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Encoding Experiencers in the proverbs of Nigerian English

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Abstract
This study investigates how Experiencers are encoded in the proverbs of Nigerian English. There are participants in different discourse situations who play common roles one of which is the *experiencer*. There are no agreed criteria and there is certainly no agreed consensus on the universal inventory. Semantic roles are useful for identifying various subclasses of verbs and occasionally are reflected by individual morphemes in natural languages. Experiencer is an entity that receives a sensory impression, but does not control the event or perform it on purpose in a discourse: *Samson* saw the snake, *Janet* liked the ring, *James* is sick, are examples of Experiencers in English. The study draws data from Jowitt (2005, pp. 145-6) where proverbs were categorized into groups namely: those that Nigerian English (NE) shares with Standard English (SE) and those which appear to be peculiar to Nigeria or which are at least not found in British English (BE). The study found out that like in Yoruba and other Nigerian Languages, Experiencers are encoded as subjects, possessors within a subject and as objects.

Keywords: encoding, experiencers, Nigerian English, proverbs, participant roles

Public Interest Statement
This study investigates how Experiencers are encoded in the proverbs of Nigerian English. Experiencer is an aspect of semantic or participant roles and Semantic roles are used to indicate the role played by each entity in a sentence and are ranging from very specific to very general. It is quite evident from the empirical reviews that similar studies on Semantic Roles seem to dwell on participant roles, thematic roles and syntactic relations. However, the present study focuses on experiencers in the proverbs of Nigerian English which is quite different from existing studies. This clearly indicates the academic gap the study fills.

1. Introduction

Experiencer is an aspect of semantic or participant roles which is an entity that receives a sensory impression, but does not control the event or perform it on purpose in a discourse. Semantic roles, also known as thematic roles, are one of the oldest classes of constructs in linguistic theory. Semantic roles are used to indicate the role played by each entity in a sentence and are ranging from very specific to very general. The entities that are labeled should have participated in an event. Some of the domain-specific roles are from airport, to airport, and depart time. Some of the verb-specific roles are eater and eaten for the verb eat. Although there is no consensus on a definitive list of semantic roles some basic semantic roles such as agent, instrument, etc. are followed by all. One who experienced is experiencer. Jesus felt very painful when heard of the sudden demise of his friend. Here, *Jesus* experienced the pain so he is the experiencer. Experiencer is a thematic role that has been described in the literature as being the bearer of a particular psychological state. Experiencers are assumed to be thematic roles in psychological predicates, belief predicates, perception predicates, and also as an optional argument of raising constructions: It is now commonplace that languages have different means of representing the same extra-linguistic or real world situation. It is furthermore assumed that these different means of representation reflect different conceptualisations of real-world situations. Andrew (1985) says that an "Experiencer" is the participant in a situation who is psychologically, perceptually or emotionally aware of something. Talmy (1985, p. 99) asserts that in English the different distinctions made among experiential situations are coded to be signaled by the grammatical relation assumed by the experiencer in an affective predication. For example, the following sentences refer to the same experiential situation.

1. Mary frightens me- Experiencer as object
2. I love Mary- Experiencer as subject

Here, the Experiencer is coded as active because it is the Subject of a verb, and when it is coded as Object, it is conceptualized as a "passive" participant in the situation.

2.Methodology/ framework

The study draws data from Jowitt (2005, pp. 145-146) where proverbs were categorized into groups namely: those that NE shares with SE and those which appear to be peculiar to Nigeria or which are at least not found in BE. Sixteen proverbs were randomly selected from the text. After a careful study of the proverbs, eight proverbs were purposively selected from the sixteen proverbs to constitute the data for analysis. The paper explores a descriptive framework, using Saeed's (2009) theory of semantic roles.

3. Literature review

3.1 Conceptual Review

This section shall review certain concepts related to semantic roles. It is difficult to have a very precise definition of thematic roles due to the number, content and theoretical status of thematic roles. According to Kasper (2008, p. 23), "thematic role are generalisations among the arguments of a predicate in order to capture regularities between the semantic representation and the syntactic expression of that predicate. Thematic role can be analysed by considering the noun phrase's function based on the verb which is used in the sentence because thematic

role is closely related to the verb. This implies that we can decide whether the subject has a role as an agent or as an experienced by observing or taking note of the verb. O' Grady et al say "thematic role or semantic role is used to describe the part played by a particular entity in an event" (1991, p. 226).

Agent is the initiator of some action, capable of acting with volition for example *Mary ate the meat.* An agent in participant role is that role that initiates and executes, possibly deliberarely, the eventuality denoted by the verb. It is closely related to "instrument". Patient refers to the entity undergoing the effect of some action; often undergoing some change of state for example Daniel hit *the dog.* A grammatical "patient" in linguistics is also called the target or underdoer. It is the participant of a situation upon whom an action is carried out. Theme is the entity that is moved by an action or whose location is described. Example, *Dan threw the book.* Theme participants typically undergo events, that is, events happen to them. This implies that a theme is affected by events. Experiencer refers to the entity which is aware of the action or state described by the predicate but which is not in control of the action in state. Example, *Jim saw the rat.* An experience is therefore that living entity that experiences the event or action denoted by the predicate.

Beneficiary refers to the entity for whose benefit the action was performed for example, *Dan studied hard for his father.* A beneficiary is the semantic role of a participant, usually human or animate, who benefits from a state of affairs. A beneficiary is also called a benefactive. An instrument is the means by which an action is performed or something comes about. Example, *Jane opened the car with a spare key.* It is the semantic role of the entity (usually inanimate) that the agent uses to perform an action or start a process. A location refers to the place in which something is situated or takes place example: *the television set hangs on the wall.* The role of location is performed or played by any expression referring to the place where events happen.

A goal refers to an entity towards which something moves, either metaphorically or literally. Example, *Dan ran from the hospital.* Goal as a semantic role refers to the semantic role of the place to which something moves. It is the thing towards which an action is directed. Other additional thematic roles include:

Actor which refers to an entity which performs, effects, instigates, or controls the situation denoted by the predicate (super type of agent). Example, *the dog bit a boy.* When used as a noun, an actor means a person who participates or performs.

Recipient is a subtype of goal involved in actions describing changes or possession. Example, *Jane sold the shoes to Jennifer.*

Percept/stimulus refers to the entity which is perceived or experienced. Example, *John fears snakes.*

According to Penfield, the common language any fool can go about it; but the use of proverbs displays your intelligence and maturity (1983, p. 43). It is a general believe that people who use proverbs, are mature. They are highly integrated into daily conversation and speech making and can be found in every interactional setting in African society, be it urban, peri-urban or rural.

Proverbs are social modes of communication which have a dominant role in most African societies according to Finnegan (1970). They are cultural tools for transferring the traditions of a speech community in terms of their values, beliefs and collective knowledge from one generation to another (Idowu 2010). They are folkloric metaphors but unlike other

oral folklore they are not set apart or restricted to certain domains of usage. Proverbs are "culture markers" that tell us brief and so much about history and psychology of the peoples and communities in brief and intense terms. Meider (1989) defines proverbs as "short, traditional statements used to further some social end". It is vital to note that the 'social end' is what makes the use of proverbs striking and meaningful. Proverbs are contextualized metaphors' which implies that they are more literary and contextual than linguistic.

3.2 Empirical Review

Marlina, in her article entitled, "The analysis of thematic role in narrative texts of senior high school textbooks" analysed narrative texts of senior high school textbooks for X grade, based on Jackendoff's and Saeed's theories of thematic role. She employs a qualitative research design and the data were ten narrative texts taken from developing English Competencies and Interlanguage for X grade. Marina's research questions involve the ways of thematic role in constructing the sentence meaning in narrative texts and the thematic role that are mostly employed. Thematic role is a way to describe the role of noun phrase in a sentence, so that it is closely related to the grammatical function. In their study, their research questions involved the various ways of thematic role in constructing the sentence's meaning in narrative texts and the thematic roles mostly employed. The research found out that nine type of semantic role, (agent, patient, location, beneficiary, experiencer, theme, source, goal and instrument are available in Narrative texts and the role, Theme was frequently employed, (260) times, of 782). Findings also reveal that thematic role constructs the sentence meaning in narrative texts by observing the verb and the preposition used in the sentence. She concludes that the analysis of thematic role in narrative texts is beneficial for educational participants, (teachers and students) in order to recognize the sentence's grammatical function. Thematic roles help in in understanding of the sentence's meaning and to grasp the message in the text.

Lehmann also did a study on "Participant roles, thematic roles and syntactic relations" where he analyses semantic relations at levels of participant roles, thematic roles and syntactic relations, where the first level serves as a "tertium comparationis" for linguistic strategies recognized at the two lower levels. In this study, a couple of functional subdomains of participation are analysed, including causation, benefaction, external possession and concomitance. The paper explores a descriptive framework, consisting of a methodology and a set of basic notions for the semantic analysis of the relations of verbal dependents. Languages differ typologically by their choice as to which participant roles they express and which ones they leave to inference. He discovered that in some participant constellations, the choice of a particular strategy is semantically motivated; in other constellations, it is not so motivated but still be pursued by a language. A language may be characterized at the typological level by the extension of a strategy over and above its proper functional domain.

Ononye et. al, in their article entitled, "Participant Roles and Cognitive Relations in Niger Delta Conflict News Discourse" investigate the participant roles and cognitive relations reflected in Nigerian print media Reports on Niger delta (ND) conflicts. They explored the lexico-semantic choices that indexed the role relations with respect to the conflictual events reported in Nigerian Newspapers.

The study uses the content analysis (Alenezi et.al 2018). The choice of this provides a qualitative understanding of participant role relations in ND conflict discourse through the analysis of the contextual and lexico-semantic features deployed in reporting the conflict

news events.

The theoretical insights for this study is drawn from Van Dijk's (2001) model and limited to two categories of contexts; participant roles and cognition.

The findings of this study confirm the view established in previous scholarships that the Nigerian media have an ideological role to play in shaping people's opinion of the roles played by the different stake holders in Niger Delta conflicts. However, they were not able to accommodate other media platforms and / or explore them at various levels of linguistic analysis. This implies that to fully understand participant roles and cognitive relations in the Niger Delta regions, the different groups of participants in the discourse have to be linked to their beliefs and goals of engagement in the conflict.

From the empirical reviews, it is evident that similar studies seem to dwell on Participant roles, thematic roles and syntactic relations. However, the present study focuses on experiencers in the proverbs of Nigerian English which is quite different from existing studies and fills that academic gap.

4. DATA
4.1 Experiencers Encoded as Subjects
Text 1.
A cat may look at a King
Text 2.
God never sleeps
Text 3.
Nobody is above mistake
Text 4.
The downfall of *a man* is not the end of his life

4.2 Experiencers Encoded as Possessors within a Subject
Text 5.
   (a) Uneasy lies *the head* that wears the crown
(b) Behind every successful *woman*, there is a man

4.3 Experiencers Encoded as Objects
Text 6.
   (a) When two elephants fight, *the grass* suffers
   (b) What a man can do, *a woman* can also do
(Jowitt, 2005, pp. 145-146)

5.2 Discussion
5.2.1 Experiencer Subject
In text 1, the entity that receives the sensory impression is *the cat*. The entity is a noun and here, there are two participants in the activity, *the cat* and *the king*. What seems to partly determine whether an experiencer is encoded as subject or object is the positioning of the noun or pronoun in an expression.

In text 2, the coded entity is *God*. *God* receives the sensory impression of the inability to sleep. It suggests here that *God* stays all day and times without experiencing sleep. Various

studies suggest that emotions or experiential situations in general may be presented as either volitional or non-volitional, or active or passive or even as a neutral state with respect to these categories. The text is in the passive because of the use of the passive verb *never*. When the experiencer is coded as subject, it is seen as passive in the situation and when it is encoded as object, it is seen as passive.When the affective is a verb, the case is seen as voluntary but when it an adjective, it is seen as an involuntary experience.The experiencers in some cases may perform some mental act while in some cases, they may perform some physical acts manifesting they are in the disposition of stimulus.Where the external cause is not specified, the experiencer is coded as object

In text 3, the entity coded is a subject, *Nobody* with the use of an indefinite pronoun which shows a generic and all inclusive indication that all humans and non-humans can make mistakes or experience mistakes.This again, suggests that experiencer subject can also take the form of pronouns which substitute for nouns and noun clauses. Here, the experiencer is not in the active but passive state because the predicative verb is not an active participant of the cause. The pronoun here is not the "causer" of the act but the act is rather seen as a phenomenal one.

Text 4 rather presents a different structural text where the subject is inherent within the noun clause. The experiencer is seen as involuntary or a passive participant in the situation (the expression suggests) because it does not bring the calamity to itself. It is clear that the experiencer, *a man,* is a victim of a natural cause (the experiential situation) but with an assurance of victory afterwards.Here, the experiencer cannot control the situation or it cannot be avoided and anyone in the situation could overcome same if such a one is determined. Experiencers of such nature are coded in the affirmative and they are involuntary therefore the experiencers undergo such experiences not because they want it but cannot escape from them.

5.2.2 Experiencers as Possessors within a sentence

In the first example in text 5(a), *uneasy lies **the head** that wears the crown*, the experiencer,*the head* is coded as a possessor within the structure. It means that it is not easy to be a king or the duty of a king is a herculean one. In Yoruba for instance, a structure of this kind will be as follows:

> inu mi badʒe- I'm sad
> inu mi dun- I'm happy

Here, the experiencer *mi* is encoded as a possessor within a sentence.In the second example, the inverted sentence structure 5(b),*behind every successful **woman** is a man,*the experiencer is embedded within the sentence which starts with an adverbial.The semantic basis for the former is agent like (active participant) while that of the latter is patient-like.

5.2.3 Experiencers as Objects

In text 6(a), *when two elephants fight, **the grass** suffers*; the experiencer is coded as an object because it is situated within the object position structurally. The sentence semantically means that the causal effect of **the elephants** fight is on **the grass**- where the fought. The inanimate experiencer receives the sensory effect indirectly so, it is the passive participant in the act. The experiencer is seen as involuntary or a passive participant in the situation because it does

not bring the calamity to itself. It is clear that the experiencer is a victim of a natural cause (the experiential situation-the fight). Again, the agent in the discourse is *the elephants* while the patient is *the grass*. The semantic basis for the experiencer is patient-like. Remember that patient- like experiencers are mostly passive participants in discourse. The second instance in text 6(b) is similar to the former,*what a man can do, **a woman** can also do*. Here, the experiencer, **a woman** is agent-like because the sentence suggests that a woman is equated with the ability of a man. She is therefore equally an agent or an active participant in the discourse.

6. Conclusion

In this work, we have investigated the specific conceptualisations of Experiencers in the proverbs of Nigerian English as culled from Jowitt (2015, pp. 145-146). The study found out that if the Experiencer is coded as the Subject in the clause, then it is construed to be an "active" participant in the situation. When it is coded as the Object, it is viewed as a "passive" argument. The Experiencer may be presented as a "recipient" of the situation characterised in the rest of the clause. The Experiencer may also be conceptualised as an unintended target of an affective situation, and in this case it is coded as the Object of the proposition. All the constructions described show that word-order and grammatical relations are used to convey specific meanings. It is therefore ascertained that word-order either in the subject, object or possessor within a clause can affect the category of the experiencer either as patient-like or agent-like. It has been argued that in the positioning of the Experiencer and specific syntactic constructions specifies the experiencer as voluntary, involuntary or neutral.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution
The authors equally contributed in the research and writing of this work.

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