

MORPHOLOGICAL AND SEMANTIC SHIFT IN BÙH

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Abstract

This study described the operation of morphological and semantic shifts in Bùh language. The language is spoken in Nasarawa and Kaduna states respectively. Some lexical items and expressions, over time, have undergone structural and meaning change in the language. Thus, this study focused on identifying such words and expressions. The dearth of literature on Buh is the motivation for this study. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been carried out in this area of the study. The study is descriptive in nature, and employed the interview method for data gathering. Competent native speakers of the language between 30-70 years were interviewed. The study adopted two theories, Egudu's (1975) Negative Positivism and Fillmore's (1976) Frame Semantics. The findings showed that certain words have been seen to have changed structurally. Thus,

substitution of phonemes leads to structural change in the language. Also, the meaning of lexical items as well as expressions could change from positive to negative and vice versa: meaning shift in context and the description of what is naturally good as bad; excellent performance or achievement in terms of destructive action; a virtue or an achievement in terms of physical or moral defect; a happy situation in terms of a sad incident; a man of excellence in terms of an animal are realized in the language. The paper concluded that morphological and semantic shifts in Bùh is one of the factors which causes endangerment for the language.

Keywords: Frame Semantics, Morphology, Morphological and Semantic Change, Negative Positivism, Semantics.

Introduction

Language change is an incontrovertible feature of languages and the consensus about language as a living being confirms the assertion that languages grow, change, and die. A language which is the medium of communication, as well as vehicle for the transmission of the culture of an ethnic group from one generation to another, is not static but dynamic. It lives and its continuous use by humans serves as a means of its sustainable growth. If a language is in use, it is alive, vibrant, grows and survives. But if a language is not used by its indigenous speakers, then its continuous survival is threatened, for it could shift to other languages. Bright (1992:387) gives example of the English word 'gay' whose meanings has changed from 'carefree', 'bright' and 'showy' or 'cheerful' to 'homosexual', over time. Apart from the fact that the meaning of words could change in languages, the structure of words also changes considerably, resulting from the influence of the dominant language(s).

The motivation for this research stems from the fact that there is a dearth of literature in the language. Bùh is

spoken in both Nasarawa and Kaduna states. To the best of our knowledge, no research has been carried out on the morphological and semantic shift in the language. The paper, therefore, seeks to expound the morphological and semantic shift and/or change in Bùh lexical items as well as expressions, depending on the context(s) which they are used. It is worthy of note that the words 'shift' and 'change' are used interchangeably in this paper. The focus here, however, is on the diachronic change rather than the synchronic change in the language. That is to say that the change takes place overtime and not periodical. The study analyses the structural shift in words and meaning of expressions in the Buh language, taking into cognisance Egudu's (2015) categorisation of the concept of positive negativity, which involves the use of negative expression(s) to opine a strongly positive state, action or attribute as in figurative usages. Additionally, the paper analyses the data collected with example to show the types of morphological and semantic change attestable in Buh.

Conceptual/Theoretical Review

This section captures the review of related works and concepts that relevant to this study. A good explication of these concepts would promulgate a good grasp and/or better understanding of the research goal. Such concepts include: morphology, semantics, morphological and semantic change, frame semantics and positive negativity.

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Morphology/Morphological Change

The term 'morphology' was derived from biology which denotes the study of the forms of plants and animal. It was first used for linguistic purpose in 1959 by August Schleicher, a German linguist, to refer to the study of the form of words (Booij, 2007). According to Bauer (2012), morphology is about the structure of words; how a word is made up of smaller meaningful elements. Morphology as a branch of linguistics deals with the structure of words. It is the study of the internal structure of words and the rules governing the formation of words in a language (Agbedo, 2015). Nordquist (2019) also defines morphology as the branch of linguistics (and one of the major components of grammar) that studies word structures, especially regarding morphemes, which are the smallest units of language. These can be base words or components that form words. It is obvious that different kinds of historical changes can be seen impinging on the morphology of the interpretation. Instances of borrowing or other changes in the lexical stock of a language can easily have effects that are obviously morphological in nature.

Anderson (2015), argues that a great deal of the derivational morphology of contemporary English has arisen as a consequence of lexical borrowing: not of the derivational regularities themselves, but of the vocabulary items that motivate them. According to him, Middle English borrowed a large number of de-verbal nouns ending {in} -ment from continental old French and Anglo-French. Examples of such borrowed words include commence/commencement and judge/judgement. The presence of these pairs of related words in the language motivated the recognition of a derivational rule producing such nouns on the basis of existing verbs. This rule provided the basis for the formation of similar forms built on verbs from the native vocabulary. Examples of such words include wonderment, amazement, betterment, and settlement. All of the bases for these were part of the original Germanic lexicon (Anderson, 2015).

Apart from the mere additions and subtractions affecting the lexical stock, change can affect the content of lexemes. One aspect of this content is the fact that certain lexemes are exceptional with respect to one another. The regularity of the language exceptionality may be co-related by their being plural with suffixation. Anderwald (2013) asserts that such lexical exceptionality can be lost, and this is a significant sort of morphological changes. More central to the issue of morphological change is the fact that systematic regularities can arise historically in a variety of ways (Anderson, 2015). A central focus, as with other sorts of historical changes, is

in the transmission of linguistic structure from one generation to the next. Change is possible even if a new generation has exactly the same experience as the preceding one, as long as there are some aspects of grammar under-determined by the data. A new generation might make a different choice, which might infer a different grammar with respect to that of their models. According to Anderson (1988), for instance, the English word 'helicopter' is etymologically "helico-pter" 'spiral-wing', but that structure is no longer apparent to learners, and the word has been re-analysed as 'helicopter'.

Semantics and Semantic Change

Semantics is a technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. It is an area of linguistics which studies the meaning of words and sentences in a language. Morris (1994) explains semantics as the aspect of linguistics which deals with the relations between references (names) and referent (things); that is, linguistic levels (words expressions, and phrases) and the objects, concepts or ideas to which they refer. For this reason, semantics is the science of meaning. It studies word meaning in existing languages to promote mutual understanding through the critical use of words. Semantics, therefore, explicates the way in which words and sentences of various grammatical constructions are used and understood by the speakers of a given language. According to Lyons (1977), semantics is the study of meaning. Fodor (1977) defines semantics as "the study of the process by which meaning is derived from symbols, signs, text and other meaning bearing forms." Leech (1981) sees semantics as "the study of the development and changes to reflect the context, situation and time." Palmer (1981) sees semantics as a technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. He asserts that meaning can best be studied or obtained through a contextual analysis. This may explain Hayakawa's definition of semantics as "the study of human interaction through communication" (1978:48). Hurford and Heasley (1983) posit that "semantics is the study of meaning in language."

Linguistic semantics is the study of literal, de-contextualized, grammatical meaning (Frawley, 1992). According to Saeed (1997), it is the study of meaning communicated through language. Kreidler (1998), on the other hand, defines linguistic semantics as "the study of how languages organise and express meanings." Lobner (2002) sees it as the part of linguistics that is concerned with meaning. Agbedo (2015) says semantics is the study of meaning expressed by elements of any language characterized by a symbolic system. These definitions are

not all in complete agreement. Some see semantics to be concerned with the study of meaning as communicated through language, while others see semantics as studying all aspects of meaning, adding the label “linguistic” to attain a more precise definition. Note, however, that the disparity is not given much importance, leaving off special formulations, although most authors may tend to agree with Kreidler's (1998) definition that linguistic semantics as the study of how languages organise and express meanings.

This, however, would leave us with the questions: what is meaning? What is that meaning that is organised and expressed by languages? Ndimele (1999:32) describes meaning as “chameleon changing the colours of its effect with a change of speakers, hearers, context or setting”. Generally, human speech is geared towards the communication of information. This implies that someone (the speaker) has something in his/her mind (idea, feeling, intention, and so on) and decides to communicate it linguistically, with vocal noises emitted. These noises are heard by another person (the hearer), who translates them back into ideas, with the result being that the hearer somehow knows what the speaker had in mind. In a nutshell, what was at first in the mind of the speaker and now in the hearer's is what is referred to as meaning.

Semantics deals with the intricacies surrounding the meaning and interpretation of language. Philosophers and linguists alike have, over time, debated the intricacies of language (words, signs, and sentence structure); how we construct meaning and how stationary those meanings are. Semantics is, therefore, the meaning and interpretation of words, signs and sentence structure. It largely determines our reading comprehension, how we understand others and even our decisions as a result of our interpretations. Semantics has been an interesting field for philosophers and linguists as they are concerned with the essence of meaning; how we build meaning; how we share meaning with others, and how meaning changes over time. This research focuses on how meaning changes over time. One of the central issues with semantics, according to Gentry and Blakeley (2021), is the distinction between literal meaning and figurative meaning. They argue that the former is at face value, while the latter utilises similes and metaphors to represent meaning and convey greater emotion.

Semantic change is one of the innovative natures of language as a result of its constant state of flux (Traugott, 2003). Cook (2012) in Egenti and Okeke (2021) asserts that semantic changes are subtle and always move unconsciously and unnoticed. This means that semantic change is less resistant. According to Armelle (2013),

semantic change looks at how word meaning evolves in time at the level of words and lexical units. Polysemy and semantic overlap are a pervasive feature of language. Associated with these is the fact that there may be variations in the range of meaning of given words, from inclusive to exclusive. At the same time, total synonymy is rarely tolerated, with usually some degree of semantic differentiation (Armelle, 2013).

The concept of metaphor is what makes it possible for lexical items to be used in fuzzy, overlapping fashion. The term 'metaphor' is more commonly used for less elementary extensions of meaning which require a greater and more daring of conscious semantic 'leap', at least when they first arise. An example is the use of 'clear' in the following sentences:

- i. His statement was clear
- ii. The water is clear
- iii. His statement was clear as water.

Sub-types of metaphor are often distinguished, with two closely related metaphors being metonymy and synecdoche. The former extends the use of a word to refer to things or activities which are considered closely associated with the meaning of that word, while the latter refers to a given semantic notion by naming its most prominent or salient part. Such clear-cut developments are not very common. Usually, semantic shifts tend to be just as unclear as their synchronic basis, leading not to merges and splits, but merely to the broadening or narrowing of the range of meanings. For instance, in British English, 'Kings' is now used to refer to a figure; a head of state. This does not prevent the term from being employed in reference to absolute monarchs. Rather than replacing one meaning with another, the change broadens the meaning of 'King' to cover the range of both (figure) a head of state and an absolute monarch. Similarly, when Germ Angst was borrowed into English as a technical term in Freudian Psychology, all that happened was a narrowing of its meaning, not a complete semantic replacement. One effect which is common and interesting enough to have been specially noted in the literature is that the value judgements attached to particular words can change. As the result of semantic change, the connotations of words may become either more positive (melioration) or more negative (pejoration).

Frame Semantics

The term 'frame semantics' refers to a wide variety of approaches to the systematic description of natural language meanings. Fillmore (1976) asserts that meanings have internal structure which is determined

relative to a background frame or a scene. The easiest way to understand this is by way of example. Suppose that two identical twins Mark and Mike are both in a hospital sitting on the edge of their beds in the same position. When a nurse walks by Mark's room, she says: "I see that Mark is able to sit up now", and when she walks by Mike's room, she remarks: "I see that Mike is able to sit down now". Drawing on what we know about hospitals (our hospital background scenes of frames) this study will interpret the two remarks to the relevant scenes (Fillmore, 2006). Another often cited example of Fillmore and Baker (2012) clearly demonstrating the aforementioned is the difference between the following two sentences:

- i. I spent three hours on land this afternoon.
- ii. I spent three hours on the ground this afternoon.

The background scene of the first sentence is a sea voyage while the second sentence refers to an interruption of an air travel. This illustrates Fillmore's use of the term 'frame' as an idealization of a coherent indubitable perception, memory, experience, action, or object (Fillmore, 1976).

Negative Positivism

According to Egenti (2018), the concept of negative positivism as described by Egudu (1975) is a theory that analyses aspects of Igbo idiomatic expressions which passes some extra aesthetic potentiality that makes it more imaginatively appealing than ordinarily what the idiomatic usages are meant to be in a straightforward usage in Igbo. Egudu attempts a categorization of these negative expressions which are also captured in Emenanjo (2015:619). Some of the instances from Egudu (1975:175-180), with their adopted translations are presented below:

i. What is apparently bad as naturally good

Àda màrà ajō mmā
Ada is badly beautiful (lit.)
Ada is extremely beautiful (fig.)
Òbì dèlù ajō akwō kwō
Obi wrote a bad paper (lit.)
Obi passed the examination very brilliantly (fig.)

ii. Excellent performance or achievement as destructive actions

Àda dējìrì mkpīṣṣakwṣkwṣ
Ada broke her pen writing (lit.)
Ada wrote extremely well (fig.)

iii. A virtue or an achievement seen in terms of physical or moral defect

Àda bụ́ oke ozū
Ada is a mighty corpse (lit.)
Ada is a very important/ eminent person (fig.)

iv. A happy situation seen in terms of a sad incident

Akwṣkwṣ rìrì Àda isī
Book eat-rVpst Ada's head (lit.)
Ada loves (reading) books very much. (fig.)

v. Excellence in terms of a wicked or evil spirit or animal

Àda bụ́ ajō nnu`nu`
Ada is a bad bird (lit.)
Ada is very experienced and wise

A close observance of the examples above, from the first to the last group, shows that negative epithet is always introduced partly for the purpose of intensifying or emphasizing the quality or virtue being praised. The juxtaposition of the negative and positive words shows the contrast/oppositional relationship. Also, some of the negative-positive expressions can have different meanings depending on the contexts, as seen in the examples above. This concept is significant to this study, since lexical items could change their meaning, depending on the contexts of their use.

Egudu (1975:182-184) also points out the various dimensions and features of Igbo negative/ positive expression: they are richer in terms of aesthetic functionality which marks them out as an aspect of idiom of a special class. They operate on the same basis as the figurative usage, especially with respect to metaphor, personification and oxymoron. The connection between figurative usage and negative-positivism is that they operate on the principle of indirection. Negative positivism has some elements of witticism which are naturally humorous and are handed down from generation to generation. It has the nature of irony especially where sarcasm or cursing is intended. Also, it differs in a way from irony especially where eulogy is involved or expressing satisfaction with a person or a situation. Hence, irony and negative/positive expression, based on intention or purpose, work in opposite directions, yet resemble in some levels of meaning which contradict each other. These explanations of the concept of positive negativism instill the understanding that it has a peculiar feature of using negative qualities, states, or actions to describe positive ones.

Methodology

The data for this study were elicited primarily through interviews held with five competent Buh native language speakers between the ages of 30 and 70 years. The five native speakers comprised three males and two females. The method employed for analysis is descriptive, putting into consideration Egudu's (1975) Negative Positivism, since it shows a level of semantic shift based on contexts. The data were tone-marked and glossed for easy pronunciation and comprehension as a framework for the study. Fillmore Frame Semantics was used in the analysis of lexical items as well as in expressions within their contexts of usage. This is based on the assumption that meaning arises in context and the selection of any meaning is informed by the contextual factors.

The research is a descriptive survey that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to account for the extent of morphological and semantic shift in the language. The design enabled the researchers to collect valuable information and/or data from respondents from the Bùh speaking communities through sampling with language use, interview and focus group discussions.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses data on morphological and semantic shifts (change) in Bùh, elicited from the interviews held with competent native speakers of the language. For the morphological shift, lexical items that have been seen to have changed their structure overtime are expounded, identifying the areas in the words that constitute the structural change. Semantic shift however bifurcates into two subsections: meaning shift in context in general, and Egudu's (1975) Negative Positivism.

Morphological Shift in Bùh

The concept of morphological shift is attestable in Bùh. From the interactions with native speakers of the language, certain words that have been seen to have undergone structural change include the following:

- | | | | | |
|------|--------|---|---------|--------------|
| i. | nàkri | - | nàkeri | 'stand fame' |
| ii. | kibrán | - | kikigbù | 'many' |
| iii. | kùkri | - | kùkì | 'stay' |
| iv. | làghà | - | ràghà | 'place/town' |
| v. | ijìgwɔ | - | ínkrɔ | 'money' |
| vi. | gbigbá | - | ɲwɔ | 'calabash' |
| vii. | gbàjù | - | gbàrán | 'cake' |

In example (i), the '*nàkri*' has structurally changed to '*nàkeri*'. This is as a result of the insertion of [e] in between [k] in the second syllable. '*Kibrán*' in (ii) has changed to '*kikigbù*', with only the first syllable retained in the second structure. In (iii) '*kùkri*', however, there is a deletion of the approximant [r] in the latter structure, which leaves us with '*kùkì*'. What we have in the case of '*làghà*' and '*ràghà*' in example (iv) is the substitution of the lateral approximant [l] with the liquid [r]. In example (v), '*ijìgwɔ*' which was formerly the word for 'money' in the language has changed to '*ínkrɔ*'. 'Calabash' which was then known as '*gbigbá*' in example (vi) has changed completely, with no similarity in spelling, to '*ɲwɔ*'. In example (vi), the structural change occurs as a result of the replacement of the voiced affricate [ɟ] (j), in the second syllable, with the liquid approximant [r].

Table 1. Meaning Shift in Context

		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Á rí gun wobrà	He closes his hands	He is stingy
2	Á hé ntsɔ	He is a chameleon	He is cunning
3	Á rí tɔ zàbà	She knows how to cross the river	She flirts very well
4	Érí shinji jo lá kínlá	Black pot has brought out white food	Ugly man gave birth to handsome boy
5	Gbugbà wàwɔ á hé ho	My wife's calabash is open	My wife is on her monthly cycle
6	Ìnjɔ kubu gɔngwɔ nì jamà	Someone has hit the bucket	Someone is dead
7	Ìchì ku mà	Rat fell in the water	The woman is ugly
8	Ìnchɔ tú chú	The king has stepped on thorn	A womanizer has been caught
9	Làkpa rì tɔ nro	Lakpa farms a lot	Lakpa eats a lot

Semantic Shift in Bùh

Apart from the fact that the structure of words changes in Bùh, the meaning of words and lexical items also shift in context. The following captures meaning shift and a replication of Egudu's (1975) Negative Positivism in the language.

The examples in the above table (1) capture meaning shift in context. In (1), for instance, *Á rí gun wobrà* which literally means “He closes his hands” changes in context to mean “He is stingy”. *Á hé ntsó* in (2) equally changes in context from “He is a chameleon” to “He is cunning”. In (3), *Á rí tó zàbà*, with the meaning “She knows how to cross the river” changes in a different environment to mean “She flirts a lot”. More so, *shinji*, the word for black in the language changed to “ugly” in (4), as a result of the environment in which it is used. Note, however, that (5-8) are more idiomatic, in that the meaning of the expressions does not stem from the choice of words entirely. In (9), *rì* “farms” is seen to have changed in context to mean “eats”.

Table 2. Describing as bad what is naturally good

		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Á hé meme shí	He has bad yam	He has plenty yam
2	Á hé meme nú	He has a bad car	He has a beautiful car

In examples (1) and (2) table above, the word 'meme' which means “bad” has changed to be “plenty” and “beautiful”, respectively. Thus, *Á hé meme shí* which literally means “he has bad yam” has changed to “he has plenty yam”. Also, *Á hé meme nú* “he has a bad car” has equally changed to “he has a beautiful car”.

Table 3. Describing excellent performance or achievement in terms of destructive action

S/N		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Chà á ripsi kòmputà	Cha scattered the computer	Cha operates computer very well
2	Báristà rì támbè	Barista ate books	Barrister has read a lot of books
3	Úrú gòn rí	Fire has burnt the pot	The food is ready
4	Lá wu Tàrí	The food has killed Tari	Tari enjoyed the food

In example (1), *ipsi* which literally means *scattered* changed figuratively to be *operates*, reflecting a good use of a destructive action in the description of excellent

performance or achievement in the language. Instead of having *Cha scattered the computer*, we have *Cha operates the computer very well*. In (2), the expression '*Báristà rì támbè*' equally changed from '*barrister ate books*' to “*barrister has read a lot of books*”. *Úrú gòn rí*, a negative action, literally, equally changed in (3) from “*Fire has burnt the pot*” to “*the food is ready*”, which is a good achievement. Also in (4), *Lá wu Tàrí* which literally means “*the food has killed Tari*” changed to “*Tari enjoyed the food*”, figuratively.

Examples in table (4) have the use of physical or moral defect in the description of a virtue or an achievement. For instance, *Níkró rí kràwútú* (*Nikre is insulting money*) figuratively means “*Nikre is very rich*”. This is also seen in *Èbì wa yó sirá* “*Her beauty makes her mad*” which changed to “*Her beauty makes her proud*”. *Tíchà tò nkwo gràtrà* (*the teacher knows the road to the house but cannot enter*) equally changed to “*the teacher is intelligent but cannot teach*”.

Table 4. Describing a virtue or an achievement in terms of physical or moral defect

S/N		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Níkró rí kràwútú	Nikre is insulting the money	Nikre is very rich
2	Èbì wa yó sirá	Her beauty makes her mad	Her beauty makes her proud
3	Tíchà tò nkwo gràtrà	The teacher knows the road to the house but cannot enter	The teacher is intelligent but cannot teach

Table 5. Describing a happy situation in terms of a sad incident

S/N		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Ìkì mo ba rí wúlú	Your goods will catch fire today	You will make good sales today
2	Ínkre wa rí gá mómó	my money fall on the ground	I am in a state of affluence

In table (5) the sad incident *Ìkì mo ba rí wúlú* (*your goods will catch fire today*) changed to *you will make more sales today*. Also, *Ínkre wa rí gá mómó* (*my money fall on the ground*) changed to “*I am in a state of affluence*”. These all express happy situations.

In the examples above, there is a shift in meaning so that *chen* 'lion' in (1) changed to a “*successful fighter*”. Also, in (2) the word *gbàjà* “*partridge*” figuratively means “*very clever*”. These explain how excellence is described using animals in the language.

Table 6. Describing a man of excellence in terms of a wicked/evil spirit or animal

S/N		Meaning	New Meaning
1	Á ri he chen	He is a lion	He is a successful fighter
2	Gbàjà hé ví ko	He is a partridge	He is very clever

Conclusion

This study described the operation of morphological and semantic shifts in Bùh language. The language is spoken in Nasarawa and Kaduna states respectively. Some lexical items and expressions, over time, have undergone structural and meaning change in the language. Thus, this study focused on identifying such words and expressions. Language change is an incontrovertible feature of languages. A language may experience change at all linguistic levels, diachronically or synchronically. The change could be in the phonemic inventory of the language; structure of words, phrases, clauses and sentences, or meaning.

This paper has expounded morphological and semantic shifts in Bùh. As established in the analysis, certain words have undergone structural changes in the language, thereby taking other forms from their original forms. Besides that, meaning shift has also been seen to be attestable in the language. As captured in the discussion, the meaning of lexical items as well as expressions could change from positive to negative and vice versa. The paper concluded that morphological and semantic shifts in Bùh is one of the factors which causes endangerment for the language.

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