



Semantics and Contextual Meanings in Traditional Ndebele Communities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of semantics and its contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. The focus of the study was on the linguistic development by classifying and examining changes in meaning of words due to their use, immediate contexts and inflection. The study adopted a qualitative approach while participants were purposively selected. Gathering techniques employed in collecting data from selected participants were interviews and observations. The analysis and discussions were derived from the contextual meanings and on how they change in relation to their immediate contexts. The study also examined semantic challenges encountered in the sphere of linguistics. Thus, through cultural education, learners and community members were enlightened on the contextual meanings resulting from critical interpretation of the words. Findings revealed that the study of semantics in linguistics is inevitable as long as IsiNdebele is taught as subject in schools and used for communication purposes in society. Also highlighted was that lack of understanding meanings in relation to their contexts results in distortion, misinterpretation and misrepresentation of issues which consequently yields to poor examination performance. From a cognitive perspective, this research emphasised that semantics is a crucial phenomenon in linguistics affirming that meanings are contextually determined rather than absolute. Therefore, it is recommended that a pragmatic approach be adopted, one that explores the relationship between language and context, and how meaning is created and negotiated in social interactions.

Keywords

semantics, meanings, challenges, context, misinterpretation

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is a multilingual country landlocked in the Central African region as it shares boundaries with countries of Zambia in the north, Mozambique in the east, South Africa in the south and Botswana in the west. In other words, is viewed as landlocked because it has no direct access to the sea but entirely located inland or away from the coast. According to Hachipola (1998), the country currently constitutes 16 official languages. From these 16 languages, except for English and Sign Languages, fourteen remaining ones are African indigenous languages spoken in different geographical locations of Zimbabwe. However, important to note at this stage is that, "Prior to the adoption of the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, English was the only official language, while Shona and Ndebele were regarded as national languages taught in the education system". (Bhebe and Khosa 2025:1). While the adopted constitution theoretically raised the official status of other languages to that of English, in essence, English persists to serve as the medium of instruction at the expense of other officially recognised languages. The failure by the government to implement its Language Acts and Policies greatly affected the development and promotion of indigenous languages, including isiNdebele which is the focus of this study on semantics and contextual meanings in Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study was conducted in Matabeleland North and South provinces and parts of the Midlands province. Matabeleland North and South regions are situated in the western and southern parts of the country while

Midlands region is in the middle of Zimbabwe, hence, the coinage of the concept Midlands. The study focused on these regions because it is where Ndebele language is not only dominant but have been taught as a subject in formal education since the colonial era. From its teaching and learning in schools, the researchers detected the inherent problems regarding semantics and its contextual meanings experienced in academic studies. However, these challenges are not only restricted to the classroom environments but are also encountered through discourses and/or conversations in social interactions in the communities where Ndebele is used as a language of communication. Precisely, in this context, the real problem is the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of semantics due to a lack of contextual meanings which ultimately affect the performance of learners in their academic studies and distorts meanings in social community conversations. In other words, highlighted regarding the problem under investigation is the importance of context in understanding semantics in socio-linguistics.

The study mainly examined semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. The study intends to identify, exemplify and analyse linguistic categories affected by semantic and contextual meanings in the sphere of linguistic, specifically focusing on Ndebele language. The study further wished to reveal that important agreement rules in linguistics are violated leading to the problem of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of meanings in academic studies and conversations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Grant and Osanloo (2014 in Adom et al. 2018) view a theoretical framework as a guide for research. Basically, the theoretical framework shapes the entire research project. In expressing the importance of theoretical framework, Ravitch and Carl (2016) emphasise that the concept assists researchers in situating and contextualising formal theories into their studies as a guide. Thus, among several theoretical frameworks in linguistics semantics, this study was mainly underpinned and informed by Conceptual semantics. This conceptual semantics is the theory that informs this study on semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities. This theory was found relevant because of its endeavour of explaining properties of argument structure. According to Betti (2020:8), “The assumption behind this is that syntactic properties of phrases reflect the meanings of the words that head them.” Furthermore, on the basis of this theory, linguistics can better deal with the fact that subtle differences in word meaning correlate with other differences in the syntactic structure that word appears in (Levin and Pinker 1991:23 and Igaab, 2016:51). That is, individual or small parts that combine to make internal structure of words are known as semantic primitives which assist towards the entire word meaning. In this regard, Conceptual semantics theory deals with the most basic concept and form of a word before our thoughts and feelings added context to it. “For example, at its most basic we know a congar to be a large wild cat. But the word congar has also come to indicate an older woman who’s dating a younger man” (Betti, 2020: 16). Implied in this example is that the meaning of the term ‘congar’ entirely depend on its contextual meaning as it has dual definition. In informing the conducted study, conceptual semantics is employed in conjunction with Lexical semantics which is a linguistic theory that investigates meanings. “This theory understands that the meaning of a word is fully reflected by its context. Here, the meaning of a word is constituted by its contextual relations” (Betti, 2021). In this regard, lexical semantics explores how words convey meaning contextually, how they relate to each other and how they contribute to the entire meaning of a phrase, sentence or discourse. Furthermore, conceptual semantics relates well with cognitive semantics which examines how language reflects and shapes human thought, perception and experience, affirming the dynamic nature of meaning as contextual influence affects meaning interpretation. Therefore, this conceptual model in conjunction with lexical and cognitive perspectives can be used to analyse semantics and contextual meanings in the study of linguistics in traditional Ndebele speaking communities in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewed in this section are scholarly works mainly found in journal articles on semantics and contextual meanings in linguistics. However, it should be noted from the onset that, although a lot has been written on Semantics and conceptual meanings in general, nothing per se has been written on semantics and conceptual meanings involving Ndebele language and grammar. At this stage, it is suffice to review articles related to definitions of semantics and conceptual meanings. Generally, semantics is perceived as the study of meanings in language and can be applied to single words or to the whole discourses. Betti and Igaab (2021: 2) in their article titled, ‘Semantics in Linguistics’ express that, “In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that studies meaning. Semantics can address meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, or larger units of discourse.” Apparent from this definition is that it is not limited to a particular aspect of the linguistic structure but applies across all categories that embrace words, phrases, sentences and discourses in any language, Ndebele linguistic semantics included. Further implied is that, it impacts on our reading perception as well as understanding of other people’s words in daily conversation. In concurrence, “Semantics play a large part in our daily communication, understanding, and language learning without us even realizing it (Betti and Mahdi, 2021: 51; and Palmer, 1997: 5-8). In this regard, this definition highlights that semantics occur as people naturally converse without knowing about the linguistic semantic processes. Also critical to observe in the study of linguistics is the issue of several meanings derived from single words. That is echoed by Betti, (2021: 8) stating that, “The same word can be said to two people and they can interpret them differently” (Betti2021: 8). Hence, the need for consideration of their context or contextual expressions in order to avoid misinterpretations which regularly occurs in Ndebele everyday conversations. Deduced from the cited definition of semantics in linguistics is that, it is understood as a critical concept interested in how meaning works in a language or how native speakers of a language subconsciously understand each other when they speak.

Emike and Williams (2024), wrote a paper on ‘Semantics on Theory and Practice’ which examines issues in semantics with a view to providing rich insights on the nature of “meaning” in language. In this context, “Both linguists and philosophers agree that meaning is central to semantics.” (Ogbulogu, 2005:18). Also noted in the abstract of the paper is that Semantics is a meaning-elucidating field of language study, which emphasises the clarifying aspect of the meaning in a language. In other words, if the meaning is not clarified, chances are high that it may results in misinterpretation and distortion of reality. Thus, “Semantics is a field of linguistics, which studies meaning in language” (Emike and Williams 2024: 1). The studying of meanings referred to in this citation implies that semantic skills of understanding a language are inevitable if distortion, misinterpretation and misinterpretation of meanings are to be avoided. From different schools of thought such as naturalists, conventionalists and contextualists in relation to meaning, the most appropriate one to this study is contextualists which argues that meaning of a word is derives from its usage, which reflects the importance of context and/or contextual meanings in the study of semantics.

Pertaining to understanding the concept ‘meaning’, Emike and Williams (2024: 3) assert that,

To understand the concept meaning, it is necessary to have proper understanding of the theories of meaning: Meaning Postulate Theory, Componential (Decompositional) Theory of Meaning, Relational Component Theory of Meaning, Generative Semantics Theory of Meaning, Speech Act Theory of Meaning (pragmatic theory), Truth Conditional Theory of Meaning and Contextual Theory of Meaning.

While all the cited theories are crucial in understanding the theories of meaning as they interpret it from multiple angles, the most relevant to this study is the Theory of Meaning and Contextual Theory of meaning. This theory mainly views context of language structure comprising words, phrases, sentences and discourses as critical and having influence in deriving appropriate meanings in daily conversations. Importance of context is further articulated by Emike and Williams (2024: 3) who submit that “In communicative situations, different meanings are contextualized appropriately, as a demonstration of communicative competence (the pragmatics of language use)” Implied in this quotation is that, for every context, words and phrases or sentences are used according to contextual nuances to deduce actual meanings. This contextual impact in obtaining meaning in linguistics, is echoed by Matthews (1993), who posits that the meaning of a linguistic form is derived from the situation in which it’s spoken and the reaction it elicits from the listener. In this context, the situations in the field of linguistics are essentially contents. The study therefore, concludes by reiterating that semantics addresses diverse issues of linguistic meaning which are also found within Ndebele language in Zimbabwe.

Another study on ‘Meanings and semantic roles of words in context’ related to the problem under investigation was conducted by Akanya and Omachou (2019). This study is centred on the semantic roles of words in a given context operating within extentionalist views as a background or theoretical framework. Emphasised from the beginning of their article, is that that meaning has a significant role to play in human communication which has made semantics a topical issue of debate. However, while every lexical word has a meaning, its social application has implication on our day to day communication. Thus, lexical items have no fixed meanings as their meanings vary depending on their application in different situations on daily conversations in life and specifically among Ndebele communities presently under study. Authors of this study also raise a crucial observation on the meanings regarding the structure of the language. According to Akanya and Omachou (2019: 8), “Sentence (structure) might be meaningless if words are not systematically ordered. For instance, ‘Grass eats goats’ structurally and prescriptively is correct because of the rule of grammar-subject and predicate is observed.” While in essence, the sentence structure is syntactically and systematically correct, semantically it is incorrect or meaningless because grass cannot eat goats. Instead, it is the grass that should be eaten by a goat rather than the goat being eaten by grass. Deduced from this example is that functions of words in linguistics are critical in denoting their meanings which are determined by the context in which they are used. Essential also is the background knowledge of the language spoken in a given community since it determines appropriate meanings to be derived in respective situations. Before initially recognising whether the sentence is structurally correct and semantically meaningful, one who has not been exposed to the language background of ‘goats’ and ‘grass’ will struggle to understand the meanings and semantic roles of these words in context. In summing up their study, Akanya and Umachou (2019: 9) state that, “It is therefore, necessary to conclude that roles are assigned to words in our daily interactions (official and unofficial), consequent upon the fact that linguistic items are multifunctional and often polysemous. In other words, words could consist of more than one meaning.” Notably, words can have multiple contextual meanings depending on their application in discourses. Hence, to prevent ambiguity and misinterpretation or misconstruing, it is essential to clearly define the semantic roles of words within their specific contexts.

Nasiba (2022), authored an article entitled ‘The theory of Semantic Field’ which is also related to the research study on ‘Semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe’ In introducing his study, Nasiba (2022: 1) articulates that, “Field theory allows language learners to fully understand the basic set of lexical compounds used in a particular field and to use the most important of them in the communication process.” Implicit in this theory is that it facilitates language learners in grasping essential collection of lexis associated with a given domain, thereby enabling them to employ them in the discourse process. Thus, the citation effectively relays the notion that the Theory of semantic field assists language learners acquire and utilise domain-specific terminology. In this regard,

language learners can only deduce and master a set of lexical compounds through a contextual perception which is critical in this study, focusing on semantics and contextual meanings with particular reference to Ndebele language in Zimbabwe. In other words, Ndebele domain-specific vocabulary may not only be misconstrued and misrepresented but also distorted if contextual interpretation is not considered when deducing appropriate meanings.

In highlighting the semantic field which is crucial in this theory, Nasiba (2022: 1), asserts that, “There are many words or lexical units in our language, among which we can recognise similarities. For example, gate, wall and wall have the same semantic field because three words define barriers” Though the exemplified terms are orthographically different, they belong to the same semantic field or group because all of them define barriers as stated in the citation. Exemplified further is “ the bulb and the candle, which belong to the same semantic field as both share light, while the bulb also shares the artificial or electricity, which is in the same semantic field as the fire.” Deduced from the cited examples is that lexical items can also belong to different semantic fields through sharing of different meanings as shown by the term bulb. An Ndebele example is ‘usiba’ for feather in English and ‘usiba’ for pen in English. In this context, the Ndebele example shows different semantic fields for the same word. Thus, it is difficult to derive its meaning if it is not used in a domain-specific discourse. The challenge of deriving its appropriate semantic fields and meanings ultimately, leads to misinterpretation and distortion of meanings, which prompted the carrying out of this research. In concluding this study on the Theory of the semantic field, Nasiba (2022: 3) reiterates that “The semantic theory is concerned with the study of lexical units, the identification of their linguistic features, and the creation of dictionaries and glossaries for a variety of purposes.” While this statement raises several concerns related to semantic theory, the study of lexical units and the identification of linguistics features hinges directly on semantics and contextual meanings in Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe which is the focus of research.

Mainly, this section focuses on the views of researchers who have explored issues related to semantics and contextual meanings in linguistics during their studies. The reviewed articles focus on semantics and contextual meanings, which is the critical issue of the research. Several themes emerged from the exploration of written articles, which include definition of semantics, conceptual and contextual meanings, semantic roles or functions, and concerns of semantic theory. Perceptions from the examined journal articles empowered and enlightened the researchers with insights into what has been researched on semantics and contextual meanings in the field of semantics in linguistics.

METHODOLOGY

This segment of the study explains the methodology employed. Research aspects discussed in this section include research design, research approach, population and sampling procedures, ethical considerations and data collection processes. The study adopted a qualitative research design which was based on semi- structured interviews and observation guides. These instruments were compatible with the research design and appropriate for gathering data from HODs, IsiNdebele teachers and community leaders who were key participants in the study. Therefore, data was sourced through the exploration of the impact of semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe.

Research Design

In any study, a research design is unavoidable as it provides instructions that are essential to executing a research. In describing qualitative research, Creswell (2009: 39) asserts that,

Qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words or text) from participants, describes and analyses these words for themes and conducts the enquiry in a subjective, biased manner.

The study adopted a qualitative approach that seeks views, insights and opinions from the respondents and gathers data comprising of words, phrases, sentences and discourses from the respondents pertaining to semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities.

Population and sampling procedures

Fraenkel and Wallen (1996, 92), define population as “a group of interest to the researcher, the group to whom the researcher would like to generalise the results of the study.” The group of interest to the researcher in this study consists of HODs, teachers and Ndebele community members who participated in the gathering of expected data on the semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities. In this study, three schools located in different regions were centers of data collection. They were purposively sampled because of their geographical location in three traditional Ndebele communities in Matabeleland South, Matabeleland North and Midlands regions of Zimbabwe. The chosen sample comprised forty participants who included five Ndebele teachers, three HODs and four community members from the three selected secondary schools and surrounding communities in three mentioned provinces. In this purposeful sampling, HODs and teachers could not have been left out because misinterpretation, misrepresentation and distortion of semantic meanings were detected in the teaching-learning processes. Community members were not spared as

participants as the impact of semantics and contextual meanings was also realised during their usual communication conversations or discourses. In other words, misinterpretations, misrepresentations and distortions are not only confined in the classrooms but also spill over into the communities as schools do not exist in isolations. Purposive sampling was, therefore, used as a sampling procedure because we had the intention of selecting appropriate and relevant data-rich cases for in-depth study (Bhebe, 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethics are a vital element of any research study. That is, “a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field, analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports.” (Creswell 2013:174). According to Bhebe (2022: 60) “Ethical issues are inevitable in research regardless of data collection instruments employed as these directly or indirectly feature in the process of data analysis.” Pertaining to ethics, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2013) posit that researchers should be directed by the following principles: informed consent, respect of privacy and confidentiality, non-maleficence (non-evil) to research participants and no deception of research participants. In this regard, the researchers ensured that the study was guided by ethical considerations as this is inevitable in a field-work related study. In seeking consent of the participants, we vividly explained that the participation was not forced but voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any time, especially if somehow physically or emotionally harmed. In this study, participants involved included Heads of Departments, IsiNdebele subject teachers, secondary and community members on issues about semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. Before conducting live semi-structured interviews and unnoticed community observations, emphasised was the critical issue of privacy and confidentiality throughout the course of the research. By explaining the purpose, the relevance and usefulness of the study undertaken, researchers convinced the participants on the importance of the study, hence, they willingly consented and participated in the research (Bhebe, 2022).

Interviews

This is a research technical instrument used in qualitative research to gather data regarding insights, opinions and factual responses. In presenting what constitutes an interview, Cohen & Manion, (1989) assert that, research interview is a survey technique that is based on a universal human activity: conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee to obtain relevant information to be used in research. In this regard, the use of this data collection tool enabled the researchers to have a direct verbal interaction with the participants. Concerning the merit of the interview technical tool, Saunders et al (2009: 44), emphasise that, “It allows the researcher to rephrase the questions in many ways he feels is possible to get the required information.” It was because of this advantage that we chose and used semi-structured interviews to solicit data from HODs, teachers and community members as participants in this study. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were employed because they were harmonious with the qualitative paradigm in that participants were accorded the opportunity to speak out on critical matters pertaining to semantics and contextual meanings in Ndebele language in traditional communities. Each face-to-face semi-structured interview lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes, thus allowing respondents adequate time to answer and seek clarification, and were completed in five days. Mainly, the interview questions focused on semantics and contextual meanings about linguistic categories that embraced words, phrases, sentences and discourses.

Observations

Observation is one of the primary and critical ways of collecting research data, which is employed in qualitative research (Bhebe, 2022). According to Mhinda (2016: 50), “Observations are highly favoured in research because they allow researchers to access authentic information through the observation of situations as they transpire.” In this context, researchers observed live community oral activities which included funeral ceremonies, traditional gatherings and church sermons while paying attention to issues related to semantics and its contextual meanings. Observations unfolded as determined by emerging situations in the community. Church visits and traditional ceremonies were planned and prepared for, whereas funerals emerged unexpectedly. During observations the researchers acted as non-participant observers, following the proceedings while quietly capturing and recording issues related to do semantics and contextual meanings. Special attention was mainly paid to semantics and contextual meanings to do with linguistic categories involving words, phrases and sentences or discourses.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Before delving into issues of data presentation and analysis, it should be noted that the aim of the study was to explore semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. The focus was on traditional communities because that is where spoken language is dominant than in urban or peri-urban areas. Through careful examination and comparison of data, themes that included words, phrases and sentences or discourses developed during the process of the study. Major issues that the study sought to interrogate in the section involved:

- semantic categories in linguistics
- semantic roles and relationships
- impact of context in semantic interpretation

Insights from in-depth interviews and participant observations

Participants who were involved in the interview processes were sampled teachers, HODs and community members who were church pastors, community leaders and councilors in traditional Ndebele communities. The selection of pastors, councilors and community leaders considered that they were not only literate but educated as all of them had done Ordinary Level (O' level), an indication that they were capable of understanding the interview process which transpired in their home Ndebele language. In response to the issue of semantic categories in language, all of the respondents easily identified confusing words category while none-teachers had challenges in articulating phrases and sentence categories until they were guided towards the expected responses. This was however, anticipated as they were not trained to teach and also not dealing with such issues on regular basis like teachers.

List of given lexical terms in the words category with multiple meanings

Table 1 Ndebele Polysemous Words

Words	Ndebele meanings	English version
Inkomo	Inyamazana efuyiweyo	-Domesticated cattle raised for meat
	Umkhuhlane wamaqhubu	-A disease characterised by pimple-like symptoms
Ulimi	-Isitho sokunambitha ukudla	-An organ in the mouth for tasting food
	-Inkulumo yabantu	-Dialect of the natives
	-Inyama yenyamazana edliwayo	-Animal meat eaten as food
Ibele	-Isilimo sentanga esidliwayo	-A grain crop used as food
	-Isitho sesifazana esiphuma uchago	-An organ in females that produces milk
Inyanga	-Inkanyezi esesibhakabhakeni	-A star in the sky that reflects light at night
	-Umelaphi osebenzisa imithi yesiNtu	-A healer who uses traditional medicines
	-Isigaba samalanga omnyaka	-A period of days in a year
Ikhabe	-Isithelo sesilimo esibomvu gebhu esimnandi	-A grown fruit with a green rind with a red or pink flesh
	-Umuntu osebenzisa izandla zombili ngokulinganayo	-A person who uses both hands equally
	-Kukhahlele khathshana	-Kick it away
Imizi	-Utshani obude bokweluka amacansi	-Tall grass for sawing traditional mates
	-Indawo ezihlala abantu	-Places where people live
Isimbo	-Isikhali sokugebhisa phansi	-A tool used for digging the ground
	-Inhlawulo ephiwa inyanga ingakaqalisi ukwelapha	-Payment made to the traditional healer before treatment
Umbala	-Isitho somzimba esiphakathi kwedolo lonyawo	-Part of the body in between the knee and foot
	-Umhlobo wokukhangeleka kolutho	-Colour of identifying something
Impukane	-Isibungu esingcolileyo esithelela imikhuhlane.	-An insect associated with filthiness and spread of diseases
	-Inyama yenyamazana esala idikiza kasanda kuqedwa ukhlinzwa	-Meat that remains shivering like soon after skinning

The above lexical category reflects that all of them are polysemous, as they possess multiple of meanings, which, however, are difficult to deduce when considered in isolation. In other words, when such lexical items are not situated within a context of phrases, sentence or discourse, they may be misinterpreted and distorted due to their inherent ambiguity and the conflation of unrelated multiple meanings. Apparent from the highlighted words is that they possess two or three different meanings, which confirm that their meanings cannot be determined out of context, as they may be misconstrued and misrepresented. What further makes multiple meanings of such words difficult to discern is that some of the definitions are influenced by intonation or pronunciation used. In this regard, processes of intonation and pronunciation can impact word meanings as occurring in Ndebele language. For instance, lexical terms in the table such as 'imizi' (homes/ reeds), 'ibele' (female's breast/grain cereal) and 'ikhabe' (watermelon/ambidextrous/kick it), have some of the meanings influenced by the tone used in uttering which does not require context.

-In the first case of "imizi", the word refers to 'homes' in English when the pitch of the tone is normal or moderate and to reeds if the pitch of the initial vowel is raised higher.

-In the second case of "ikhabe", the word refers to 'watermelon and ambidextrous' when the pitch of the tone is natural or normal and to 'kick it' if the pitch of the initial vowel is raised confirming the action to be taken.

-In the third case of "ibele", the word refers to 'grain cereal' when the pitch of the tone is moderate or level and to 'female breast' when the pitch of the initial vowel is lowered with a deep voice.

Notably, presented examples reveal that the pitch of the tone varies and depends on the articulation of the words, which distinguishes their meanings despite the fact that they are not uttered within contexts of phrases, sentences or discourses. Therefore, failure to recognise the impact of intonation and pronunciation in Ndebele conversations and discussions may lead to misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and distortion of meanings, something that should be carefully avoided in academic fields and communication processes.

Different lexical terms in the words category with common meanings

Table 2 Ndebele Synonymous words

Words	Ndebele meanings	English version
Isicebi Isinothi	ngumuntu olemali lempahla enengi kakhulu	Is a wealthy person in possession of plenty money and assets
Umyanga Ompofu	ngumuntu oswelayo kakhulu	Is a destitute and extremely poor person
Isithutha Isiwula	ngumuntu ongakhaliphanga njalo ongananzeleliyo impumela yoloutho	Is someone who makes unwise decision and may not consider consequences
Isifebe Iwule	Ngumuntu ohlangana lowesilisa loba lowesifana emacasini ehlawulelwa lesenzo njalo akulani lobulili	Is somebody who engages in sexual activities in exchange for payment and the term refers to any gender
Unganu Umcephe	yisitsha sokudlela ukudla	Is a small flat dish used for serving food.
Umgqomo Inkonxa	ligabha lokufakela amanzi	Is a container for storing water.
Amaphahla Amawele	ngabantwana abazalwa kanyekanye ekuzithwaleni kwaleso sisu	These are two offspring born at the same birth, resulting from a single pregnancy
Amayezi Amafu	yinkungu yamanzi esesibhakabhakeni loba emoyeni phezulu	These are clouds in the sky or in the air above.
Imbumbu Igolo	yisitho sesifazana e siligodi esixhumanisa isibeletso lezitho zensitha ezingaphandle	Is the female muscular canal that connects the outside body to the uterus
Ixhegu Ikhehla	ngumuntu omdala oyindoda oseluphele	Is an aged male parent

The table above reflects common synonymous terms categorised by words provided by participants in the course of semi-structured interviews. Although paired synonyms are morphologically distinct, their semantic significance lies in their shared meanings, which is fundamental in the sphere of semantics. Hence, linguistically speaking, synonyms are words or expressions that can often be used interchangeably without altering the overall meaning of a sentence or context. According to teachers and community members, synonyms play significant roles in enhancing expression, offering more precise meanings and facilitating more effective communication in classroom learning and community gatherings. It emerged from the participants that the challenge encountered in the teaching processes is that learners tend to use only those words which they are familiar with, while teachers mark down those that are unusual in daily conversations. From the synonymous pairs highlighted on the table, the following four words were singled out as unusual to learners and young teachers:

- 'Isicebi' > someone who is filthy rich
- 'Ompofu' > someone who is miserably poor
- 'Umcephe' > a small flat dish used for serving food.
- 'Amawele' > two offspring born at the same birth, resulting from a single pregnancy

Unfortunately, the examination of synonymous words requires candidates to know both as knowing only one, results in the loss of marks, which is justified given the nature of the questions. However, the fact that these terms are unfamiliar to learners and young teachers cannot be ignored, since Ndebele traditional communities are increasingly affected by modernisation, technology and Christianity, which greatly compromises African cultures, according to HODs and most teachers. In concurrence, community members noted that even some elderly people may not remember 'umcephe' (wooden plate), as the word has fallen out of common use, given the prevalence of metal and plastic plates over wooden ones. Given the challenges posed by synonymous questioning, teachers are required to have a deep understanding of Ndebele culture to adequately prepare learners for language examinations.

Lexical terms in the words category with the same spelling and pronunciations but having different contextual meanings

Table 3 Ndebele homonym words

Words	Ndebele meanings	English version
Inyanga/ Moon Inyanga/ month	Umuntu osebenzisa izihlahla ukwelapha Isikhathi sesigaba somnyaka	A person who uses herbs to cure Time of the year calendar
Ikhabe/ Waterlemon Ikhabe/ Person	Isilimo esibomvu phakathi esimnandi Umuntu osebenzisa izandla zonke ngokufanayo	A red plant inside which taste sweet A person who uses both hands equally
Imvu/ Person Imvu/ Sheep	Ngumuntu olunge kakhulu Yinyamazana elungileyo eyisifuyo	A person who is very obedient A domesticated animal that is good
Isimbo/ Sharp edged Iron rod	Umgqala ocijileyo wensimbi yokugebhisa	A sharp edged iron road for digging

Isimbo/ money	Imali ephiwa inyanga ukuze umuntu elatshwe	Money paid to the traditional healer for the patient to be treated
Inkomo/ Cattle Inkomo/ disease	Inyamazana eyisifuyo njalo elenyama edliwayo Umkhuhlane wamaqhubu emzimbeni	A domesticated animal eaten as beef A disease characterised by rash all over the body
Ingulube/ Pig Ingulube/ Star	Inyamazana eyisifuyo elenyama edliwayo kodwa engentshisiyo Inkanyezi eluhlaza esibhakabhakeni ebusuku	.A domesticated animal eaten as pork but that does not chew the cud A green shining star in the sky in the evening.
Umuzi/ Home Umuzi/ Birth black body spot	Ikhaya elihlala abantu Ichatha elimnyama lokuzalwa elisemzimbeni	A dwelling place of people A birth black spot on the body
Impukane/ Fly Inyama/meat	Isibungwana esiphaphayo esithelela umkhuhlane ngengekeza yaso Inyama yesifuyo esala idikiza ngemva kokubulawa	A small flying insect that spreads diseases because of its dirty Animal part that remains shivering after its slaughter.
Ifusi/ Someone born after twins Ifusi/no longer tilled land	Ngolandelana lamaphahla ekuzalweni Insimu engasalinywayo	Someone whose birth comes after twins Once tilled land that is lying idle
Umbala/ leg Umbala/ Colour	Isitho somzimba esixhumane lomleze womuntu Isimo sokubonakala kolutho emehlweni	Part of the body that is connected to the thigh Form of visibility of something in the eyes

Highlighted above are lexical terms that mainly came from the respondents during interviews. Although the majority of respondents easily identified homonyms captured on the table, non-teachers struggled in giving the second or third meanings from the same words. In other words, meanings of homonyms are not on the surface despite that their spellings and pronunciations are the same. Teachers and HODs in their responses went beyond to elucidate different meanings in homonyms if they are contextually expressed, an indication that context is indispensable in deriving meanings from words spelt and pronounced the same.

Observed along the words' vertical column is that most of the homonyms have English equivalents, except for *isimbo* (sharp edged iron rod), *ifusi* (no longer tilled land), *ifusi* (Someone born after twins) and *umuzi* (birth black body spot). Thus, these words are expressed in phrases in English to denote sense, which reveals that they do not have their equivalents. Notably, from homonyms *ifusi* (land that is no longer tilled) and *ifusi* (someone born after the twins) is that besides not having their equivalents, what they are referring to is non-existent in English culture as the language is a vehicle of its own culture. Deduced therefore, from homonyms on the table is that when viewed individually, they are vague and ambiguous in their meanings. That is, their meanings are only known if used in given contexts as highlighted in the middle and last columns of the table. In this regard, the impact of context in expressing meanings in the field of semantics cannot be overstated.

The next language structural level centered on different lexical terms in the words category, denoting sets of objects with the same meanings

- Imibala (colours): 'mhlophe', (white) 'bomvu,'(red), 'mnyama', (black), 'hlaza' (blue)
- Izinyamazana(animals): 'indlovu',(elephant), 'isilwane',(lion), 'idube'(zebra), 'ingwe' (leopard)
- Inyoni (birds): 'ijuba'(dove), 'intshe' (ostrich), 'isikhova' (owl), 'ukhozi' (eagle).
- Abantu (people): 'ubaba' (father), 'umalume', (uncle), 'ubabakazi' (aunt), 'umfana' (boy).

It emerged in the course of the conducted interviews that there are sets of different items constituting the same meanings. Shown above are four categories of highlighted sets of objects with the same meanings in each category, given as common by the participants. However, HODs and teachers also disclosed that, knowing specific items or objects in each set is more critical than just identifying the name of the category. In other words, the embracive set name is rather wide and may not be appropriate for specific responses. For instance, learners may know the set of animals (*izinyamazana*) that include a bat (*ululwane*), but confuse it as a bird because it has wings to fly. In pursuance of the meanings differentiating objects in the same category, two teachers vividly argued that referring a dove as a bird while among other birds is misleading in terms of meaning. The term bird (*inyoni*) maybe acceptable if it is alone and not known by its name, which is incorrect if the question expected a specific name of a bird like an eagle (*ukhozi*). For instance, the questions maybe expressed as:

- Yiphi inyoni oyaziyo edla amatshiyane enkukhu? > lukhozi
Which bird you know, that eats hen's chicks? > An eagle
Yiwuphi umbala ohambelana lenkomo yamadlozi? > ngomnyama
Which colour is associated with ancestral spirits beasts? > black

These pair of sentences illustrate that the umbrella terms like birds (*izinyoni*) and animals (*izinyamazana*) are not always accurate in providing meanings of words in contextual situations. In this case, the context of the question should determine whether the answer should be related to a specific response or general set name as exemplified by pair of sentences. For one to have not specifically answered it is an eagle (*lukhozi*) and black (*ngomnyama*) respectively, would

be incorrect since 'izinyoni' (birds) and 'izinyamana' (animals) are too broad because they accommodate several things or objects with the same features. Therefore, in this context, it is critical to understand that although items in a given set may have the same meanings, but when perceived individually and used in different situations, their meanings vary contextually.

The grammatical unit of phrases, another key aspect of language structure in relation to meanings, was also addressed during the interviews. According to Nasiba (2022), Phrases are a combination of words connected to meanings, which is the main function of semantics. Correspondingly, Betti and Igaab (2021: 8) posit that, "Lexical semantics deconstruct words and phrases within a line of text to understand the meaning in terms of context". In light of this context, the study examined words, phrases and sentences in relation to semantics as separate components of Ndebele language structure. Given the focus on phrases, it is essential to highlight their various functions which include conveying meaning, forming idiomatic expressions, serving as building blocks and facilitating contextualisation, among others. Below are examples of Ndebele phrases obtained during the interviews illustrating their intended meanings.

Table 4 Ndebele Phrases

Phrases	Ndebele meanings	English Version
Zimbila zantabanye	Ngabahlala bendawonye	Those who are ever together
Ukulala ngesibomvu	Ngolele esuthi	Sleeping on a full stomach
Ukudla lamanqe	Ngoshlala egangeni	Who now stays in the bush
Ukhomba ngophakathi	Ngongasweli lutho	Who is rich in resources
Yingwe lenja	Ngaba zondanayo	Those who are enemies
Ukuzitshaya isifuba	Ngozikhukhumezayo	Who touts their own praises
Ukubeletha izithende	Yikubalekela ukuzisiza	Running for dear life
Umnyama ongela mpisi	Yikwesaba into engekho	Fear of the unknown
Ukusenga lezimithiyo	Ngamanga engezelelweyo	Exaggerated lies
Ukumbambisa ilitshhe	Yikungagcwalisi isithembiso	Failing to keep one's word

From the phrases captured in table above, it is apparent that they are primarily characterised by two or three lexical items, which serve as building blocks that can be developed into sentences and extended language discourse. While conveying of meanings is central to the use of different phrases and their functions, the analysis focused on idiomatic expressions and contextualisation. The reason is that the phrase meanings are not literal but rather figurative, and can only be understood when used in context. The challenge persists, particularly for those without a deep understanding of Ndebele cultural background. For instance, *the phrase ukhomba ngophakathi* (having plenty resources) is incorrect because the statement does not express a specific recurring action of pointing with a middle finger. But, as an idiom, its meaning becomes vivid when contextualised. Contextually, the phrase gains meaning when used within a sentence like: *UMhlomuli kasweli lutho, ukhomba ngophakathi* (Mhlomuli lacks nothing, as he has everything he needs). In this sentence, the preceding subject phrase provides context and meaning to the Ndebele phrase *ukhomba ngophakathi*. Hence, the meaning extends beyond literal interpretation, relying on semantic contextualisation for thorough understanding.

Another example of an Ndebele phrase with culturally based meaning is *ukusenga lezimithiyo* (exaggerated lies). Literally, the phrase means 'milking of pregnant cows', implying that what is being said is not only unbelievable but impossible. In essence, its full meaning, is anchored in Ndebele culture which values cattle as a form of wealth. While the milking cows is a cultural reality in Ndebele communities, concern lies in the extent of blatant exaggeration, likened to milking pregnant cows, something unheard of in real life. The cultural context of this phrase lends meaning to its coinage and usage, demonstrating the impact of contextualisation in semantics. Thus, HODs stressed that Ndebele phrases require thorough instruction, since they are assessed in national examinations. Interviewed parents valued the instruction of idioms, asserting that they are crucial because they are embedded in Ndebele culture and should be recognised and transmitted through education. Based on their meanings in the table above, it is clear that the language used to coin these phrases differs from their literal meanings, implying that their authentic importance can only be understood contextually.

The final phase of the interview instrument centred on sentences which is also a crucial grammatical unit in the language structure. Important to note about sentences in the language is that they contain words and phrases which are critical constituents in any language. In highlighting the significance of sentences in education, Lyons (1969) in Akanya and Amachonu (2019: 5) argues that, "for one to comprehend the meaning of a sentence and its semantic relations to other expression, one is obliged to know the meaning of lexical items as well as 'know' how they (words) interrelate." Implied is that the meanings of the lexical items in sentences have a bearing on their relationship in the formulation of a complete sentence. On the relationship of words in sentences, Yule (1996), articulates that, they should not be seen as 'containers' of meaning, but should consider the roles they play within describable context in a sentence. It can be deduced from the citation that sentences are characterised by words performing different syntactical functions, a crucial phenomenon in the study of semantical linguistics.

In defining what entails a sentence, the respondents viewed it as a complete statement of a combination of words. While this perception was acceptable, the aspect of roles was notably silent in their responses, yet the completeness stems from the roles of words used. When probed further about the structure of the sentence, teachers explained that words are

classified into constituents namely noun phrases and verb phrases associated with their distinct grammatical functions. Below is an example of a sentence broken down into two major syntactic constituencies:

Ugogo omude upheka amazambane.	> Ibizo mtshwana > Ugogo omude
A tall grandmother is cooking groundnuts	> Noun Phrase > A tall grandmother
	> Isenzo mtshwana > upheka amazambane
	> Verb Phrase > is cooking groundnuts
Ugogo omude	> Ibizo > ugogo
	> Isiphawulo > omude
A tall grandmother	> Noun > grandmother
	> Descriptive adjective > A tall
Upheka amazambane	> Isenzo > upheka
	> Umenziwa > amazambane (ibizo)
	> Verb > is cooking
	> Object > groundnuts (noun)

The above example reflects a sentence grammatical unit comprising words and phrases. Notably, in words, phrases and sentence, meaning is a key issue penetrating across Ndebele structural grammatical units. However, the interpretation of these structures differs if they are considered separately. For example, *ugogo* (grandmother) means an old mother while *ugogo omude* (a tall grandmother) refers to a tall one which is different from the meaning of grandmother as an independent word. The statement *Ugogo omude...* is partially incomplete in terms of meaning as a noun phrase. Its completeness is the result of the additional component of a verb phrase *...upheka amazambane* (...is cooking groundnuts). Thus, its completeness is the combination of a noun phrase (subject) and verb phrase (predicate) characterised by different words as illustrated in the presented and analysed sentence; *Ugogo omude upheka amazambane* (A tall grandmother is cooking groundnuts).

Further revealed from the study is that words and phrases are misrepresented, misinterpreted and ultimately distorted if used in isolation or out of contexts. In this respect, language constitutes words and phrases put together in a context to enhance communication through sentences among those in the same linguistic environment. On the other hand, sentences might be meaningless if words and phrases are not systematically arranged, despite the correct observation of noun phrase- verb phrase rule. While the sentence: *Amazambane upheka omude ugogo* (Groundnuts are cooking a tall grandmother), is structurally correct according to rules of grammar, in essence, it is meaningless because it is impossible for groundnuts to cook a tall grandmother. Instead, it is the tall grandmother to cook groundnuts and not the other way round. "In order to avoid ambiguity, misrepresentation or being misconstrued the semantic roles in contexts must be explicitly explicated." (Akanya and Omachonu 2019: 15). Therefore, in linguistics, understanding the semantic roles of words is crucial for deducing contextual meaning of phrases and sentences.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown the significance of semantics and its contextual meanings in words, phrases and sentences in the sphere of linguistics. The focus of the study was on linguistic structural categories and the examination of changes in the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences due to their use, immediate contexts and inflection. While all lexical words have independent meanings, their social application varies their meanings and makes them understood from a contextual perspective. Polysemous, synonymous and homonymous words in Ndebele were presented as word categories that may be misrepresented, misconstrued, and misinterpreted in both written and verbal forms if not used contextually, either in phrases or sentences. Concerning phrases, which were considered as another grammatical structural unit in the Ndebele language, the study through interviews and observations confirmed their meanings are not literal but rather figurative as they can be understood better when applied in context. Since lexical items and phrases are inadequate if perceived out of context, the sentence is considered the final structural level that encompasses both. Besides containing critical words and phrases, understanding their significance in terms of meaning is essential for grasping the overall meaning of sentences. The study validated that even in the Ndebele language, lexical items, phrases, and sentences do not have fixed meanings, which is a crucial linguistic issue revealed through conducted interviews and observations. In conclusion, these linguistic structures are, therefore, multifunctional since their meanings depend on the particular context, as authenticated in the study of Semantics and contextual meanings in traditional Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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