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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEGBO WORDS

BY

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### Abstract

The study of words should begin with a look at the individual words before studying them as they occur together to give effects. Words have different structures in different languages. Where some languages have a whole sentence for an idea another language might have just a word for the idea.

This paper attempts to describe Legbo words as they give meaning, and a classification in terms of the words and their relationships with the sense and the actual object. This description is in terms of such units as full/form-words, loan words and their underlying natures (if any).

Finally, the different relationships between words as they form sentences are also analyzed. As a methodological basis, Saussure's theory of the 'Arbitrariness of the linguistic sign' which was simplified by Ullman is used.

### 1.1 Introduction

The word is particularly important to the historian as it is to the linguist. There are very many aspects of the word, the most important being the semantic and etymological aspects. If nothing else, the word is supposed to carry meaning. This perhaps makes this aspect more important than others for some people.

The word carries different significance for different communities. Among the Legbo speakers, the word is considered to be a very powerful weapon. The Legbo language is an Upper Cross language spoken by the Agbo people (in Abi LGA) of Cross River State. The word in this community is so powerful that it is used with caution most of the time. This can be seen in the common Legbo expression:

*I/edi ema ekakaña ek'aka kaña/ talk mouth it strong it strong*

meaning that the word is strong. The word is so powerful that it is superstitiously believed that if an unknown voice calls one, and the person answers, he will die. Someone does not answer a call unless he knows the person calling. This also means the word can be a kind of web linking the whole world. It should therefore not be used carelessly for careless usage of a word is capable of not only upsetting a part of a system in the community but also destroying the whole system.

The Agbo people, who speak Legbo language, also consider very important the time a word can be used. For instance, certain words (in songs) associated with the 'Edele' Festival are not used at other times. The Edele Festival is the main festival in the Agbo Community. It is a dance festival for women. The only men who feature in the dance are the chiefs and drummers.

Edele songs are banned from even being hummed except during the Edele festival period. The assumption here is that if particular words are used other than during Edele festival

period, something bad would befall the person who used the words.

Before any ceremony (either a meeting, a dance or some other ceremony, greetings in form of proverbs, allusions to riddles, praise names, some of which are totally incomprehensible to even some native speakers, (particularly since different levels of meaning may be superimposed on the different words), are used. It is along these lines that the word is being described in this paper.

### 1.2 Theoretical Considerations

There have been two schools of thought regarding words. One holds that the important thing about words is the meaning which its users attach to them at the time they are being used. As such, etymology has nothing to do with it. The other school holds the view that the history of a word is the only important thing that should concern word study and usage. These two views (semantic and etymological) views are extremes. From the etymological point of view, the word does not keep the same meaning for all times. On the other hand the history of a word influences the meaning speakers attach to it.

For a long time, the 'word' was considered to be the smallest semantic unit. Recently however, modern methods of analyses in linguistics have discovered morphemes to be the smallest meaningful unit. In spite of this the word still has a key position in the structure of sentences.

While it is quite easy to identify words, it is more difficult to state the criteria by which words are identified.

Among Greek Philosophers, there were debates as to the principles underlying word. The naturalists held that words and their meanings came 'by nature' and the Conventionalists held that words and their meanings came by convention. However, a lot of criticisms have in recent times changed these views. But there seems to be some sense in the two arguments. In every language, there are some words that have apparent connection between the sound and nature or sense, whereas for some other words, there is virtually no connection, and it would appear that such naming is merely a matter of convention.

De Saussure (1955) distinguished two parts within a word: expression and content. The former he called "Signifiant" and the later he called "signifie". Thus a series of sounds such as: /t + ei + b + l/ - "table", does not become a word until it is associated with a certain representation, the "signifie". A word can be represented thus: a word = acoustic image + representation. "Table" in English brings to mind a piece of furniture which is as a result, a mental image. This would not mean anything to a German for instance, who does not understand the language. Besides the acoustic image and the mental object which it evokes, there is a third phenomenon-reality itself. Saussure himself put it properly thus:

The linguistic sign does not join a thing and name, but rather a concept (mental object) and acoustic image  
Saussure, (1955)

These relations were first captured by Ogden and Richard's, (1923), and later simplified by Ullman, (1952).

Sometimes, there is no direct relation between 'signifiant' and reality. A case can be made of this with the fact that it is not always possible to designate the same thing in different languages with the same acoustic images. Example, "table", as: mesa, tish, ekpokolo, etc. That is to say that the signifiant is not motivated by reality. The linguistic sign is arbitrary, and as such there is no direct relation between the word and reality.

The word is indeed a powerful tool. In the literary world, it is used to heighten sensitivity as well as imagination. A lot of things are done with words: they are personified for instance as animals or even humans. We sometimes hear "a barrage" of words a "smoke-screen" of words, etc. All these illustrate the controversy, power and importance of the word.



## 2.0 Transparent and Opaque Words

### 2.1 Words and Languages

The question of whether a language is conventional or not is not very important these days. What is important is the fact that every language is made up of both "arbitrary or opaque" words, and "motivated or transparent" words. Legbo, like other languages has got its store of these two groups of words. These are discussed in this section.

#### 2.1.1 Transparent Words

Transparent words are sometimes regarded as motivated words. These are words which to some extent have some connection between their sounds and their senses. The motivations differ, either in the sounds, or in morphological structure, or even in their semantic background. For convenience, I shall discuss only two of these: Onomatopoeic words and metaphoric words.

##### 2.1.1.1 Onomatopoeic Words

Onomatopoeic words are words which are imitative and expressive. Some people prefer the term 'echoic'. This implies that the sense of the object is incorporated into the acoustic signal. This explains why different languages choose different names for the same phenomenon. They name objects sometimes according to how they perceive the phenomenon in question. For instance, sounds of Legbo are particularly evident in the noises of animals.

- |     |                                |             |
|-----|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 2a. | The dog's bark is described as | /gwogwoo/   |
| b.  | The cattle's noise is          | /m-mo hoo/  |
| c.  | The Goat's bleat is            | /m-me hee/  |
| d.  | The cock's crow is             | /ekokoliko/ |

In spite of the fact that languages do not use identical terms, there are cases where these formations are quite parallel. One of the popular examples which cuts across languages is the cock's crowing.

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 3a. | The English describe it as "Cock-a-doodle-do" |
| b.  | The French describe it as "cocorico"          |
| c.  | The Germans describe it as "kikiriki"         |
| d.  | The legbo describe it as "ekokolikol"         |
| e.  | The Efik/Ibibio describe it as "kokoriko."    |

In these sounds, the /k/ sound runs across these languages. It is important however to note that even with such parallels as shown above convention still plays an important part in naming. This accounts for the fact that some onomatopoeic formations bear no resemblances to each other in different languages. In this case the people choose a name according to the characteristics considered as typical. For instance, the dog's bark is described as gwogwoo, in Legbo. Gun shot is described as

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 4a | "kpoo" in Legbo                                |
| b. | "bang" or "crack" in English                   |
| c. | "um" or "paf" in Spanish                       |
| d. | "kpoo" in Ibo, Efik and Ibibio (like in Legbo) |

The bang sound is common to the cannon which is common to the English Society. The kpoo sound is common to the den guns which are very common in many African Societies.

However, once these different onomatopoeic sounds become part of the language, they often evolve just as other words do (through phonetic changes). Some of them do lose their onomatopoeic character. In such a case they join the great mass of un-motivated words.

#### 2.1.2 Metaphoric Words

Sometimes, there is a direct connection between the word and reality. In this case, the word is named after that which it resembles. Such direct motivations lead to metaphors or metaphoric expressions. Consider 5 - 7 below:

5. /ntotofi eebi gese eeka/  
rat without tail it has not

Translated literally as 'rat without tail: This expression means 'a thief: The idea behind this expression is that rats are thieves that do not belong to their. As such 'ev are thieves. But

where a human being takes things that do not belong to him, he is regarded as a rat. Since humans have no tails, the thief is simply called rat without tail.

6. /avam gweni/  
Cow White

Translated literally as someone who is easily noticed in a crowd.

The white cow is not as common as other colours and as such it is easily noticed in a crowd. This expression refers metaphorically to someone who is unlucky.

7. /letal ikafakpo/  
stone catapult

The literal meaning to this expression is 'catapults stone' referring to women. The metaphorical meaning of this expression is that women marry from any part of the world and they are sort of thrown away' from their homes.

#### 2.1.3 Descriptive Words

Some words are actual descriptions. These constitute quite a large number of Legbo vocabulary. Consider the following examples:

	Legbo Words	Description	English Equivalents
8a	/etlito/	inner house	room
b	/Lizil inn/	fowl's food	rice
c	/Etnwene/	book's house	School
d	/Etgeti/	medicine's house	hospital
e	/enunakala/	white man's salt	sugar

More examples of this class of words are given in section 3.3

Sometimes a word tells a whole history of a concept. For instance, 'tray' in Legbo is call /nai-nai/. The word /nai/ is a corruption of 'nine'. In this case, 'nine pence' which was shortened 'nai' when the pound was used as currency. A tray at that time sold for nine pence. The duplication of the word stems from a general way of duplicating items to indicate singularity, a phenomenon which is common to most Nigerian languages. Also, the word for large bowl is 'seconde'. Seconde is a town in Ghana. It was common at a time for Agbo people who had gone to Ghana to return with large bowls (sometimes called Basins). Coming originally from Seconde, the people just named them after the town.

#### 2.2 Opaque Words

Many words in different languages are entirely opaque and unanalysable. Convention is the main principle underlying such words. This implies that these words are un-motivated.

##### 2.2.1 Unmotivated Words

Many Agbo words like in most languages are apparently unmotivated. This goes a long way to support the arbitrariness of the "linguistic sign". This implies that there is no direct relationship between the "signifiant" and reality - a view which was one of Saussures' most important discoveries.

Most common nouns in Legbo seem to be just a matter of convention. Consider the following:

9a.	/ekpian/	-	chair
	/akpa/ /akpañ/	-	plates
	/eze/	-	beads
	/asi/	-	water
	/awili/	-	dress etc

There seem to be real connection between these sounds and reality.

Sometimes, a word can have several meanings. This phenomenon known as 'polysemy' results from lack of motivation of words. In this case, the same acoustic image can be the symbol for different realities. Sometimes the things which bear the same name might be relatively close, but in some other cases, the things or concepts which bear the same names might be two or more very different things with different looks and functions. Consider the following examples:

10a	Verbs	-	/du/	-	to beat a person; to pound something;
-----	-------	---	------	---	--



			to whisper.
b.	/ñwa/		to reach one's destination; to wear a dress; to go to sleep.
c.	/towo/		to run away; to thread a needle.
d.	/tu/		to dance; to direct; to weed.
11a	Noun	/(g) eti/	stick; medicine; seat.
b.		/(g) itu/	life; enjoyment.
c.		/etowo/	position in society; sitting.

### 3.0 The Word as a Unit

Words are of two kinds: full words and form-words. Some people call full-words "Contentive words" or "logical word" and form-words "functors" or "grammatical words". Full words are those which have meaning in themselves. These include such categories as nouns and verbs. Form words are those whose functions are to express the relationships of other words to one another. This group includes such categories as prepositions, conjunctions etc. (Crystal, 1991). Form words are few in number even though they are frequently used. They are also characterized by a wide range of meanings.

However, while discussing words, it is important to bear in mind the risk involved in the study of words in isolation. But in spite of this, it is still better to study words in isolation first before connecting them in sentences.

#### 3.1 Full Words

Full words constitute a greater number of Legbo vocabulary. They are used less frequently than form words. The number of full-words in existence at a particular time in any language is always more than the number within a speaker's competence. And the number is even lesser in his performance. So that the number of words that constitute the 'active' vocabulary of a language is not half the total number of the vocabulary in that language. Some full-words in common usage are given below with their English equivalents.

#### 12. Some nouns (parts of the body)

	Legbo	English
a	/etol/	head
b	/sin/	hair
c	/lesol/	face
d	/esovem/	
e	/den/	eye
f	/n-zuf/	nose
g	/ema/	mouth

#### 15. Some other Common Nouns

a	/ekpian/	chair
b	/ekpokolo/	table
c	/lemal/	door
d	/ego/	cloth

e	/nteinte/	animal
f	/ekpuan/	money
g	/waa/	child
14.	Some Common Verbs	
a	/zi/	eat
b	/toho/	sit
c	/too/	cry
d	/de/	buy
e	/waan/	cook
f	/du/	beat, pound
g	/tono/	tell
h	/tuu/	direct, weed

The list of full-words is endless. It would be noticed that there is no real systematic motivation in the choice of these sounds for the different concepts. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign could not be portrayed better.

#### 3.2 Form Words

Mention has already been made of the fact that form words are fewer in number even though they are used more frequently. Legbo has a peculiarly interesting set of form-words.

Prepositions in Legbo are relatively few. One morpheme may represent up to three or more preposition while another language like English would use different morphemes. Consider the prepositions: to, at, from, on, in. In Legbo all five are represented by one morpheme - /ke/ - with the vowel only being modified in the different environments in which it occurs. The proposition 'with' 'by' are represented as /i/. These prepositions are optional. Thus a sentence can be grammatical without a particular preposition where it would be essential in another language, like English. Consider the following:

15a	/n-zei lezanal/	I came by river
	I came by river)	
b.	/n-ze lezanal/	I came river
16a	/kiâ ke esi/	put it in bag put it in a bag
b.	/kie esi/	put bag

Both groups (a and b) of the sentences above are grammatical even though the group b have no prepositions.

On the other hand, another group of form words like the conjunction 'and' has up to three morphemes: /bii/, /etai/, /bele/, where English and most other languages have one morpheme.

The article 'a' is not represented as such: Thus it cannot be distinguished from 'one', if it must be used. Consider the following:

17a	I have a plate	
	/n-neni	akpan/
	I have	plate
	or	
	/n- neni akpan woni/	
	I have plate one	
b	A child came	
	/wahe eweli /	
	child he came	
	or	
	/Wahe woni eweli/	
	child one he came	



### 3.3 Compound Words

Compound words involve the linkage of two words to express a single idea; and cause of the fusion of the two words being mainly semantic. In Legbo, most compound words are merely descriptions with the second elements modifying the first. Consider the following:

	Compound	Description	English Equivalents
18a	/Eto gbala/ house oblong	oblong house	palour
	/Ekligbal Iesal/ spoon teeth	tooth's spoon	fork
	/asi z l/ water pouring	pouring of water	baptism
	/agba nonon/ charm finger	figers' charm	ring
	/enufi akala/ salt whiteman	white man's salt	sugar
	/aga idudummi/ pin sewing	sewing pin	needle
	/aga ikp kp / pin nailing	nailing pin	nail

### 3.4 Loan Words

Loan words refer to words which are taken from a foreign, second or alternate language and used as though it were part of the language into which it has been borrowed. This is a common feature of all languages in contact. Sometimes it is easier to borrow a word from another language rather than to coin one for a new concept. Legbo, like other languages, has got a wealth of its own share of loan words, both from neighboring native languages (Efik/Ibo/Yakkur etc.) and English. Consider the following loan words from Efik and English.

#### 19. Efik Loan Words

Legbo	Efik	English
a /Enai kwa/	/enafi ukwak/	bicycle
b /ibân/ /Ubed/		room
c /etibom/	/etubom/	leader
d /nwene/	/nwed/	book
e /egboñolo/	/ukpohode/	key

#### 20. English Loan-words

	Legbo	English
a	/wunde/	window
b	/polis/	police
c	/moto/	car
d	/eloplen/	acropplane

e /switi/

sweet

As the above examples show, most of the words borrowed from Efik are words referring to education. This suggests that the Efiks received formal education before the Agbo people. So that by the time the Agbo received education, they just borrowed the said words from the Efik language. These words have since become part of the Legbo vocabulary.

### 4.0 Conclusion

Words are very interesting phenomena. For one thing, they deal with subjects which are very interesting; for another, they illustrate the history of the people who use them. Examples have been generally cited in the paper.

However, it is important to note that words being part of a "living" language change constantly. Perhaps we should use the term "grow". Whether they are "born" of the native speakers or "adopted" from neighbours, they all undergo the same process of "growing up" until they finally "die" of "old age". Being of course replaced by "younger" words.

The issue of etymological versus semantic considerations of the word has been discussed. If we agree that there is need for both disciplines, then there is need to strike a compromise. Just as we cannot ignore Etymology completely, the meaning of a word is also very important. Afterall, what are words for if not to convey meaning? If words are part of a "living" language, they must change in meaning. Brook, (1981) summed it up appropriately.

...we must assume that because a word once had a particular meaning, it will keep that meaning and no other for all time, but on the other hand, we cannot afford to ignore etymology completely.

Both Semantics and Etymology should work hand in hand with each other. Etymology of Legbo words is outside the confines of this paper. As such, emphasis was not laid on etymology of words. Only the semantic aspects of words were discussed. This makes room for more researches into the Legbo word-structure.

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