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## CONTENT

### SECTION A: LANGUAGE

- Pragmatic Analysis of Tones and Tonal Patterns in Igala Language  
**Abdul, Mohammed Ademu** 1
- Process Choice Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015  
Inauguration Speech  
**Mohammed Maikiyari, Ph.D and Ramatu Tijani Oziti** 12
- Quantifiers in English and Izhia: A Minimalist Investigation  
**Maria-Helen Ekah, Ph.D and Chibueze Egbe Aleke** 26
- A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Images of Banditry in *Daily Trust Newspaper*  
Cartoons  
**Umar Uba Abubakar, Ph.D., Benjamin Iorbee, Ph.D and Queen  
Nguhemem Jebe-Tume** 42
- Critical Discourse Analysis of Persuasion in Donald Trump's 2024 Victory  
Speech  
**Hauwa Giwa-Ali, Ph.D** 60
- Political Discourse Analysis of Selected Plenary Speeches of Nigeria's Senate  
President Godswill Akpabio  
**Ahmad Musa Saleh and Abdul'aziz Bako, Ph.D** 73
- Rethinking Social Order: Racism within and After Covid-19 Pandemic  
**Abaya, Henry Demenongo** 84
- Irregularities In The Grammar of the English Language: Blindspots for  
Pedagogical Attention in ESL Classrooms  
**Cecilia Folasade Ojetunde, Ph.D and Osipeju, Babasola Samuel** 105
- An Analysis of Lexical Cohesive Devices in Governor Ahmadu Fintiri's  
Inauguration Speech  
**Muazu Hassan and Hauwa Giwa-Ali, Ph.D** 121
- Non-observance of Grice's Maxims: A Study of Some Selected Dialogues in the  
Play – Harvest of Corruption  
**Abdulkadir Adamu and Usman Maigari Malala** 140
- The Morphology of Personal Names in English and Ebira Languages  
**Amina Salisu Aliyu, Ph.D, Ahmadu Mohammed Dauda, Ph.D and James  
Jarafu Jawur** 153
- Impact of Gamification on Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention among Private  
Secondary School English Learners In Lagos State, Nigeria  
**Adedokun, James Adekunle and Olabode, Adeyinka Ayoola, Ph.D** 169

The Expansionist Approach to the Teaching of the English Grammatical Categories: Examples with the Naming Category <b>Khabyr Fasasi</b>	<b>187</b>
Digital Media Learning and Postmodernist Classroom Innovations in Nigerian Universities <b>Maggai Tsokwa and Fatima Inuwa</b>	<b>201</b>
The Pronunciation of the New English Native Speakers in Nigeria <b>Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji</b>	<b>210</b>
Lexico-Semantic Analysis of ASUU-FGN Impasse In Nigerian Newspapers <b>Awoniyi Olalekan Ogundeji and Happiness Uduk, Ph.D</b>	<b>222</b>
A Critical Stylistic Analysis of a Channels Television Show, 'Politics Today' <b>Waliyah A. Akeju and Muhyideen Kolawole Ayuba</b>	<b>237</b>
An Investigation on Functionality and Usage of Language Laboratories for Teaching Oral English in Colleges of Education in Bauchi State <b>Bakoji Mohammed Fema, PhD, Alhaji Abubakar, PhD and Fatima Mohammed</b>	<b>249</b>
A Pragmatic Investigation of the Speech of Former President Muhammadu Buhari on Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 <b>Habu Yusuf</b>	<b>262</b>
Rhetoricity In Orality: An Analysis of Muhammadu Dan'Anace's "Shagon Mafara" <b>Garba Adamu, Ph.D and Ashiru Abdullahi</b>	<b>277</b>
A Semantic Analysis of Selected Mwaghavul Proverbs <b>Danji Sabo and Kyetu Mandyen Danlami</b>	<b>286</b>
Investigating Linguistic Features of North-East Nigerian Suicide Notes <b>Yunana Ahmed, Ph.D and Danladi, Daniel Boyi</b>	<b>300</b>
A Morphological Study of Derivational Patterns In Android Smartphone Terminologies <b>Ahmadu Mohammed Dauda, Ph.D and Abdulkarim Musa Yola</b>	<b>315</b>
Lexical choices and Ideology in Nigeria's Security and Development Discourse in the Nigeria's Media <b>Murjanatu Sulaiman-Shika</b>	<b>326</b>
Syntax and Semantics Interface <b>Mohammed Gambo, Ph.D</b>	<b>346</b>
Colonial Legacy in Tunde Kelani's <i>Saworoide</i> : Language, Power, and Resistance <b>Okunnuwa, Sunday J. Ph.D, Ibrahim, Wahab Adegbayi, and Sobande, Olukayode Olukemi</b>	<b>355</b>

## SECTION B: LITERATURE

- An Appraisal of Cult Symbols In The Selected Songs of American POP Artists  
**Tanimu, Abubakar (Prof) and Adekunle, Joseph** 365
- Enlightenment for Empowerment: A Feminist Reading of Safiya Yero'S Najah  
**Manta G. Yadok and Ishaya: Bilyaminu Salman** 380
- Arab-Muslim Immigrants and the Limits of Cultural Citizenship in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*  
**Olamiposi Oyeleye, Ph.D., Oladiran Damilola Peju, Ph.D. and PatrickbCharles Alex, Ph.D.** 395
- The Artist and Leadership Failure In Africa: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O'S Wizard of The Crow  
**Dr. Manasseh Terwase Iortyer, Prof. Jeff Godwin Doki and Bizuum Godwill Yadok** 411
- Narratives of Conflict: A Literary Exploration of Boko Haram's Impact in Politics and Security in Nigeria's Northeast Since 2009  
**Markus Ishaku** 421
- Literary Creativity and the Condition of the Nigerian Writer in the Age of Globalization and Capitalist Economy  
**Adebayo, Abidemi Olufemi, PhD and Bukola, Olubunmi Iyabo, M.A** 431
- Amali's Faces of Shame as Reflection of Leadership at the Altar of Ethics and Decorum  
**Isah Ibrahim PhD** 442
- Of Mothers as Mistresses: Jocasta Complex and Transference in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's Season of Crimson Blossoms.  
**David Mikailu Ph.D.** 452
- Stylistic Explorations of Love: Conceptual Metaphor In Mariama Bâ'S So Long a Letter and Zaynab Alkali'S The Virtuous Woman  
**Anwar Danjuma, Maryam Mukhtar Abdullahi, Muntari Babangida and Sulaiman Harisu** 462
- The Influence of Nigerian Folktales on National Identity and Values  
**Jimoh, Olumide Yusuf, Ph.D. and Adedokun, James Adekunle** 474
- Discontents and the Quest for National Rebirth in Karen King-Aribisala's Kicking Tongues  
**Okache C. Odey** 487
- An Assessment of Performance of Bauchi State Senior Secondary School Students in Literature-In-English  
**Professor Asabe Sadiya Mohammed, Dr Alhaji Abubakar and Haruna Shuaibu Hardawa** 496



Betwixt And Between Colonial Hegemony and Contemporaneity: Examining The Voyage of Transmutation In African Drama

**Andrew Aondofa Nyikyaa** 508

Investigating the Educational Advisory Roles of Tera Proverbs

**Alheri Bulus** 527

## **SECTION C: COMMUNICATION**

The Media Influence on Economic Development Through Addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

**DANGO, Salamatu Eshi and ABDULLAHI, Hussaina Abaji** 535

Social Media Discourse and Peace Negotiations in Contemporary Nigeria

**Peter Ochefu Okpeh, Ph.D., Theodore Shey Nsairun and Okpeadua Sony Okpeadua, PhD** 546

When Robots take over Journalism: systemic Considerations for Artificial Intelligence and Practical Realities in Nigerian Television Newsroom

**Maggai Tsokwa and Tebrimam Useni Andefatso** 560

Mitigating Fake News Through Media Literacy Education: The Perception and Experience of Masaka Market Traders in Karu

**Ben Ita Odeba, Ayuba Ummah Ibrahim and Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD.** 574

An Assessment of Adherence to Journalism Code of Conduct among Journalists in Plateau State

**Dorcias Agabison, Prof. Greg H. Ezeah, Maggai Tsokwa and Orya Theophilus Tertsea** 597

An Assessment of the Two-Way Communication Model of Public Relations Used During the University of Jos School Fees Increase in 2023

**James E. Amad, Evaristus J. Ugboma and Chidimma Precious Okechukwu** 616

An Assessment of the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Business Communication in Lafia, Nasarawa state and Makurdi, Benue state, Central Nigeria

**EIMOGA Audu** 632

## **SECTION D: CREATIVE WORKS/BOOK REVIEW**

Poems for Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies

**Ismail Bala** 647

The Loss-Land

**Fatima Inuwa** 652



Dustbins and Dreams <b>Abdulkadir Mubarak</b>	<b>657</b>
The Desperate: Desire of a Feminine Soul <b>Faith Nkeri Aliyu</b>	<b>664</b>
Gumakan Zamani: A Book Review <b>Mohammad Abubakar M.</b>	<b>667</b>



## A Semantic Analysis of Selected Mwaghavul Proverbs

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### ABSTRACT

*The study is a semantic analysis of some selected proverbs of the Mwaghavul language of Plateau State. The work was anchored on the connotative and denotative meaning among other semantic tools. Qualitative approach was adopted as its design. Data was collected via interview conducted with some young and elderly native speakers of the language. The data collected was presented and analysed in tables and followed by the discussion of the findings. The study discovered that Mwaghavul proverbs carry both conceptual and connotative meanings and are used while taking into consideration the variables of concept and purpose. The proverbs are found to belong to compositional semantics, which is further separated into lexis and sentence. It was concluded that semantics is not valuable in the understanding of Mwaghavul proverbs.*

**Keywords:** Semantic Analysis, Mwaghavul Language, Mwaghavul Proverbs.

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### Introduction

The Mwaghavul people, who currently occupy about 80-85 % of Mangu Local Government area and parts of Pankshin (Takkas) both of Plateau state as their homeland, are also found in large numbers in Shendam, Quanpan, Gwol (Barkin Ladi), Bokkos, and in Kaduna State (Saminaka, Pambegua and Zaria). They are said to have migrated from the Middle East in the early years of 1700s and settled in the Chad Basin.

Their migration from the Middle East is believed to be for agricultural purposes as they love farming in the Chad Basin, precisely

the present-day Borno State of Nigeria. They were part of the historic Kanem Borno Empire, which they left Borno as the result of internal struggles and external attacks, that brought about the fall of the Kanem Borno Empire. From Borno, they came into their present land through Bauchi where they briefly stayed in the present-day Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro local government areas of Bauchi, in a village called Gambar as one of the prominent areas. Two reasons are associated with their leaving Bauchi, which are;



1. They left in search of better agricultural land.
2. They left as a result of Jihad as they refused to convert to Islam.

In all their journey up to Bauchi, it was said that they were with the Ngas and only separated when they left Bauchi and settled at different areas on the plateau. It is important to note that the Mupun, Miship (Chip), and Mushere were not distinct from the Mwaghavul, but are now different nations, ethnic groups and languages. However, the two cultures attest to the fact that they were all one ethnicity. The Mwaghavul are also known as the Sura/Surawa, but they only accept their original and gazette name \_Mwaghavul.

### Statement of the Problem

Many earlier researchers have worked extensively on the areas morphology and syntax of the Mwaghavul language at the expense of the semantic level of the language. This has left a gap that needed to be bridged, therefore, this study, besides looking at the complex nature of the language of proverbs, the richness of the proverbs as sources for teaching morals and encourage unity which brings progress and preservation of the Mwaghavul proverbs so as not to go into extinction, tries to bridge the gap left out by earlier researchers in the language and also to find out whether or not there is semantic import in Mwaghavul proverbs.

### Research Questions

The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. How can we justify the existence of Mwaghavul proverbs?
2. To what extent do the meanings of the selected proverbs fit the concepts in which they are used?
3. What are the semantic implications of some lexical items in the selected proverbs?
4. Which aspect of semantics do the selected proverbs belong?

### Semantics

Semantics is generally viewed as the study of meaning in language. It is the study of linguistic meaning which is the meaning of words phrases and sentences. It studies phenomena like concepts, meanings, and relations between words, phrases, and sentences. Semantics studies the abstract meanings of words and how they relate to each other, as well as how they are used in sentences, which is unlike pragmatics, which studies meaning in context.

Leech (1981) sees semantics as the study of meaning in language. He emphasizes that language is used to express meanings which can be understood by others. But meanings exist in our minds and we can express what is in our minds through the spoken and written forms of language. Semantics refers to the meaning conveyed by words, phrases and



sentences used in a language. It is the study of how sentences relate to real world and how they convey specific ideas or information. Semantics is concerned with understanding the intended meaning behind a particular language. It is like figuring out what people say and how they express their ideas using words. Semantics helps us make sense of what others say and convey our thoughts clearly to others.

From the above definitions, semantics studies meaning expressed through language. It specifically focuses on linguistic meaning within the context of language. While meaning can be a broad concept that applies to various contexts, such as art or symbols, semantics is concerned with understanding how language conveys meaning through words, phrases and sentences.

### **The Concept of Meaning**

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (9th edition) meaning is defined as the message that is intended, expressed or signified. Saeed (2007) describes meaning as what is communicated through language. This means that the existence of meaning precedes the language in which the speaker encodes it. It lies in the mind of the intended audience. The speaker meaning sometimes differs from the interpreted meaning. In written communication, the writer's meaning may be affected by the reader's linguistic competence, that is, the reader's knowledge of the grammar of the language used in spoken form

could be affected by noises, which will obstruct the listening ability of the reader.

According to Leech's theory (2003:36), the importance of meaning in communication is that it becomes the medium between the speaker and the hearer to understand each other. Someone can investigate easily the difference between how to deliver the meaning and how to make the hearer understand the intention. Meaning is the message that is expressed as an intended aim. Leech notes that there are only seven types of meaning, which play a vital role in understanding what is communicated. Of the seven types, five of them are identified as associative meanings. The seven types of meaning are; conceptual meaning, thematic meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, and collective meaning. Apart from the first two types listed, the remaining five types are associative meanings. Associative meaning is a less stable meaning, and varies with the individual's experience (Leech, 1981: 19). It is an expression related to individual mental understanding of the speaker.

### **Conceptual Meaning**

Conceptual meaning refers to the logical sense of the utterance that is recognizable as the basic component of grammatical competence (Mwihaki, 2004: 130). It is alternatively described as the cognitive or the denotative meaning (denotation) (Lyons 1981). This is the basic or universal meaning that can be represented at the lexical level, as



well as a clause or a simple sentence. The semantic representation of conceptual meaning is governed by two linguistic principles: that of contrast and that of arrangement. These principles are comparable to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations observed in phonological and syntactic analysis. Conceptual meaning is the literal meaning of the word indicating the idea or concept to which it refers. Leech (1981:9) says that conceptual meaning is widely assumed to be the central factor in linguistic communication, and it can be shown to be integral to the essential functioning of language in a way that other types of meaning do not. The conceptual meaning distinguishes one real meaning from the meaning of other sentences. x Conceptual meaning of a word is universal; it is the same everywhere in the world, which becomes the basis for universal communication

### **Proverbs**

The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs (p. 60) defines proverbs as a crystallized summary of popular wisdom and fancy. Proverbs have been, are and will always be timeless. The variety and the number of proverbs and proverbial phrases are boundless. No matter how old people are, what country they come from, proverbs are part of their heritage. In relation to the way of thinking of all proverb users, they comprise a good portion of common sense, experience, wisdom and, above, all truth.

From a linguistic perspective, a proverb is a source of

figurative language and metaphor. It has also been described as the “core of verbal interaction in Africa” (Oduaran, 2006). Used daily, proverbs continue to be a chief mode of communication in African communities. Generally, using proverbs in a best possible way makes one feel more confident than others when speaking. For instance, in Ethiopia, where the main language is Amharic, they take its proverbs so seriously that each year a revised book of thousands of proverbs (called an ababal or misale anegager) and riddles (called inqoqilish) is published and used as a textbook in public schools (the link to these proverbs are in this paper’s reference). Children are expected to learn them and their meanings, and adults are praised and respected for being skillful in using them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Connotative meaning is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. Saeed (2007), describes meaning as what is communicated through language. This means that the existence of meaning precedes the knowledge in which the speaker encodes it. It lies in the mind of the intended audience. The speaker meaning sometimes differs from the interpreted meaning. Similarly, Lyons (2009) posits that philosophers have debated the question “what is meaning?” with reference to language for over 2000 years. Until today, no one has yet to provide a satisfactory answer to the above question. Therefore, based on this contention, this study is centered on the



connotative meaning of Mwaghavul proverbs.

Language is fluid and full of nuances. Writers employ language with narrative techniques to create complex ideas and deeper meanings. One of the best ways to do this is through connotation, a literary device that refers to the selection of a word or a phrase for its suggested meaning instead of its literal one. It is the difference that exists between referring to an adult as “youthful” or “childish”. The definitions of the words are the same, but the implied meanings are very different. Connotation is the use of a word to suggest a different association than its literal meaning, which is known as denotation. For example, blue is a color, but it is also a word used to describe a feeling of sadness, as in: “She’s feeling blue”.

This work adopts connotative meaning as a skeletal framework in analyzing proverbs in Mwaghavul language because of its conceptual content which varies from individual to individual, from society to society, from one historical period to another or from culture to culture.

## Research Methodology

### Research Corpus

The research corpus was made up of (20) twenty Mwaghavul proverbs and their literal interpretations. The meaning implied of the social, moral and their cultural function of the Mwaghavul proverbs are considered in this study in order

to have an in-depth analysis of the selected Mwaghavul proverbs.

## Criteria for Corpus Selection

Two criteria were used for corpus selection of this study. These are the representativeness and accessibility. Accessibility ensures that the data are easily accessible to the researcher, while representativeness ensures that the selected data represent the discussion between some native speakers of Mwaghavul that were interviewed.

## Source of Data

The data which consists of mainly of selected Mwaghavul proverbs. These were gotten from Mwaghavul native speakers. The speakers comprises both the young and old: (2) two elderly and (3) three young members, who were knowledgeable in Mwaghavul language and culture. This is because they are known to be vast in the norms, customs and traditional values of their society and can read and write in the Mwaghavul language.

## Method of Data Collection

The researcher used interviews, note taking and voice recording to collect the data. The responses during the interview of the selected Mwaghavul natives were then transcribed into texts for analysis.

### Method of Data Analysis

A qualitative method of data analysis was adopted by the researcher. The approach was adopted for the identification, description, discussion and

interpretation of the selected Mwaghavul proverbs. The approach adopted is descriptive and discursive in nature. It is therefore deemed appropriate since the study is qualitative.

### Data Presentation, Analysis and Findings

#### Data presentation and Analysis

SN	MWAGHAVUL PROVERBS	LITERAL INTERPRETATION	MEANING
1	Maar a nwoo long, kat tap baa yaa ndang.	Farming is a wealth snake, so seize it by the tail.	Farming is lucrative; it should be embraced.
2	Ba am ki dwang ndin aas kas.	Water does not sour without flour.	There is no rumour without a cause.
3	Saar finna muu a paad.	My fingers are five.	I am innocent.
4	Mii a mimer.	A relative is a scar.	Like a scar is permanent, so are relative because once bound by blood, they cannot be replaced.
5	Vyang shangghir vuum,vuum tung aas ngloghomtu aku nloghomtu gong pee di nnwa.	One eyed person removes thorn from a blind's leg, the blind makes food for the leper, so that the leper guards him.	There is power in unity, because everyone has an edge over another.
6	Nga nne angaa dak, mee ginang mmepee.	You think you are the only one, there is someone somewhere.	You are not alone in/with such situation.
7	Kwar sushi ku aa la medpee ndi	You decided to be jumping, instead of running	People ignorantly use the wrong path instead of the right one.
8	A naa mat dang a lap,tasi a lap ni kyakpee kas ji taar a wed nkoss paa.	Observe a woman before you marry, lest you marry a troublesome wife, so you do not have to consult the priest.	Be observant lest you find yourself in difficult a problem.



9	A dyeel dang lek	Fighting is wealth	To achieve much in life, you need to struggle/fight.
10	Nwor a bak kaa,ngyal a sak maar	Commerce is an unprofitable stress, it is better to farm.	One's wealth is measured by his harvest, so farm well.
11	Ngizok di a naan pos lip nni be baa ngu bees ni di kas.	A dreadlock hair which is anointed by God, no one can despise it.	Anyone who God has blessed, no man can curse him/her.
12	Ba shopkaa mmak dee a koppee kiis kas.	Hair cannot take the place of a head pad.	Natural ability provides self-contentment.
13	Kaat ki aryeem mwaa	Meet a bear on it way home.	When you refuse to heed to warning, trouble shall befall you.
14	Drong a toghol jaap a bin.	Robust on the outside and empty on the inside.	Do not claim to be what you are not.
15	Munvul a long,micek a muud.	Two is wealth, loneliness is a disease.	Two is better than one.
16	Kurum a kaa ting kir si,kat a naa njong be ale ne a so a kaa,kat a so dang ni so mer nga	Humans are like silk cott,on trees, when sighted afar it looks like smaller; when you come closer you cannot climb it.	Men look simple but difficult when you get close to them.
17	Soghot ki wal a mishin	A wizard desires to be alone.	An evil person takes time alone to plot evil plans.
18	A naan le munvul,pal be ginang ndyeep gha.	It is God that made us two; when you fall, the other helps you up.	God created us two to help each other, as no one is an island.
19	Jinjin a mwagha, tadaar a nmin naan	Today is yours, tomorrow is God's	You may have it today, but only God knows tomorrow.
20	La reep a kaa am dung si	A damsel is like a river.	A single woman is accessible to everyone.

These Mwaghavul proverbs are used to convey social functions. This means there are various societal facts and ethical information embedded in them that is meant to help the people solve certain problems. They also



convey moral functions, because of their association with rights or norms that conform to the morally acceptable standard of the Mwaghavul people. Moreover, some of them are culture bound, as they portray the cultural way and habits of the Mwaghavul people through the literal and implied meaning presented in them.

### Findings and Discussion

This section answers the research questions identified at the beginning of the study based on the data collected.

#### 1. How can we justify the existence of Mwaghavul proverbs?

The justification of the existence of Mwaghavul proverbs is overtly stated in the data presented above. These proverbs contain some elements of myth and legends. Finnegan (1985) states some pointers to the analysis of proverbs. These include shortness, terseness, fixity and poetic (aesthetic) quality in style and sense. In proverbs, many abstract ideas, values, and emotions are represented by certain emblems. In some proverbs, some animals or birds with some peculiar attributes are used to symbolize some actions and to compare the proverbs in progress to some other happenings. The symbols could be fixed or unfixed. The unfixed symbols are some emblems and actions which are symbolic in their context only, while the fixed symbols are those emblems, actions and values which are culturally recognized anywhere and anytime. Indeed, a user of proverbs

has the arduous task of ensuring that his usage is appropriate and suitable for the occasion he is using it (Hymes, 1974; Bashir and Idris-Amali, 2012:495). Okojie (2004:2) states that among the Esans, "anybody who makes a proverb and does not end it well is a confused man." This serves as a warning to people who speak in proverbs to express themselves clearly or face the consequence of being misunderstood.

Therefore, "proverbs epitomize a people's language showing not just wit, humour, wisdom, but life experience too. Hence, it is the major medium of expression of the aged and wise". Older people, especially men, use proverbs to communicate meaning to the younger generations. According to Okpewho (1992:230), "age and experience put them (elders) in a better position to understand the full implication of the wisdom and truth contained in the proverbs and so to impart these to the younger members." This is probably why older folks talk more in proverbs than the younger people among the Mwaghavul people and even among speakers of other languages in Nigeria at large. Thus, Alagoa (1968:235-242) states that proverbs are pithy sayings of the wise, which embody personal and general historical experience.

Some of the proverbs analyzed depict the culture, moral and social values of the Mwaghavul people. For example, the proverb "maar a nwoo long, Kat tap baa Yaa ndang" which is interpreted as "Farming is a wealth snake, so seize it by the tail" meaning "Farming is a lucrative business; it



should be embraced" text (i) is a common proverb because Farming among the Mwaghavul people is considered as a major occupation, for they are predominantly farmers, Farming is one way in which someone's wealth is measured. Therefore, the proverbs explicitly show that Mwaghavul people give prominence to farming over any other occupation. Therefore they use such proverbs to pass cultural norms and values to one another. More so, some proverbs depict morals, for example, the proverb "Drong a toghol jaap a bin", interpreted as "Robust on the outside and empty on the inside", which means "Do not claim to be what you are not" Text (14).

Moralityrelated proverbs explicitly show that Mwaghavul People recognize the rights and norms that conform to the moral standards of the Mwaghavul people. Proverbs are used to disseminate traditional wisdom, knowledge and apparent truths that are handed down from generation to generation, especially in the absence of vigorous written literature. They are used as the guardian and the carrier of a nation's philosophy and its genesis (Mieder, 2004; Tae-Sang, 1999). Miruka (1994) states that proverbs serve as reflective devices that provide us with a codified wisdom of a society that has been accumulated over many years of pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

## **2. To what extent do the meaning of the selected proverbs fit the concept in which they are used?**

Based on the data collected, Mwaghavul proverbs fit into the

concept in which it is used because the proverbs touch every aspect of life ranging from social, cultural, and moral. Whether they are called maxims, truisms, cliches, idioms, expressions, or sayings, proverbs are small packages of truth about a people's values and beliefs. Values like ambition, virtue, generosity, and patience are addressed in proverbial sayings from almost every culture. Yet, each culture has proverbs that are unique to it. The saying, "If you want to know a people, know their proverbs" illustrates this. For example, sayings from various Native American tribes often reflect their view of the land as sacred: "Take only what you need and leave the land as you found it" (Zona, 1994) and the importance of spirituality: "Wisdom comes only when you stop looking for it and start living the life the Creator intended for you" (Zona, 1994). Japanese proverbs often refer to morals: "An evil deed remains with the evildoer" (Zona, 1996) and discretion: "The tongue is like a sharp knife, it kills without drawing blood" (Zona, 1996). Many Mexican proverbs reflect the thinking and values of rural people or the average person on the street and hope is a common theme: "Hope dies last of all" (Sellers, 1994). This is akin to how the Mwaghavul people, through their proverbs, reflect their cultural values and traditions. For instance, the Mwaghavul people believe so much in unity, as it is reflected in their motto "Walshak, balka ki bamshak mpe sekyen" which is translated as "unity, compassion, and peace for progress. This explicitly explains the importance of unity among the



Mwaghavul people. Unity is a thing of utmost importance, because as Mwaghavul people are predominantly farmers, during cultivation, they involve in several farming activities together ranging from tilling, weeding and harvesting, which are usually done in groups, involving young children, young men and women, elderly men and women. This has also helped to foster unity among the Mwaghavul people. This is also reflected in their proverbs like "Vyang shangghir vuum,vuum tung aas ngloghomtu aku nloghomtu gong pee di nnwa" translated as "The one-eyed person removes thorn from a blind's leg, the blind makes food for the leper, so that the leper guards him" which means "There is power in unity, because everyone has an edge over another".

This is also found in the proverb "Munvul a long,micek a muud", translated thus," two of us are richness, loneliness is a disease", which means "two is better than one". This is a reflection of the cultural ideologies, belief system and values of the Mwaghavul people. Also, another cultural ideology of the Mwaghavul people is reflected in the proverb is the "importance of farming". as seen in the proverb " maar a nwò long , kàt tap baa yàa ndang" translated as " Farming is a wealth snake; so seize it by the tail" which means "Farming is lucrative; it should be embraced". Another proverb is,"Nwor a Bak kàa, ngyal a ask maar" translated as "Commerce is unprofitable stress; it is better to farm", which means "One's wealth is measured by his harvest; therefore farm well". Among the

Mwaghavul, children are taught farming, as it is more profitable to farm than to do any other profession, for any man whose farm produce finishes before the next farming season is considered a weakling.

Another concept is that of the existence of gods and deities. The Mwaghavul believe in gods which is seen in the proverb in text 18: "A na'an let Munvul pal,be ginang ndyeep gha" which is translated as "It is the god that made us two; when you fall, the other helps you up" which means God created us two to help each other up, for no one is an island.

### **3. What are the semantic implications of some lexical items in the selected proverbs?**

It was revealed that some of the lexical items in the selected proverbs selected are heavy in meaning deduced either through connotation or implicature. For example, in (text 4), the proverb "Míi a mimer" is interpreted as "A relative is a scar". The proverb suggests that just like a scar is permanent, so are people bound by blood which can never be altered. The lexical item "scar" which a relative is, because blood cannot be altered, so it remains like a scar is, which never fades.

Another lexical item is seen in the proverb in text 9," A dyèl dang lek" which translates as "fighting is wealth". This suggests that for humans to achieve much in life, he/she you need to hustle and struggle. The lexical item "fighting" indicates the struggle we go through

in life in order to make a living. In the first look, one can deduce that the word "fighting" could mean a physical combat, but looking at the sentence critically, the word "fighting" connotes that one must struggle in order to make it in life.

#### 4. Which aspect of semantics do the selected proverbs belong?

From the analysis, it has become clear that the proverb analyzed fall under the sentence or text semantics. Arewa and Dundes (1964:71) define a proverb as "a phrase that summarises a situation, passes judgment, suggests a course of conduct, or acts as a secular precedent for contemporary activity". Sentence or text semantics concentrates on the combination of sentences, such as the representations of real or hypothetical facts into coherent, narrative, descriptive or argumentative structures. For instance, this is depicted in the proverb in text 6: "Ngha ne aah ngha dak,mèe ginang mmepee" which is translated as "you think you are alone, there is someone somewhere". The following can be deduced from this proverb:

(i) The proverb contains two clauses;

(a)" you think you are alone"

(b) "There is someone somewhere"

(ii) These are real life situations because most a times when we find ourselves in some situation, we feel we are all alone, as if we are the first to go through such a situation. From

the texts presented, (i) contains two clauses which represent sentence semantics, and (ii) suggest real life conditions.

Moreover, the evidence of text semantics can also be seen in the proverb in text 8: "A naa mat dang a lap, tasi a lap ni kyakpee kas ji taar a wed nkoss paa", translated as "Observe a woman before you marry, lest you marry a troublesome wife, so you do not have to consult the priest", the following can be deduced.

(i) The proverb contains the following information:

(a) "Observe a woman before you marry..."

(b) "lest you marry a troublesome wife..."

(c) "so you do not have to consult the priest..."

The combination of the above clauses give rise to a coherent structure like this: Observe a woman before you marry, lest you marry a troublesome wife, so you do not have to consult the priest" This therefore qualifies the proverbs under the aspect of text semantics, as it also relates to the real world. Furthermore, the evidence of text semantics is seen in text 1: "maar a nwoo long, Kat tap baa Yaa ndang" which is interpreted as "Farming is a wealth snake, so seize it by the tail."

(i) Which contains two clauses (main and dependent)

(a)" Farming is a wealth snake..."



(b) "so seize it by the tail..."

The above clauses give rise to the proverb; "Farming is a wealth snake", so seize it by the tail." Therefore, these proverb qualify under the aspect of text semantics. It has been stressed that Mwaghavul proverbs are symbolic expression of the people's values, ideologies, and beliefs. These proverbs are influenced by the linguistic and sociocultural experience of the native speakers of the Mwaghavul language. The saying, "If you want to know a people, know their proverbs" illustrates this. For example, sayings from various Native American tribes often reflect their view of the land as sacred: "Take only what you need and leave the land as you found it" (Zona, 1994) and the importance of spirituality: "Wisdom comes only when you stop looking for it and start living the life the Creator intended for you" (Zona, 1994).

## Summary and Conclusion

### Summary

The study focuses on the semantic analysis of Mwaghavul proverbs. It explores the meaning of the proverbs through the skeletal framework of connotative type of meaning. The study justifies the existence of proverbs in Mwaghavul cosmology and the meanings heavily embedded in the proverbs. The meanings of the selected proverbs are derived via implicature and connotation among other semantic components. The study also reveals that this Mwaghavul proverbs fit their context of usage. Finally, the study proves

that Mwaghavul proverbs fall under the aspect of text semantics.

## Conclusion

As a branch of linguistics that studies meaning, semantics enables a speaker or writer to use language to achieve their intension. Semantic analysis, on the other hand, helps listeners to identify with ease the speaker's or writer's intention and make communication more effective. By analyzing proverbs, learners can gain a better understanding of the cultural values and beliefs of the people who use those proverbs which in this case is the Mwaghavul people. This can help them to become more proficient in the language and think critically about the world around them. The study concludes that semantic is necessary if we want to understand Mwaghavul proverbs.

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