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Hausa Substantives: A Natural Semantic Meta-language Approach

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Abstract

This study presents an inventory of Hausa semantic primes. It analyses one category of the primes, namely substantives. The study was inspired by a large number of researches, such as (Ameka, 1994; Goddard, 2008; Peeters, 1994), investigating the existence of semantic primitives and their grammar in typologically unrelated languages. However, little has been done on African languages, with the exception of Ewe language. The primes were arrived at by asking three Hausa native speakers the equivalence of the English primes given by Goddard (2002a). The proposed Hausa exponents offered by the respondents were harmonized and subjected to rigorous analysis through the Natural Semantic Meta-language (NSM) framework. Reasons for considering an exponent as a prime over a seemingly possible candidate were given. It was found out that Hausa primes correspond in many ways to those of English, however, the former has fewer than the letter, 53 and 62 respectively, because some Hausa exponents are polysemous. As for the substantives, although they differ strikingly in their combinatorial behaviour from those of English, the basic argument of NSM is justified.

1.0 Introduction

This study, having been influenced and informed by Goddard (2002a) proposes an inventory of semantic primes of the Hausa language, and analyses one category of the primes —namely substantives. The study is inspired by an extensive body of researches investigating the existence of universal semantic primes and their combinatorial behaviour in as diverse languages as English, French, Kalam, Japanese, Russian, Malay, Chinese etc (Goddard, 2002b). Semantic primitives are postulated to exist in all human languages. The study is significant in that it adds to the existing body of knowledge in the field of linguistic semantics. Three native speakers of Hausa were asked the equivalence for English primes outlined by Goddard (2002a). The identified Hausa primes were analyzed to arrive at their morpho-syntactic behaviour. Rationale for selecting an exponent as a prime over a seemingly possible candidate is justified.

2.0 The Hausa Language

Hausa, being the most spoken indigenous language in West and Central Africa, belongs to West Chadic branch of Afro-Asiatic language family. It is spoken as a first language in Niger and Nigeria, by about half of the population of the former, and by about one-fifth of the population of the latter (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014). The language is tonal and has a predominant SVO word order. It has a grammatical gender, with nouns and pronouns indicating number and gender (marked only in the singular nouns and 2nd& 3rd persons). The forms of plural pronouns differ from their singular counterparts (*ni-mu, kai/ke –ku, shi/ita -su*). Tenses are not indicated on verb stems, but depend on personal pronouns. New words are created through derivation. For example, the root form *'haif',* to give birth, can, through the prefix '*ma-',* vocalic ending and tonal patterns, be derived to *ma-haif-ii*, father; *ma-haif-iyaa*, mother; *ma-haif-aa*, parents; and *ma-haif-aa* birthplace, the last two examples differ only in the tone. Verb roots are modified through derivation resulting into classes termed verbal grades. Thus, the verb *'yank'* 'to cut' can become *'yankaa'* to cut up (grade 1), *'yankaa'* to cut a piece off (grade 2), *'yankee'* to cut all of (grade 3), '*yankoo'* to cut and bring hither (grade 5) and '*yankuu'* to be well cut up (grade 6). Such verbal grades may be further modified according to the syntactic slots in which they occur. For instance, depending on the type of object that follows it, the verbal grade 2, 'yankaa', to cut a piece off, takes four different forms (A, B, C & D) thus: Form A is used where there will be no object as in *naayankaa* I have cut; form B 'yankee' occurs when the object is pronominal: *na yankeeshi* I have cut him off; form C 'yanki' is used when the object is a noun*: na yanki naaman* I have cut the piece of meat off, form D 'yankaa' occurs where there is an indirect object *na yankaa masa naman*, I have cut off the piece of meat for him. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014; Migeod, 1914). There is a large number of

empirical cross-linguistic studies investigating the existence of the primes in as diverse languages as English, French, Japanese, Russia, Malay and Chinese. Little has, however, been done on semantic primes on African Languages. The only study, known to the researchers, on an African Language, is that of Ameka (1994) on Ewe language. Chamo (2011) analyzed a Hausa cultural term, *kunya* through English semantic primes but did not examine Hausa semantic primes. Therefore, this study proposes Hausa semantic primes, and analyses one class among them —namely substantives, indicating their language-specific morpho-syntactic nature. The primes were first arrived at by asking three native speakers of the language the equivalence for English primes outlined by Goddard (2002a). Reasons for selecting an exponent as a prime over a seemingly possible candidate are given.

3.0 Natural Semantic Metalanguage Theory

Natural Semantic Meta-language (henceforth NSM) theory is based upon a premise that there is a set of simple, indefinable meanings (universal semantic primes) which have concrete linguistic exponents in all human languages (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard, 1998; Goddard, 2008; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002b; Peeters, 1994). Semantic primes are universal core meanings which are irreducible in themselves but which can be used in describing semantically complex words in any language. Therefore, any natural language is internally adequate — as it has the resources for its own meta-language, exponents which form the bases of translation across languages. In other words, any language has a group of indefinable, simpler exponents that can be used in explaining culturally-loaded or semantically complex expressions. Examples of semantic primes of English include SAY, GO, DIE, LIFE, I, SOMETHING, DO, THINK etc. Such words cannot be defined in a non-circular fashion, their meanings can explicate numerous other words and grammatical constructions. The number of the primes in English is 63. In this theory, semantic analysis should be based on reductive paraphrase i.e. the meaning of any semantically complex word can be explicated through ‘‘paraphrase composed of simpler more intelligible words than the original’’ (Wierzbicka, 1972, cited in Goddard, 2002a). Put differently, linguistic analysis should be done through simple indefinable words whose meanings are hypothesized to exist in all languages. The advantage of this method is that linguistic description would be intelligible and testable across languages and would as well be free from circularity, obscurity and ethnocentrism, three shortcomings that tangle up most other semantic theories.

In NSM framework, the universality hypothesis does not stop at the lexicon, but extends to grammar in that since semantic primes are believed to be universal, they must have inherent combinatorial properties (grammar) i.e. principles that underpin how such

lexical elements can be put together to form meta-language sentences that are expressible in all human languages. Thus, the primes and their grammar make up 'a kind of mini-language' that is capable of expressing any idea, like a natural language—hence the term ''natural semantic metalanguage''. For instance, the prime SAY is postulated to allow, universally, ''valency options of 'addressee' and 'lucutionary topic' so that one can express, in any language, meanings equivalent to X said something to Y and X said something about Y, however the formal markings of the valency options might vary from language to language'' (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002a). An important methodological tool employed in indentifying and analyzing the primes is canonical sentences composed of semantic primes hypothesized to be expressible in any human language. For instance, by putting together the primes: SOMEONE, SOMETHING, SAY, THING and BAD, one could express, in any human language, the equivalence of SOMEONE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT YOU. Other examples of canonical sentences include:

Something bad happened.
I don't want you to do this.
She said something to me, but I did not hear it.
Something happened in this place.
There are many kinds of birds (fish, nut etc.).
These people lived for a long time.
This thing has two parts.
If I do this, people can think bad things about me. (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002b).

The analytical approach that makes NSM theory stands out from other semantic theories is reductive paraphrase, which has the analytical power of 'defining the indefinables' i.e. semantic nuances that were once thought to be difficult or impossible to be adequately described can be explicated through reductive paraphrase. Chomsky (1987:21) remarked that it is difficult to precisely define the English visual words: *watch, glare, gaze, scrutinize*, etc. However, through reductive paraphrase, such words, indeed even the more complex cultural ones, can be explicated. Here is an explication of the verb *watch* given by Goddard (1998):

> X was watching Y= for some time X was doing something because X thought when something happens in this place I want to see it because X was doing this, X could see Y during this time (Goddard, 1998).

Another group of words that elude precise definition is the field of emotion terms, such as *love, hate, happy, envy* etc. However, NSM literature has a large body of research describing emotion terminology. Here is an example with the word *envy*:

> X felt envious=
> X felt something bad because X thought like this about someone else: something good happened to this person it didn't happen to me this is bad I want things like this to happen to me (Wierzbicka, 1999, cited in Goddard, 2002a)

The explications given above underpin the basic nuances of the words analyzed. One of the methodological problems that make the identification of semantic primes less straightforward is polysemy and alleloxy. Exponents of semantic primes in a variety of languages have been reported to be polysemous. The prime KNOW in English, for instance, has the sense of 'knowing that' (*I know that this is not true*) and the sense of familiarity (*I know this man*). Also, the English substantive YOU is polysemous as it may be singular or plural. In analysing polysemous primes, one should demonstrate clearly which among the various senses of the word is considered primitive, and how actually the senses can be differentiated syntactically in sentences. For instance, the two senses of *know* can be demonstrated through its syntactic behaviour in that its primitive sense requires a *that*- complement, while the other sense does not. Moreover, the polysemous nature of the substantive *you* can be proven based on the existence of the pronouns *yourself* and *yourselves* (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994). A more complex kind of polesemy is found in some languages, where a single exponent refers to two distinct primitives, for example in Yankunytjatjara, *Kutjupa* means both SOMEONE and OTHER (Goddard, 1994); also in Mangap-Mbula, the exponent *so*means both SAY and WANT (Bugenhagen, 1994). In both languages, the different senses of the exponents can be determined straightforwardly through their syntactic properties.

Alleloxy refers to exponents that are semantically identical in any paraphrasable way, being therefore variant forms of the same primitive meaning. They may differ positionally as in English *I* and *me*, the former occurring preverbally, while the latter otherwise (Goddard, 2002a). Alleloxy may be due to the gender class of a language as in Latin which has three deitic forms *hic* masculine, *haec* (fem) and *hoc* (neutre) that correspond to English THIS. These three forms of Latin are, thus, variant realizations of the same prime, but differ only in terms of gender. In Japanese also the exponenets*kono* and *kore* correspond still to the prime THIS, the former occurs as a nominal modifier while the latter functions independently (Goddard &Wierzbicka, 1994). The point that

underscores the NSM framework is that every language is internally adequate as it has simple irreducible words that can explicate its more complex expressions. Just as English has its own semantic primes with their specific combinatorial tendencies, each language has its own primes with their specific syntax representing the 'core grammar' of the language in question— hence the extensive cross-linguistic studies on semantic primes and their grammar. Although meanings of primes are believed to be universal, there would be obvious similarities and differences in the forms of the primes and the way they are combined across languages. In what follows, therefore, this study presents an inventory of Hausa semantic primes, and an analysis of one category of the primes, namely, the substantives.

1. **Proposed Exponents of Semantic Primes in Hausa**

   Key to abbreviations:
   1SG = 1st person singular
   2SG= 2nd person singular
   3SG= 3rd person singular
   Mas= masculine
   Fem= feminine
   Voc= Vocative
   Aux= auxiliary
   Prep= preposition
   FUT= Future

SUBSTANTIVES: *ni I, kai/ke YOU, wani/wata SOMEONE*, mutum PEOPLE/PERSON, *waniabu/abu* SOMETHING/THING, *jiki* BODY
MENTAL PREDICATES: *tunani* THINK, *sani* KNOW, *so* WANT, ji FEEL/HEAR, *gani* SEE.
SPEECH: *faɗa* SAY, *kalma* WORD, *gaskiya* TRUE
ACTIONS, EVENTS & MOVEMENTS: *yi* DO, *faruwa* HAPPEN, *motsa* MOVE.
EXISTENCE/ POSSESSION: *akwai* THERE IS *nada* HAVE
LIFE: *rayu* LIVE, *mutu* DIE
DETERMINER: *wannan/wannar* THIS, *iridaya* THE SAME, *wani/wata* OTHER
QUANTIFIERS: *ɗaya* ONE, *biyu* TWO, *wasu* SOME, *duka* ALL, *da yawa* MANY/MUCH,
EVALUATORS: *maikyau* GOOD, *muni* BAD
DESCRIPTORS: *babba* BIG, *ƙarami* SMALL.
TIME: *yaushe* WHEN, *lokaci* TIME, *yanzu*, NOW, *kafin* BEFORE, *bayan* AFTER, *da jimawa* A LONG TIME, *Ƙaramin lokaci A SHORT TIME*, *zuwa wani lokaci FOR SOME TIME*.

SPACE: ina WHERE, *wuri* PLACE, *nan* HERE, *sama* ABOVE, *ƙasa* BELOW, *nesa* FAR, *kusa* NEAR, *gefe SIDE*, *ciki INSIDE*.
LOGICAL CONCEPTS: *domin* BECAUSE, *idan IF*, *ba NOT*, *watakila MAYBE*, *iya CAN*
INTENSIFIER, AUGMENTOR: *sosai VERY*, *ƙari MORE*
TAXONOMY, PARTONOMY: iri KIND OF, *bangare* PART OF
SIMILARITY: *kamar* LIKE

2. SUBSTANTIVES (I, YOU, SOMEONE, PERSON/PEOPLE, SOMETHING, THING, BODY)

(A) *ni* I, and *kai/ke* YOU

The primes I and YOU correspond to a group of grammatically intricate set of Hausa pronominal forms: *ni* with its allolexies *na, -n*, and *kai*/*ke* with their variant forms *ka*/*ki* respectively, all of which can be used in metalangauge sentences such as:

1. Ni na yi wani abu,

1 1SG 1SG-PAST do something
I did something

2. Na yi wani abu
1SG-PAST do something
I did something

Ni readily translates as I but the existence of *na alongside* it as in (1), and its subjective function in (2) seem to blur the primitive sense of I in Hausa. However, a cursory glimpse at the examples reveals that *na* in (1) complements *ni* by indicating the tense of the verb; *ni* does not indicate tense and cannot therefore function independently as subject, it obligatorily requires a complementing pronoun (Migeod, 1914) except in verbless sentences (e.g. *ni dalibi ne*). In contrast, *na*, can be an independent subject and can indicate the past tense as in (2). *Ni* is inherent in the deep structure of sentences where *na* functions as subject. What proves its elliptical status is the answer to the question: *who did the action mentioned?,* which is readily *ni* and not *na*. In other words *ni* is elliptical where *na* functions as subject.

3. Ni zan fadi waniabu
1SG FUT-1SG say something
I will say something

4. Zan fadi waniabu
FUT-1SG say something
I will say something

What was said of the relation between *ni* and *na* above applies to both (3) & (4) (ni & zan), only that in these last two examples the future tense marker *za-* to which the shortened pronoun *–n* (originally *na*) is attached is explicit. In the sentences analyzed so

far it is not possible to indicate the semantic difference between the senses of *ni, na* and *–n* other than combinatorial one - that is *na* and *–n* being bound to tense which is not the case in *ni.* Therefore, the three forms are combinatorially allolexical. *Ni* is thus the Hausa prime for I because it is simple and indefinable, however its variant forms are complex as they express tense.

5. Kai ka ji labarin
   2SG-MAS-VOC 2SG MAS-PAST hear story-DEF
   You heard the story
6. Ke kin ji labarin
   2SG-FEM-VOC 2SG-FEM-PAST hear story-DEF
   You heard the story
7. ka ji labarin
   2SG-MAS-PAST hear story-DEF
   You heard the story
8. Kin ji labarin
   2SG-FEM-PAST hear story-DEF
   You heard the story
9. Ka yi karatu
   2SG-MAS do reading
   You read
10. ki yi karatu
    2SG-FEM do reading
    You read

The primitive meaning of YOU is expressed in Hausa through *kai/ke* and *ka/ki*. The former pair, as a vocative, require a complementing pronoun *ka/ki* that indicates the tense of the verb and the gender of the referent as shown in (5) & (6). However, the function of *ka/ki* is not restricted to complementing *kai/ke*, but can, as in (7) & (8), be subjects indicating still tense and gender. Also, in imperative sentences, such as (9) & (10), *ka & ki* function as subjects. But in all the examples, *kai/ke* are elliptically understood. Thus, *kai/ke* are basic since they are inherent even where *ka/ki* are independent, the former pair is considered the Hausa exponent for the prime YOU. *Kai/ke* together with their variant forms *ka/ki* respectively illustrate gender alleloxy, on one hand, and as the latter pair occur in syntactic slots where *kai/ke* naturally do, they demonstrate combinatorial alleloxy, on the other. *kai/ke* are considered the exponents for the prime YOU, because they are semantically simple in contrast to their variant forms *ka/ki* which, because of being bound to tense, are more complex.

(B) *wani/wata* SOMEONE, *wani abu* SOMETHING and *abu* THING

The Hausa exponents for SOMEONE and SOMETHING are *wani/wata* and *wani abu* respectively. The prime *wani abu* is a portmanteau involving two distinct primes (wani and abu), and like its English counterpart, it refers to unspecified nonhuman thing. It can be combined with evaluators and discriptors to form substantive phrases such as *wani abu maikyau* (something good), *wani abu mummuna* (something bad), *wain abu maigirma* (something big), *wani abu karami* (something small). Similar findings were reported by Yoon (2008) on Korean Language. Unlike in English where there is a special negative form of the prime SOMETHING (*anything*), *wani abu* can be used in both positive and negative sentences as in (11) & (12) below. Similarly, Goddard (2002b) reports that Malay exponent for SOMETHING does not have a corresponding special negative word.

(11) Ya na waniabu a lokacin
3SG-MAS-PAST AUX something PREP time-DEF
He was doing something by that time

(12) Ba na son yin wani abu yanzu
Not 1SG want do something now
I don't want to do anything now

Wani/wata are alleloxical, but differ only in terms of gender, the former being masculine while the latter feminine as illustrated in:

(13). Wani ya zo nan jiya
SOMEONE-MAS 3SG-MAS-PAST come here yesterday
Someone came here yesterday

(14). Wata ta zo nan jiya
SOMEONE-FEM 3SG-FEM-PAST come here yesterday
Someone came here yesterday

Like in English (Goddard, 2002a), the prime *wani/wata* does not occur with determiners (this/that) **wannan wani/ *wannar wata* (this someone), however the meaning of such combinations can be expressed by combing the determiner with the prime PERSON as in *wannan mutum* (this person). In this sense, therefore, *wani/wata* is a combinatorial allelox of the prime *mutum*.

The exponents *wani/wata* are polysemous, because they can express the meanings of English primes SOME. When used adjectivally, the exponents may mean some (a certain) as in:

Wani mutum ya yi karya (Some man has lied); *wata mata ta yi karya* (some woman has lied). The translation of the exponents *wani/wata* as 'some' can

be demonstrated more convincingly when *wasu* the plural form of the exponents is used as in: *Wasu mutane sun yi karya (*some people have lied).

(C) *Mutum* PERSON/PEOPLE

The primes PERSON/PEOPLE correspond to *mutum*/*mutane*. Unlike in English, the Hausa expressions are symmetrical in terms of number, the former being singular while the latter being plural. Because of this we argue that the plural form should not be part of the Hausa primes; the singular form suffices. The inclusion of the two words (person/people) in English primitives is theoretically motivated because the language does not have a strict singular form for people; moreover, *person*, unlike *people,* can refer to nonhumans (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994) and there is need for both words in some explications. The Hausa equivalent for the prime THING is *abu*, realizd usually as *abi* which as Migeod (1914: 12) shows is not realized alone, rather it combines with the preposition *–n* (of) to form words such as: *abi-n-ci* food, *abi-n-sha* drink, *abun mamaki* a wonder, *abin tsoro* a thing to fear etc.

(D) *Jiki*BODY

The Hausa equivalent for BODY is *jiki,* a prime whose identification is straightforward. It does not function as an independent argument, rather it combines with other anchoring expressions to indicate its relational status with the being whose body is in question as in *jiki na* (my body), *jikin sa ya girma* (his body has grown big). Similar findings were reported by Goddard (2008) and Junker (2008) on English and East Cree languages respectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Hausa language, although typologically different from English, is found to have almost all the English primes outlined in the literatures, with a slight difference in the combinatorial behaviour of the primes. This discovery substantiates the argument of natural semantic meta-language proponents that all human languages have an inventory of words that are indefinable in themselves, but which can be used in defining other words. Further studies should analyze the remaining classes of Hausa primes, and apply them in explicating complex cultural terms of the language.

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