

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CHILDREN'S DAY ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE PUNCH NEWSPAPER IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Language in its spoken and written forms continues to be the vital means of communicating ideas. It is, however, notable that English language in particular is not always deployed appropriately to convey the meanings intended by the producer. This tendency is especially evident in advertisements appearing in print news media, where meaning is often compressed and multimodally presented. Such weaknesses may negatively affect the interpretive competence and linguistic development of up-and-coming scholars and other users of English. Consequently, this paper analyses selected Children's Day advertisements published in *The Punch* newspaper of 27th May, 2012 from a communicative-semantic and interpretive perspective. The analysis examines ambiguity, contradiction, reference, collocation, sense relations, and sentence structure or mood, alongside the interpretation of accompanying pictograms, in order to show how meaning is constructed, inferred, and sometimes misinterpreted in advertising discourse.

Keywords: Semantic analysis; Advertising language; Print media discourse; English usage in Nigeria; Children's Day advertisements

Introduction

The place of communication in any human society must not be overestimated. According to Lyons (1995), Language use varies across cultures and purposes, while Xhemaili (2020) stressed that proper communication is essential to establish and strengthen national and international ideas and relations. Also, successful communication takes place through spoken or written language. In Nigeria where English is the *lingua-franca*, effective communication cannot be achieved if the semantic rules are not properly adhered to. It is disturbing to note that many of the ideas intended to be passed across to the public through print media are sometimes weakened by inappropriate deployment of linguistic features necessary for the semantic purposes.

According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, language is the use of words in an agreed way as a method of human communication. Hall (1968) sees language as the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. Language can also be seen as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols and non-verbal means through which a social group co-operates. Language use varies across culture and geographical location because of the differences in the norms and convention of these geographical spaces and ways of life of the people occupying the spaces.

Aspects or levels of language study can be identified as Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics. Phonology as one of the levels of language study is concerned with the sound system of a language, its classification, description and the allophonic variation of sounds. Morphology has to do with words, their inflections and word formation processes. Syntax deals with the proper arrangement of lexical items into phrase, clauses and sentences. Semantics is concerned with the study of lexical and meaning, while the purview of pragmatics is the study of meaning of utterances, i.e. meaning in the context of language use.

Of all the levels of language discussed above, the concern of this paper is semantics, as it is a semantic analysis of selected Punch Newspaper's advertisements on children's day. The analysis covers some selected advertisements placed in the newspaper edition of 27th of May, 2012. The features of semantic interest such as ambiguity, contradiction, antonymy, synonymy tautology, reference, collocation, repetition, and sentence structure are explored in the data. Also, the analysis covers the interpretation of the pictograms in relation to what they have contributed to the understanding of the meaning of the expressions as used in the data, since in pictorial literacy, complex meaning is communicated and negotiated via pictures (Lawal, 2020), as validated by the adage that states that "a picture is worth more a million words".

Analysis of Selected Children's Day Advertisements in the Punch Newspaper

Purview of Semantics

Semantic studies or analysis which focuses on how meaning is structured and interpreted as put forward by Leech, (1981). “Semantics” is derived from a Greek word meaning to signify. According to Saeed (2009), semantics is the study of meaning communicated through language. To Wales (2001), semantics is specifically the study of linguistic meaning, of words and sentences, and has been much influenced by philosophy and logic. Babatunde (2007) views semantics as the study of meaning which seeks to convey and classify human experience through language. Goddard (2011) further explains that Semantic analysis focuses on how meaning is encoded and decoded. From the above various definitions, it can be said that meaning in language use is of great significance in communication and this is what semantics is concerned with, especially at lexical, phrasal, clausal and sentential levels. Having considered semantics as a concept, the elements of semantics, on which the analysis of this work is based, are also considered next.

Meaning Relations

Palmer (1981) notes that lexical relations form an essential part of semantics while Odebunmi (2006), explains meaning relations simply means the relationship that holds between words and utterances in a language. Odebunmi identifies five meaning relations, which are synonymy, antonymy, homonymy, hyponymy and polysemy. Saeed (2009) conceptualized meaning relations as “Lexical Relations”. Saeed has gone beyond Odebunmi (2006) as he has identified eight ‘lexical’ relations – homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, opposites (antonymy), hyponymy, meronymy, member – collection and portion – mass. Yule (2006) also identifies nine meaning relations which are synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, prototypes, homophony and homonymy, polysemy, word play, metonymy and collocation. These will be defined briefly here, using Yule’s (2006 & 2019) typology.

An **antonym** is viewed by Yule (2006 & 2019) as forms of word with opposite meanings while **Synonyms** are two or more words with very closely related meanings. Also, **Hyponymy** is the case when the meaning of one form is included in the meaning of another. In the case of **Prototypes**, there is the idea of the characteristic instance of a category. While **Homophones** are two or more different written forms have the same pronunciation, **homonymy** occurs when one form either written or spoken has two or more unrelated meanings. **Polysemy** manifests when one form either written or spoken has multiple meanings that are all related by extension. **Word Play** is another form of **polysemy** used in a comic manner for humorous effects. In the case of

Metonymy, it occurs when one uses a part of an object to refer to another object with which it is related. While **Collocation** refers to the frequency of occurrence of related words in a string, **Reference** is an act by which a speaker or writer uses language to enable a listener or a reader to identify something, and this can be achieved through the use of proper nouns, nouns in phrases and pronouns. Cruse (2000) notes fine distinctions among lexical relations in reference to semantic field theory, which groups words into sets based on shared features, and truth-conditional semantics, which examines how words relate to each other in terms of truth conditions. Cruse stresses on comprehensive understanding of lexical relations and their roles in shaping meaning. (Cruse, 2000 & Goddard, 2011). Similarly, Hurford, Heasley & Smith, (2007) maintain that Semantic features help differentiate lexical items.

Advertisement as a Distinct Discourse Genre

According to Soans (1998), the concept of advertisement is defined as “a notice” display or awareness used for describing a product, service or event in a publication or on television/radio in order to increase sales or patronage. Brierley (2001) submits that Advertisements depend on semiotic choices to convey persuasive messages, while O’ Barr (1994) notes that advertising reflects cultural values and social identities in all its forms.

The Wikipedia Dictionary. com describes advertisement as a notice or an announcement in a public medium promoting a product, service or event or publicizing a job vacancy. It is a form of communication used to encourage or persuade an audience (viewers, readers and listeners) about a particular product, event or service. Language of advertisements is carefully chosen and used in order to make it captivating and attention-catching (Goddard, 2011). Therefore, investigating the language used in the advertisement arena is a worthwhile endeavour for the real meanings of the selected words in advertising to be clearly understood.

Eleven (11) advertisements on Children’s Day selected from Punch Newspaper of 27th May, 2012 were randomly selected for this study. The written parts are italicised for easy identification, followed each by the accompanying pictogram, before proceeding to the semantic analysis;

Datum One

Let's have fun...

It's our day

Because our future is secured in Osun

Pictogram



The second sentence is a structural ambiguity, likewise the last sentence. In the second sentence, “our day” may mean the State’s Day or the Children’s Day. The last sentence may mean the future of the children lies in the hands (physical) of the Osun State or the hands of the leaders of the state. Secondly, it may mean that they had made necessary provisions for the future of Osun State’s youth as reinforced by the extract’s declarative mood, while the pictogram also aligns with this message with the children’s relaxed mood because the environment is conducive for them. The pictogram suggests that the children are psychologically balanced and healthy, hence they have the time to relax and play.

Datum Two

The future is about the children. The future is the children.

Let's celebrate our future. Let's celebrate our children.

PICTOGRAM



These two concepts, 'future' and 'children' in the first sentence are used as endophoric reference. Also, the two concepts are contextually synonymous, but ordinarily, they are antonyms, using componential analysis. In the third and fourth sentences, these two concepts are used as exophoric reference. The extract's mood type is declarative, while the spectacle in the pictogram symbolises the youths' capacity to see far and beyond the present situation, just as the moustache represents the future of the youths, their old age, thus echoing the English proverb which affirms that "the child is the father of the man".

Datum Three

I am the future...

I am STERLING!

Pictogram



These words ‘future’ and ‘sterling’, although different in their primary (denotative) meanings, are used in the two sentences synonymously. One difference is that the future is far and abstract, while Sterling Bank is here and concrete. This advertisement has a declarative mood and the pictogram suggests that, for children to be successful and rise step by step to the top of their careers, they need the continuous alliance and support of Sterling Bank. The girl symbolises gender affirmation, implying that both boys and girls can actualise their life ambitions, if both are given the right motivation and support.

The ball she is holding is the logo of Sterling Bank and this conveys the idea that the future of the bank is firmly and safely in the hands of children, especially girls, after successfully supporting them to attain the peaks of their careers.

Datum Four

The future is Bright

Because you are the future

Because you bring joy

Because today is your special day

We celebrate you!

Pictogram



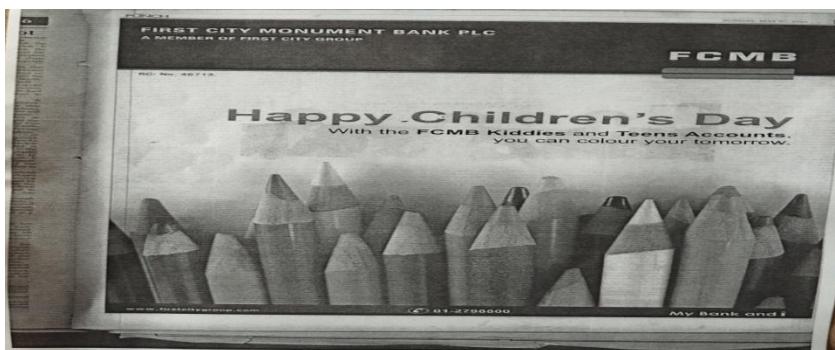
‘Future’ and ‘bright’ appear contradictory in their ordinary, primary senses. In the third, fourth, fifth and sixth lines, we have references ‘you’ and ‘your’. These two concepts are also used as a form of repetition, a means of achieving emphasis. Also, the repetitive deployment of ‘Because’ in this context serves the same purpose of emphasis. ‘Future’ and ‘today’ are antonyms. ‘The sentential mood for the extract is declarative mood, just as pictogram represents a happy child, a symbol of “joy”, who stretches his hand to embrace the brightness which the future holds for him, the future to which Diamond Bank connects, only tacitly, through this advertisement.

Datum Five

With FCMB kiddies and Teens Account

You can colour your tomorrow.

Pictogram



“Kiddies” in the advertisement refers to infants and pre-teenagers, while “teens” refers to teenagers or adolescents. The word ‘teen’ is a clipped form for “teenagers, but ‘kiddies’ is a further colloquialisation of “kid”, the colloquial, informal variant of “child”, to convey a sense of extreme familiarity, love, care and concern.

The whole expression is syntactically ambiguous. The statement can mean using the FCMB’s account or keeping an account with the Bank. The advert has a declarative mood. The crayons in the pictogram depict brightness of the children’s future, because if there were no colour, the world would be a dull place. The crayons also depict the inherent capacity and creativity of the children to design their futures, figuratively, in bright colours.

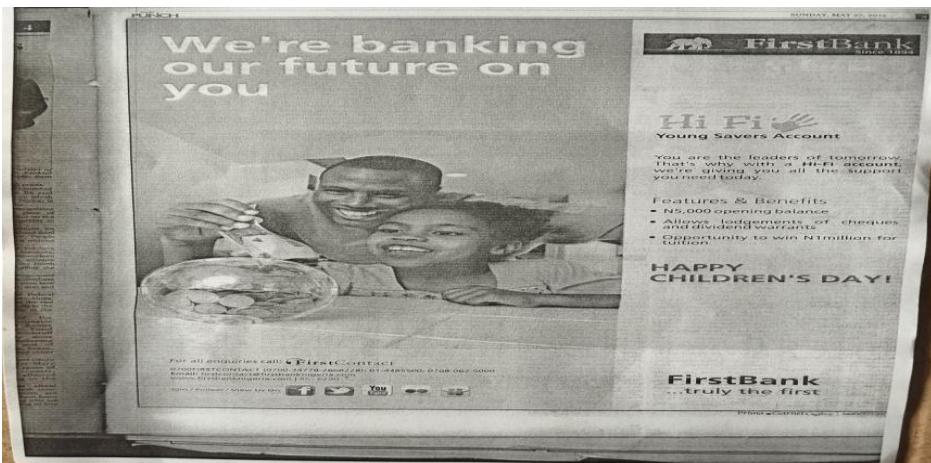
Datum Six

We're banking

Our future on

You

Pictogram



The word ‘banking’ is ambiguous because it could mean “keeping money in the bank for you (i.e, the children), or “depending on the bank for the future survival of the children (i.e, our future)”, or even “staking everything for you for our (i.e, the bank’s) future”. ‘Our’ is thus ambiguous as its narrow sense can refer to the bank, while its broader meaning is the whole nation. The advert has a declarative sentential mood and the picture of the safe depicts abundance safety and saving for the future. The daughter has absolute trust in the efforts of her father and that is why she is happy. The father too has confidence that the daughter will not misuse the opportunity and that is why she has been carried along in the decision making of her father.

Datum Seven

Give every dream an opportunity

Today, we celebrate tomorrow’s heroes whose future started with yesterday’s dream.

Pictogram



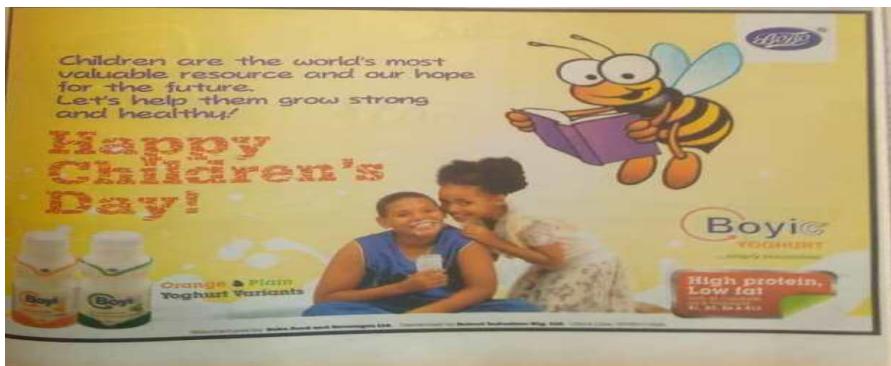
The first sentence is a contradiction; ‘dream’ and ‘opportunity’ are contradictory, as “dream” is not animate and cannot receive or be given anything. These two concepts are, on the other hand, related in their abstractness. In the second expression, the words, ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’, ‘yesterday’ and ‘future’ are hyponyms of “time”, while ‘future’ and ‘tomorrow’ are synonyms.

The mood for this excerpt is imperative, as the pictogram symbolises ambition and the career aspirations of children to become pilots, which is represented by an airplane; a judge, represented with a wig, a doctor, represented with a stethoscope; a teacher, represented with a pen, etc. The pictogram also depicts that every child should be given an opportunity to make a choice of career. The pen and pencils are the pillars that uphold the success of the children’s career. All the symbolic objects are held in the SKY of the children’s dreams, an ingenious innuendo and pun on SKYE, the name of the bank which suggestively makes dreams come true.

Datum Eight

*Children are the world's most
Valuable resource and our hope
for the future.
Let's help them grow strong
and healthy!*

Pictogram



The words, 'strong' and 'healthy' are used as hyponyms of wellness. 'Resource' and 'hope' are used as references to children, and the sentential mood of this extract is declarative. The picture depicts nutritional value and satisfaction on the part of the children who, according to the cartoon, take Boyic Yoghurt to enhance their mental alertness and intellectual development.

Datum Nine

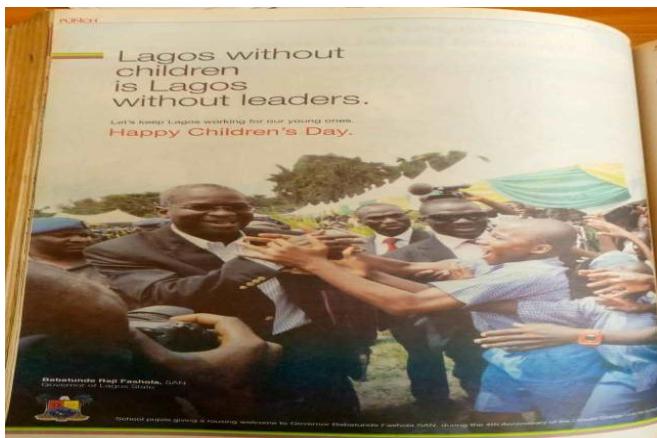
Lagos without Children

is Lagos without leaders.

Let's keep Lagos working

for our young ones

Pictogram



The words, 'children' and 'leaders' are used as synonyms. Repetition is also in the text, as 'Lagos' and 'without' are repeated for emphasis which enhances the parallelism in the epigrammatic, declarative statement. The last sentence is structurally ambiguous as it could mean 'to manage the resources of Lagos State for the upbringing and upkeep of the children' or 'Lagos is an object, animate or mechanical, which should work for the children'.

The pictogram depicts interaction and cooperation between the Governor and children. It also depicts that the government has trust in, and love for the children which is the reason for the governor embracing them. Conversely, the children in turn have trust in the government's abiding interest in, and deep concern about their welfare.

Datum Ten

From one innovator to another:

*The future
of innovation
starts
here*

Pictogram



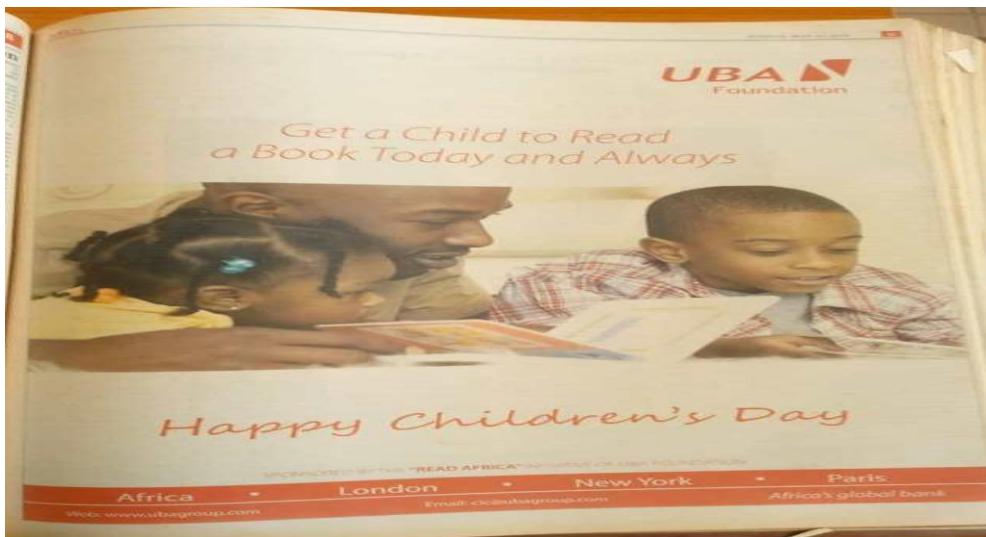
The mood in the excerpt is declarative, with the adverb “here” functioning as a form of reference

referring to the entity represented in the pictogram as a mobile phone. Apart from this, “here” is ambiguous as it could mean a particular place, time, (spatio-temporal deixis), or the object represented in the pictogram. It could mean that the future of technological advancement starts now through the use of the mobile phone as a symbol of information and communication technology (ICT). The crayons depict creativity and a means of graphic communication. Also, “innovator” implies creativity, problem-solving, and progressive thinking, while “from one innovator to another” suggests a connection between the speaker, an ICT entrepreneur, a budding innovator via the use of crayons for graphic creativity. “The future of innovation starts here” acknowledges the child’s simple exploration and creativity as the starting point for future innovation, as symbolised with the objects in the pictogram.

Datum Eleven

*Get a Child to Read
a Book Today and Always*

Pictogram



‘Read’ and ‘book’, ‘today’ and ‘always’ are collocative pairs. ‘Today’ refers to a specific time

while ‘always’ is non-specific. The clause, “get a child” is a syntactic ambiguity. It could mean look for any child or get your own child. The mood for this excerpt is imperative and the pictogram illustrates concentration, focus and teamwork expected when an adult scaffolds a child’s literacy development, indicating the importance of by leading by example. This reinforces the idea of mentorship and guidance, which children need so as not to not to go astray. It further suggests that reading is a valuable activity that is worthy of adult attention and support, and that adults play a significant role in shaping children’s reading habits.

Conclusion

The paper has critically carried out a semantic analysis of selected Children’s Day advertisements in *The Punch* Newspaper, drawing on aspects of meaning relations such as reference, ambiguity, repetition, hyponymy, contradiction, antonymy, synonymy, and collocation, with particular attention to how these features shape the interpretation of meaning by readers. The analysis demonstrates how semantic choices in advertising discourse guide, constrain, or sometimes complicate the interpretive process, thereby influencing how intended messages are inferred and understood by the audience.

Besides the written aspects of the data, the pictograms have also contributed greatly to the understanding of the meaning through interpreting, since a picture is worth more than a thousand words, indicating that language, in a generic semiotic sense, is multimodal. Hence, visual advertisements are often bimodal, with pictures, diagrams and cartoons not only consolidating but also further elucidating the meaning in the written texts.

In addition, the declarative mood was found to be predominantly deployed to make powerful, captivating and sometimes witty assertions, while the imperative mood was sparingly deployed to enjoin and persuade the reader to patronise the object of advertisement. Coincidentally, most of the advertisements were from the banking industry which cleverly leverages parental love and the Children's Day celebration to engage their real and potential clientele by showcasing their services and products via the joint and complementary mediums of language and graphic imagery, i.e pictures, diagrams and cartoons.

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