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# Analysis of Semantic Changes in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966)

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine semantic changes in *The Concubine*. Any semantic analysis must explain the semantic implications of the words and sentences used. It must also show how they are related to states, processes and objects in general. This study indicates how the semantic implications of expressions in the novel come together in the explanation of the novel as a whole. The research problem treated is the manner in which Amadi manipulates words not retaining their denotative or primary meanings and how the way he uses words has helped him to portray events in an African village successfully. This is an investigative research. A thorough investigation is conducted to discover the semantic changes, their effects in portraying the message and overall effects on the novel. The primary data are taken from the novel while the secondary data are taken from critical works on the novel. Elechi Amadi was an unarguably one of African's finest writers. Linguistic issues about his works have not been treated satisfactorily hence this study treats the application of meaning in his novel. Besides the fact that different forms of meanings are revealed and understood through this study, it adds to the existing literature on the novel. A major finding in this study is: his usage of words in the novel results in figures of speech, as a result of the fact that he wants to present a slice of life and as a result of interference from the first language of his characters. This makes his explanation very clear.

**Keywords:** Semantics, meaning, changes, literature, implications

## Introduction

Semantic change is normally about alteration in the meanings of words. (PH Mathews: 2007:360). This change could be in form of extension or widening of meaning, restriction of meaning, and figurative changes among others. It is however the figurative changes that entails a metaphor and other figures of speech that this paper is focused on. 'Semantic' is gotten from semantics. Semantics is defined by Crystal as 'A major branch of linguistics devoted to the study of MEANING IN LANGUAGE' (2008:428). Many other scholars whose definitions agree that the study of meaning is at the CENTRE of semantics are documented as follows. Ogunstiji and Olarewaju (2010:42), Adagbonyin (2017:6), Okolo and Ezikejiogu (1999:175) Uburmwangho (2000:115), Saeed (2002:3), Agbedo 2000(149), Finch, (2000:142), Umera-Okeke (2008:2) and Anagbogu et al. (2010:209). Semantic changes which is our title in this study therefore means changes that concern meaning in the novel. The meanings of words and sentences are therefore going to be studied in the novel so that the artistic benefits or otherwise to the audience will be discovered for the overall gain of scholarship. Several critical studies have been undertaken on this novel but none of the said studies have been based on semantic changes. Some of such studies are as follows.

Ebele Eko (1991) 'Elechi Amadi: The Man and His Works', under this study, it is pointed out that the use of African rituals, myths, folksongs, folktale techniques, proverbs, local metaphors and images is very much part of Amadi's style. The language of science avoids plurality and



multiplicity of meanings whereas the language of the creative artist is connotative and evocative. As a scientist, and a creative artist, Amadi has managed to combine both, worlds in the language of his novels. Furthermore, Taiwo in *Culture and the Nigerian Novel* (1976:197) opines that:

Amadi through his skillful organization and control of language, handles the descriptions of village life and the relationship between man and god so successfully, that the reader is tempted to think of his books in terms of sociological data.

A critical evaluation of the above view of Oladele Taiwo reveals that it is just a comment on Amadi's thematic exploration and not on anything linguistics.

Offor in a paper entitled: 'Jungian Archetypes and the Main characters in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*' also points out that '*The Concubine* is a novel that has its very breath from Jungian psychology as well as African tradition mythopoeia' (1987:37-43). Again the issue Offor talked about does not concern language. Other critics are: Eustace Palmer (1972), Sweeney Eileen 1986 etc. None of these critics addressed the issues we want to address in this study.

This study is hinged on the use of contextual or operational theory of meaning proposed by Wittgenstein (1953) and popularized by J.R. Firth. The type of meaning used by the artist is connotative meaning, which concern the feelings or ideas that are implied and not real meanings of words. (Ogunsiji and Olarewaju 2010:55) support our view when they recall that Crystal (1971) opines that 'connotations are the individual feelings we have about words...'

#### **A Brief Biodata of Elechi Amadi**

Elechi Amadi was born in 1934 in his village Ahu, near Port-Harcourt in Rivers state, Nigeria. He attended Government College, Umudike, Umuahia. Like other renowned writers, he later attended University College, Ibadan, where he bagged a degree in Physics and Mathematics in 1959. He worked as a land surveyor, teacher, and later a soldier. Besides, *The Concubine*, he wrote other novels, plays and a social political work, entitled: *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* (1982). He was however best recognized as a novelist. He died in 2016 in Rivers state.

#### **What is the Story About?**

*The Concubine* tells the story of a woman with superlative degree of beauty. She is kind and well behaved. However, she unknowingly, brings ill luck and death to any man that marries or attempts to marry her. Each of the men of who marries her, attempts to marry her and even desires her die mysteriously. Emenike, her first husband dies, Madume who desires her though unsuccessfully, dies.

Ekwueme, who has Ahurole betrothed to him from birth, becomes attracted to Ihuoma. Nwigwe and Adaku-Ekwueme's parents do not like this at all. They do all they can to dissuade Ekwueme from marrying Ihuoma. Marriage negotiations between Ekwueme and Ahurole are therefore hastened. They got married. Their marriage however fails because of Ekwueme's interest in Ihuoma and the love potion which Ahurole uses to control her husband from Ihuoma's attention. Ekwueme becomes mad and runs away as a result of the love potion. The villagers search for him and bring him back. As a mad man Ekwueme expresses the desire to marry Ihuoma hence he refuses to be treated unless Ihuoma is brought before him. He is obliged. He is treated and gets well still desirous of marrying Ihuoma, this time as a sane man. At this juncture, his parents agree with him.

But Anyika, the dibia speaks against the marriage. He (Anyika) is formally consulted and he reveals that Ihuoma is no ordinary human being. She is the wife of a powerful wicked sea-king. She is just in the world in human form. Any man that touches her or goes to her for marriage or anything near it will not be spared by the sea king. They consult another dibia, Agwoturumbeto who says the same thing with the only difference that if he is given what he will prescribe for sacrifice, he will be able to tie the sea king so that Ekwueme will marry Ihuoma successfully. Meanwhile the first dibia, Anyika reveals that the best that will happen is that Ihuoma can be somebody's concubine after an involving sacrifice.

Because of Ekwueme's interest in the marriage coupled with his parents' interest in his welfare, they decide to allow Agwoturumbeto offer sacrifice to tie the sea king so that the marriage can take place safely.

On the marriage eve, they decide to gather ingredients for the sacrifice. Nwonnalhouma's son shoots a lizard, one of the ingredients needed. The barbed arrow misses the lizard and pierced Ekwueme's heart. This incident leads to the death of Ekwueme, throwing Ihuoma and his parents into grief and mourning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The linguistic framework that this study is based on is the use or contextual theory of meaning which was proposed by a German scholar called Wittgenstein (1953) and made popular by Firth (1957). According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of any linguistic expression (be it a word, a phrase, a sentence) is determined by the context in which it is used as recalled by Ndimele (1997), Akuanya 1996:19 and Umera-Okeke (2015): This theory asserts that the most significant fact about language is its social function. It explains that every utterance is actualized in a culturally determined context of situation and the meaning of an utterance is the totality of all the features in it that can be identified as contributing to the maintenance of the pattern of life in the society of the speaker or writer. A careful look at the theory in question will point out the fact that it believes that meaning is acceptability of appropriateness of use. A statement is considered meaningful only if it is used appropriately in a context. This use of words in contexts may not necessarily be in tandem with the conceptual or denotative meanings of words. This is where semantic change comes in.

Elechi Amadi uses the concept in question in *The Concubine* to portray the events of the story and eventually present a slice of life where all his characters have psychological profundity.

### **Methodology**

This is an investigative research. The researcher read the novel thoroughly from the first chapter to the last and discovered the semantic changes in the novel. Besides reading the novel, the researcher also consulted the critical works which are part of what constitutes the secondary data as well as the literature available on *The Concubine* to find out critics' opinion on the text. The information communication technology was used and the net was thoroughly searched, to ensure that our topic had not been treated by other scholars and to ensure that our information on the author and the text is current.

### **Method of Data Collection**

The primary data for analysis were taken from the text. To ensure that we presented a comprehensive view, the data were sourced from the first chapter to the last chapter of the

novel. The secondary data were taken from the critical works on the text as well as the commentaries on the novel by journalists in the new Statesman and the Guardian news papers.

### Semantic Changes

Semantic change occurs when the meaning of a word or phrase or an expression changes from the original one to a newly assigned one in the context. See P.H. Mathews (2007:360).

(a) The sun was *just starting its journey to Chiolu* when the worshippers trooped back to the village. (18) The numbers in brackets after the quotations show the pages in the novel where they are found.

In the above sentence, the italicised part means the sun was just, beginning to set. The sun is going to Chiolu in the vocabulary of the people in Omokachi society means that the sun is setting.

Omenogor (2021:55) 'explains that connotative meaning concerns the feelings or ideas that are implied and not real meanings of words'. David Crystal (1971) in Ogunsiji and Olarewaju (2010:55) supports the above view when he says connotations are the individual feelings we have about words, i.e the feelings they arouse in our minds. The stylistic effect of the above usage lies in the fact that Amadi succeeds in making the expression very clear as he likens how death take someone, to how fruits are reaped, of course all of us know how fruits are reaped.

c. But you need a young maiden who would obey you and give you the *first fruits* her womb. (91)

The use of 'fruits' in the above sentence is also connotative because the author does not mean ordinary fruits. 'fruits' means 'children' above. It is also used to promote clarity in the situation. The statement was made by Ihuoma, the heroine in the novel, during a dialogue with Ekwueme the hero. Ihuoma rationalized and agrees that herself and Ekwueme love each other but she is not the best person for Ekwueme to marry.

(d) Think of the empty *thing* before you now. (164).

What attracts our attention above is the use of 'thing' in reference to Ekwueme by his mother, Adaku. Agreed that 'thing' can also be used to stand for a living being but its use here shows that Ekwueme is no longer the way he was. The stylistic importance is that with the usage of 'thing' Amadi succeeds in portraying the condition of Ekwueme, he is no longer normal, no more with his senses or appears bewitched as his mother suggests.

(e) Ekwueme *cleared* the food set before him (182).

'cleared' above has been used to mean 'ate' in the context it is used. The effect in the work is that Amadi succeeds in portraying how Ekwueme ate the food very fast because he is just found in the bush where he has been for the past two days, Ekwueme may not have eaten any food and so he is very hungry.

(f) His mother refilled his *place* and the second *helping* also *disappeared* (182)

The words that have acquired new meanings in the above sentence are: 'place', 'helping' and 'disappeared'. Amadi tells the readers that Ekwueme's mother refilled his plate and the second food put in his plate is also consumed very fast. It is still an artistic way of expressing Ekwueme's state of hunger when he is just found in the bush and brought to the house as a result of his getting insane and running away from home.

(g) 'Adaku', he cried in a terrible voice, 'do you want to leave me too?' (216)

The expression that acquired new meaning here is Wigwe, Ekwueme's father's question. This is the time Ekwueme has been involved in the serious fatal accident that claimed his life. Nwonna, Ihuoma son's arrow flying parallel with the wall, just missed a big red-neck lizard and hit the upper part of Ekwueme's belly and he (Ekwueme) fell back across the door way with a cry 'Adaku', ... do you want to leave me too?, Amadi should have written, 'Adaku', do you want to die too?, but he used the expression ...do you want to leave me too' to express the idea. The stylistic effect is that the expression has been made less unpleasant to readers. This is the figure of speech referred to as 'euphemism' which Amadi utilizes.

(h) 'I shall travel with my son',  
The woman said. (216)

Based on the circumstances of the above statement, that is when Ekwueme is involved in the fatal accident, Ekwueme at the time of the statement has not actually died, but it was certain that he is going to die. His mother makes the above statement which means 'I shall die with my son. Again, Elechi Amadi uses euphemism to present a very unpleasant situation in a rather pleasant manner.

(i) The scene was so pathetic that 'I could not tear myself away quickly. (24)

Ekwueme makes the statement to his mother. At the time his mother observes that he has been at Ihuoma's house for too long when he went to condole Ihuoma over the death of her husband, Emenike. What attracts our attention in the statement is the expression, ... 'tear myself apart' which has been assigned another meaning. The expression means 'leave' but Amadi uses 'tear myself apart' to show how emotional and pathetic the scene was.

(j) 'Please come with the elders and speak to my husband, otherwise my children and I may not survive another moon. (72)

Wolu, Madume's wife made the above statement to Chima, the oldest man and chief of Omokachi, when she went to appeal to him, to come with the elders to speak to her husband, Madume over the fact that he has become violent since he went blind. The meaning of 'moon' is not a natural satellite of the planet but it has been used stylistically to refer to a month, especially a lunar month in the sentence.

(k) Another use of the word 'moon' with the same stylistic implication is found in page 123 of this text as follows.

'That will be by the new moon which is at hand'. (123)

The statement was made by Wonuma, Ihuoma's mother on one of the occasions that Wigwe and others went for Ahurole's marriage negotiations at Omigwe. The usage of 'moon' in the sentence has the same stylistic significance with the one in sentence 'j' above.

(l) She ran towards the well and when she was a few steps from it, took a leap, but the barricade across the mouth of the well *defeated* her. (216)

The meaning of 'defeated' in the above sentence has been converted. Amadi has used 'defeated' to mean 'made it impossible for her to jump into the well but he just used 'defeated' for artistic effect.

(m) Ihuoma pondered for a while, her face down words. Then the tears rained fast and thick. (21)

Emerike, Ihuoma's husband died and Ihuoma was still crying over her husband's death. Okachi, Ihuoma's mother moved down from Omigwe to Omokachi to console her daughter. It was in this circumstance that Amadi describes Ihuoma's activities as saying:  
...the tears rained...

He has used the 'rained' in the place of 'flowed'. The stylistic significance of the usage is that he succeeds in portraying to the audience the degree of tears shed. It was a great degree hence he used 'rained' instead of 'flowed'. It is a hyperbolic expression.

(n) These bags would later *house* goat-meat and other delicacies which the women would take back to their children and grandchildren. (32)

'House' in the above sentence is what the novelist converted its meaning/ the novelist used 'house' to mean 'contain'. The stylistic usefulness of the usage is to put it to the audience that the old women would take goat-meat and delicacies in no little quantities from the ceremony. They would take as much as a house accommodates. This is another hyperbolic statement.

(o) 'When will you bring me word again?'  
'On the evening of the brother of tomorrow'. (63)

The above conversation is between Ekwueme, a beginner in love affairs and Nnenda, Nnadi's wife. This was when Ekwueme was sending Nnenda a love message for Ihuoma. 'The brother of tomorrow' in the above quotation, ought to be written, 'The day after tomorrow' but Amadi expressed it in the manner he did in order to capture local colour and express a true slice of life.

(p) You *big-eyed* fool, how dare you touch Ihuoma? (69)

Ihuoma went to harvest plantain in the piece of land earlier disputed by Emerike and Madume. Madume then met Ihuoma and ordered her to leave the head of plantain and rough handled her. It was then Nnadi, Ihuoma's brother in-law, called Madume, a big-eyed fool. Elechi would have used the word 'greedy' instead of 'big-eyed'. The novelist was writing for the Nigerian audience, so in order to capture local colour, he used the expression as most members of his audience would put it because of the interference from their first language at the semantic level of language. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) 'Big-eyed' means: astonished' 'deeply surprised', 'wondering' but Amadi used it to mean 'greedy' in the context hence the change of meaning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we observe that Elechi Amadi uses mainly the connotative and the contextual or operational type of meaning to portray his message successfully in the novel. The contextual meaning is the one that looks at the meaning of a word from the manner in which a word is applied in the sentence. If the context of a word is considered then what it suggests will become clear to the audience. This is why it is also called suggestive meaning. Which differs from the conceptual meaning. Amadi has been able to marry the contextual theory of meaning with the connotative meaning in expressing events in this novel. He displays a good literary craftsmanship in the novel.

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