and *dove* the past tense of dive. He adds that when homonyms are spelled the same, they are also homographs, for example, *bear* and *bear*, but not all homonyms are homographs.

Homophony, on the other hand, refers to lexemes that have the same pronunciation, but different meanings. The spellings may or may not be the same (Fromkin & Rodman 1998, p. 247). Malmkjær (2000, p. 460) says that if ambiguity pertains to the spoken form only, the two differently written forms are said to be homophones: site/sight/cite, rite/right/write/wright, meat/meet. Saeed (2007, p. 63) averred, “homophones are senses of the same spoken word, but with different spelling: e.g. the verbs ring and wring.

### Review of Related Work

There is no published work on ambiguity in Ikwere. This then implies that our review would be based on published work from any related Igboid language of the West Benue Congo family of the Niger-Congo Phylum of languages.

Ugochukwu (2014) examined ambiguity in Igbo and identifies three types of ambiguity in the language which are phonetic, lexical and structural ambiguities. He treated homonymy as a type of phonetic ambiguity and averred that this form of ambiguity results in speech from the phonetic structure of the sentence, since the acoustic unit of connected speech is the breath group. It may happen that two breath groups made up of different words become homonymous and so ambiguity occurs. Two or more lexemes which have different and unrelated meaning may coincide in the spoken language and sometimes in the written language, thus giving rise to homonymy in the language. This means that homonymy can arise when two or more distinct lexemes coincidentally or accidentally have the same form or phonetic shape. Thus, phonetically homonymous words can be ambiguous.

He indicated that in Igbo, there are many lexemes that have different and unrelated meanings but whose surface forms are the same. For example, *ɔkwa* which could be interpreted as

- a. Small wooden mortar and

b. Status/rank

*okwa* is a case of homonymy because the different meanings are not related. In other words, we have two different lexemes that accidentally have the same phonetic form and pronunciation.

Igbo Ambiguous Statements	Meanings
1. I rère n'èlu ?	i. 'Did you decay on top? ii. 'Did you sell wholesale? iii. Did you sell upstairs?
2. Ihu gi dì kà ihu m mà	i. Your face looks familiar. ii. Your face looks like the face of a knife/machete'.

Ugochukwu (2014), accounting for the ambiguity above, stated that when spoken, the ambiguity in (1) and (2) respectively rests on *rère*, which can mean 'decay' or 'sell' and *m mà* which can be interpreted as 'I know' or 'knife/machete'.

### Ambiguity in Ikwere

Ambiguity is a language-specific phenomenon. An observation of the interaction among some native speakers of Ikwere revealed two types of ambiguity. They are lexical and structural ambiguity. This paper therefore, treats them one after the other. As a first attempt in this area of study, the work does not claim to be exhaustive.

### Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity involves cases where words that have the same form can have multiple meanings. Fromkin, et al (2003:586) state that lexical ambiguity refers to multiple meaning of sentences due to words that have multiple meanings. In this research, it is observed that polysemy and homonymy as instances in which lexical ambiguities are found in Ikwere.

### Polysemy

Polysemy is a semantic relation in which one word has several meanings. It is however important to note that the several meanings of a polysemous word must be related. Alluding to this fact, Ndimele (1999:57) confirms that "all the several meanings of a polysemous word belong to a common core". In polysemous words, 'one of the several meanings is central while other meanings are rather figurative or metaphorical extensions of the core sense. See examples of polysemy in Ikwere nouns in (1a - e):

**Polysemy in Ikwere Nouns**

Polysems (nouns)	Senses	Type of Meaning
1. <i>ńknú</i>	Fire	Core
	Wood used for cooking	
	Hot	” ”
	Heat	Metaphorical extension
	Fresh	Metaphorical extension
2. <i>ńdnù</i>	Life	Core
	Raw	Metaphorical extension
	Fresh	Metaphorical extension
3. <i>ákàrà</i>	Mark	Core
	Destiny	Metaphorical extension
4. <i>ìhnú</i>	Face	Core
	Front part of something	Metaphorical extension
5. <i>íshî</i>	as part of the body	Core
	as main point/ paramount	Metaphorical extension
	As Source of something	” ”
	As eldest child	” ”
	As edge/end of house	” ”
	As number one in class	” ”

The examples in (1) – (5) demonstrate that some nouns in Ikwere can be used to express different senses. Example (1) shows that the central meaning of *ńknú* is ‘fire’ used to cook different types of food, boil water, set things ablaze, etc. The same term is used to refer to ‘wood’, instead of kerosene (stove), gas (cooker) that can be used to make fire. The example further illustrates that the sense can extend to mean ‘hot’ and ‘heat’. While ‘hot’ refers to the effect a flaming fire or sun has on whatever items/person that it is directly in contact with or fever has on a patient, the term ‘heat’ is the feeling of hotness generated by rarefaction of air or restlessness caused by difficult condition. The term *ńknú* also can be extended metaphorically mean ‘fresh’. Fresh here refers to a current matter of interest, an object of discussion by almost everyone in the society as opposed to a matter that is already stale news in the society. Conversely, the core meaning of *ńdnù* in (2) is ‘life’ referring to all living things (i.e., both fauna and flora). By extension, *ńdnù* means ‘raw’ or ‘fresh’. The sense of ‘rawness’ of *ńdnù* is used to refer to food items that are partially cooked or uncooked as against the cooked ones. On the other hand, the sense of *ńdnù* that means ‘fresh’ is used to make distinction between greenish vegetables or leaves and





11. 'To impose fine' as in:  
 Wè rì Ógè iwû 'They imposed fine on Oge'  
 3PL eat PN fine
12. 'To squander money' as in:  
 Ézè rì-whùlé iwáí pàpá ă 'Eze squandered his father's money'  
 PN eat-waste money father 3SG
13. 'To enjoy life' as in:  
 Élé óchíchí rì-gà ńdnù 'The leaders are enjoying'  
 Person leader eat-PROG life
14. 'To celebrate/observe festivity (e.g Christmas)' as in:  
 Wè rì égwû nì n'rí ɔnwâ n' áwhà 'They celebrated Christmas in December'  
 3PL eat Xmas PREP ten month PREP year
15. 'To make profit' as in:  
 Rì m mbnàrná nī jí mé é-rē 'I made profit in the yam I sold'  
 Eat 1SG profit PREP yam 1SG PR-sell
16. 'To take bribe' as in:  
 Nyé pòlìsì rì à ñgàrì 'A Policeman took bribe from him'.  
 Person police eat 3SG bribe
17. 'To deceive' as in:  
 Ézè rì ényì á ńgnō 'Eze deceived his friend'.  
 PN eat friend 3SG betray
18. 'To drown in the river' as in:  
 Mini rì nnwo a n'abali 'His child drowned in the river at night'.  
 Water eat child 3SG PREP night
19. 'To inherit property' as in:  
 ńnwò á rī m̀kpé ă 'His child inherited his property'  
 Child 3SG eat property 3SG

20. 'The cost of something' as in:

Órò í rī íwáí èlé ? 'How much did the (building of) house cost you?  
House 2SG eat money QW

Generally, possession is marked with a high tone in the language while pronouns on the other hand are marked with low tone in the language. But observe that in examples 19 and 20, we find some deviation from the tone marking as stated above. This deviation from the standard is occasioned by the presence of possessive pronouns before the verb root.

In Ikwere, perfect verb root forms always bear high tones whereas in simple past, the verb root always bears low tone. Observe however, that examples 19 and 20 are instances of simple past but the verb root bears a downstepped tone rather than a low tone. This is possible because the original floating low tone of the pronoun (since pronouns generally bear low tones in the language) has been displaced by a high tone which marks possession in the language. This high tone then influences the low tone on the verb root to become downstepped.

### Homonyms in Ikwere

We had earlier distinguished between polysemy and homonymy. We said while polysems have several related meanings, homonyms have unrelated meanings. We identified noun, adjectival and verbal homonyms in Ikwere.

1. Homonymous nouns	Several unrelated meanings
21. Óchnà	'whiteness' (colour), 'ripe'(of fruit), 'cleanliness', 'innocence'
22. Nji	'blackness', 'darkness'
23. árnû	a bite', 'heaviness'
24. àrí	'Worm', 'hook'
25. ñgwò	'Palm tree', 'sugar cane'
2. Homonymous Adjectives	Several unrelated meanings
26. Óchichnà	'white', 'fair in complexion' (light skin),
27. Ùjǐjǐ	'black', 'dark'
28. Kwú	'big', 'enormous', 'older in age as grandmother'
3. Homonymous verbs	Several unrelated meanings
29. Zà	'respond to call', 'swell'
30. Zà	'filter', 'sweep', 'melt'
31. Sà	'answer', 'slice'
32. Kpò	'lay(complain)', 'flip open'

33. Tù	'peck', 'decide', 'dig (ground to plant yam)'
34. Rí	'eat (food)', 'drink(water)'

The examples of homonyms presented in (21) – (34) demonstrate that some words in Ikwere may be used to convey more than one meaning and it is actually one of the sources of ambiguity. Example (29) and (30) further reveal the importance of tone in the language as the substitution of a low tone with a high tone, for an instance, can also generate different meanings, which by themselves can also present different in Ikwere.

### Structural Ambiguity in Ikwere

Structural ambiguous expression involves the possibility of assigning that structure to two or more phrase markers. The various meanings are numbered with the Roman numerals (i) and (ii) as the examples (35) – (41) illustrate this concept in Ikwere:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 35. Í kpākàlá ñrì wé ákà<br>2SG touch-NEG food 3PL hand                    | i. 'Don't touch their food'<br>ii. 'Don't eat their food'                     |
| 36. Nde nwirnikne ni nde nwerne ojoo<br>Person male CONJ person female bad | i. 'Men and bad/wicked women'<br>ii. 'Wicked men and wicked women'            |
| 37. Íshī búlà à òmà<br>head be-NEG 3SG good                                | i. 'He is not behaving well'<br>ii. 'He is mad'                               |
| 38. Ọ rì anọ Eze<br>3SG eat meat PN  | i. 'S(he) ate the meat belonging to Eze'<br>ii. 'S(he) ate Eze' flesh'        |
| 39. Kínī vùyàrà ì hnà ?<br>QW carry-come-FT 2SG here                       | i. 'for what purpose did you come?'<br>ii. 'through what means did you come?' |
| 40. Wè kpàgà kìnī?<br>exhibiting?<br>3PL do-PROG QW<br>cocoyam)?'          | i. 'what type of behaviour are they<br>ii. 'what are they scraping (yam, fish |
| 41. Nòjíhiè àlì<br>Sit-toward ground                                       | i. 'sit down (take a seat)'<br>ii. 'go and rest (don't bother yourself)'      |

For structural ambiguity, the listener is somewhat at a loss because he/she is subjected to a different choice with regards to the meaning of the utterance which are all possible probabilities to the given structure. This is mainly seen in uncompleted expressions which the speaker may feel that there is no need either to waste time or energy in completing. When this happens, the listener is faced with the

problem of making a choice from the possible options. It therefore behooves the listener to put his/her creativity to play within the given context to make out the exact meaning of the structure appropriately. See examples in (42):

- |                            |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Ò zà-kpà-lá                | i) 'S/He has finished sweeping' |
| 3SG sweep/melt-finish-PERF | ii) 'It has melted'             |

The example in (42) can actually be understood by the listener if he/she is a participant observer or aware of the context of discussion. If otherwise, it means that (42) could be interpreted as: 'someone has finished sweeping' or 'something has melted'. To disambiguate it will be to add an object or replace the subject pronoun with the appropriate noun subject. The examples in (43) and (44) demonstrate one of the ways to disambiguate it:

- |                       |          |  |
|-----------------------|----------|--|
| 42. Ò zà-kpà-lá       | órò      | 'S/He has finished sweeping the house' |
| 3SG sweep-finish-PERF | house    |  |
| 43. Ò zà-kpà-lá       | n' itè   | 'It has melted in the pot'             |
| 3SG melt-finish-PERF  | PREP pot |  |

The addition of the noun phrase (object) *órò* 'house' or *n'itè* 'in the pot' to (42) as in (43) or (44), respectively, clarifies which of the meanings is intended. Examples showing the substitution of the subject pronoun with the noun subject are found in (45) and (46).

#### Disambiguating Ambiguous Expressions in Ikwere

Ambiguous expressions can be clarified using different techniques. According to Bussmann (1996:130) disambiguation can be achieved by taking extralinguistic contexts into consideration. He suggested that lexical ambiguities can be linguistically disambiguated by excluding semantically incompatible lexeme combinations. In this light, Malmkjær (2002, p. 461) gives the example - *The chicken is ready to eat*. This can be disambiguated by adding *so please serve it* or *so please feed it*, thus differentiating chicken (=meat) from chicken (=live animal). Disambiguation through extralinguistic context depends on the particular situation, or prior knowledge, attitude, expectations of the speaker/hearer as well as on non-verbal cues (Palmer 1981, p. 49).

For Akmajian et al (2006, p. 366), the onus of determining the meaning of expressions lies on the shoulder of the hearer who must be mentally capable of processing and deciphering expressions that reflect complex structural properties as prominent in human language. The implication of this view is that since complex and ambiguous structures are often found in many expressions in human language, the hearer must determine the exact meaning the expression by the speaker refers to at the particular time among other possible interpretations.

Lehiste et al (1976) in Crystal (1987) averred that listeners use the prosodic variable, duration, to disambiguate syntactically ambiguous sentences. They say that some of the sentences' meanings could be represented by two distinct syntactic bracketings, e.g., 'The hostess [[greeted] [the girl] [with a smile].]' and 'The hostess [greeted] [[the girl] [with a smile.]].' Other sentences, while ambiguous, had a common syntactic bracketing, e.g., '[German teachers] visit Greensboro.' In their experiment, the

duration of words corresponding to ambiguous constituents of the sentences or containing ambiguous boundaries of the constituents was varied systematically. Subjects listened to the sentences and selected one of the two meanings.

The results indicated that only sentences in which the two meanings were represented by two distinct syntactic bracketings were reliably disambiguated by durational cues. It is suggested that when the interstress interval spanning a major syntactic boundary is increased, listeners perceive the boundary's presence.

Crystal (1987, p. 179) somewhat borrowed a leaf from the duration concept of Lehiste et al (1976) when he talked about time-lag between production and reception. He stressed that listeners also have to anticipate the effects of the time-lag between production and reception, and the problems posed by having their language read and interpreted by many recipients in a diversity of setting. In the absence of immediate feedback, available in most speech interaction, care needs to be taken to minimize the effects of vagueness and ambiguity.

A number of ways may be used to disambiguate ambiguous structures in the language. The three broad ways are by completing the sentence or phrase; supplying another sentence or clause that will give additional information for clarification, and substituting the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular subject pronoun with the appropriate noun subject.

#### 1) The Substitution of Subject Pronoun with the Appropriate Noun Subject

It is observed that certain ambiguity caused by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronoun can be disambiguated by replacing the subject pronoun with appropriate noun subject. This is particular so when one realizes that the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular is used to refer to both human and non-human. Examples are given in (45) and (46):

- 45a. Ò zà-kpà-lá i. 'S/He has finished sweeping'/  
 3SG sweep/melt-finish-PERF ii. 'It has melted'
- b. Ógè zàkpàlá 'Oge has finished sweeping'  
 PN sweep-finish-PERF
- c. Édè zà-kpà-lá 'The cocoyam has melted'  
 cocoyam melt-finish-PERF
- 46a. Ò jì ñî i. 'S/He is dark in complexion'  
 3SG be black black ii. 'It is black'
- b. Ógè jì ñî 'Oge is dark in complexion'  
 PN be black black
- c. Éwù á jì ñî 'The goat is black'  
 goat DET be black black

Example (45a) could mean that ‘someone has finished cooking’ or ‘something has melted’. The substitution of the pronoun *ò* ‘s/he’/ ‘it’ with a human subject (personal name) *Ógè* in (45b) automatically renders the meaning ‘has finished sweeping’. On the other hand, if the pronoun is replaced with a non-human subject such as *édè* ‘cocoyam’ as in (45c), the meaning derived is ‘has melted’. Similarly, while personal name in (46b) clearly shows that the pronoun refers to someone that has a dark skin, (46c) demonstrates that it refers to a black goat.

## 2) Completing the Phrase or Sentence for Additional Information

Some ambiguous constructions may be disambiguated by either adding an object, modifier or a predicate depending on the source of ambiguity. A typical example is sentence (45a) renamed here as (47a):

- 47a. *Ò zà-kpà-lá* i. ‘S/He has finished sweeping’  
 3SG sweep/melt-finish-PERF ii. ‘It has melted’
- b. *Ò zà-kpà-lá órò* ‘S/He has finished sweeping the house’  
 3SG sweep-finish-PERF house
- c. *Ò zà-kpà-lá n’ itè* ‘It has melted in the pot’  
 3SG sweep-finish-PERF PREP pot

The addition of *órò* ‘house’ in (49b) automatically rules out the sense of ‘melt’ because Ikwere kind of house does not melt. Conversely, the inclusion of the complement *n’ itè* ‘in the pot’ in (47c) also excludes the meaning of ‘sweep’ as it is not natural to sweep in the pot.

Other examples of how the addition of certain items to a sentence can help to disambiguate ambiguous constructions Ikwere are given in (48) and (49):

- 48a. *Ínnwọ kà* i. ‘This child’  
 Child DET ii. ‘This person’
- b. *Ínnwọ kà kwná-kwà* ‘This child can cry (excessively)’  
 child DET cry-much
- c. *Ínnwọ kà rnụ-kwà* ‘This person can work (excessively)’  
 child DET work-much
- 49a. *Árnù á kárlá* i. ‘The work is much’  
 Work DET surpass ii. ‘The bite is much’
- b. *Árnù úbì m kárlá* ‘My farm work is much’  
 Work farm 1SG surpass
- c. *Árnù ó tà m kárlá* ‘The bite s/he gave me is much’

## Bite 3SG bite 3SG surpass

Examples (48a) and (49a) further demonstrate that a particular construction can be interpreted in different ways, while their (b) or (c) counterparts specify which of the meanings is intended by the speaker. Ordinarily, *ńnwọ* means ‘child’ but when *kà* is added, it could be interpreted as ‘this child’ or ‘this person’. When, however, the appropriate predicate is added to the phrase as in (48b) and (48c), it becomes obvious that a child is the referent in (48b) as it is common for children to cry at the slightest provocation, whereas an adult is the referent in (48c) as carrying out any form of task is often attributed to the adults. For example (49a), appropriate modifiers are added to the noun subject specify the intended meaning. Thus, the phrase *úbì m* ‘my farm’ in (49b) used to modify the subject *ármú* illustrate that it has to do with farm work, while the clause *ọ tà m* ‘that he bite me’ in (49c) shows that it is the wound sustained through a bite that is referred to. The foregoing examples demonstrate that an addition of a modifier, an object of a predicate could be used to disambiguate an ambiguous expression depending on the source of the ambiguity.

**3) Supplying Additional Sentence**

Contrary to the strategy of disambiguating an ambiguous construction by enlarging the internal constituents, it may also be disambiguated by supplying additional sentence to such a construction. Thus, while the first construction is ambiguous, the second provides a guide to what the speaker intends. Consider examples (50) and (51):

- 50a) *Ákà m dì ọchná* i. ‘My hands are clean (not dirty)’  
 Hand 1SG be clean ii. ‘I am innocent’
- b) *Ákà m dì ọchná. M kwóla m ákà*  
 Hand 1SG be clean.1SG wash-PERF 1SG hand  
 ‘My hand is clean. I have washed the hand’.
- c) *Ákà m dì ọchná. Ọ díà hné mé mè*  
 Hand 1SG be clean.3SG be-NEG thing 1SG do  
 ‘I am innocent. I did not do anything’
- 51a. *Í kpākà-là ńrì wé ákà.* i. ‘Don’t touch their food’  
 2SG touch-NEG food 3PL hand ii. ‘Don’t eat their food’
- b. *Í kpākà-là ńrì wé ákà. Ájnā dà à-bná ā*  
 2SG touch-NEG food 3PL hand. Sand FUT PR-enter 3SG  
 ‘Don’t touch their food. It will become sandy’
- c. *Í kpākà-là ńrì wé ákà . Wè mè è-rí-lê ńrì*  
 2SG touch-NEG food 3PL hand . 3PL NEG PR-eat-NEG food

‘Don’t touch their food. They have not eaten’

Example (50a) may be interpreted as ‘my hand is clean’ or ‘I am innocent’. To state precisely what the speaker intends, the following sentence *M kwólá m̄ ákâ* ‘I have washed the hand’ in (50b) shows that it is the physical hygiene that the speaker intends, while *Ò díà hné mé mè* ‘I did not do anything’ in (50c) specifies that it refers to the innocence of the speaker to whatever the problem is. Similarly, (51a) means ‘don’t touch their food’ or ‘don’t eat their food’. To leave no one in doubt, a second sentence, such as *ájnā dà à-bná ā* ‘it will become sandy’ in (51b) may be supplied to mean that the food may become sandy if touched. On the contrary, if the sentence, *wè mè è-rí-lé ñrì* ‘they have not eaten’ in (51c) is the choice, it means that the people for whom the food is reserved will definitely need to eat as hunger is inevitable.

### Conclusion

This work treated lexical and structural ambiguities in Ikwere. Polysemy and homonymy were two types of lexical ambiguities treated. Polysems in Ikwere were identified in nouns and verbs as special attention was given to the polysemous verb *rí* in the language. *Rí* was analyzed to have a core sense and twelve different metaphorical or figurative extensions of the core. Homonymous nouns, adjectives and verbs were also treated in this paper.

A number of ambiguous structures was also treated and the paper then suggested three strategies for disambiguating ambiguous expressions in the language. These strategies are: Substitution of subject-pronoun with appropriate noun subject; completing the phrase or sentence for additional information and supplying additional sentence.

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