HOMONYM DISTRIBUTION IN ẸDO: A CASE OF THE VERB "GBE"

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Abstract

This paper examines the various homonymous forms of the Ẹdo verb gbè. The study investigates the homonymous forms of the verb gbè in different contexts and how they are distributed within its semantic field in the language. The data available to the study comprises different homonyms of the gbè verb that were sourced from the Ẹdo native speakers, distributed across different demographic variables. The data were solicited through interviews, family, and other group discussions on several everyday topical issues that provide the informants with the appropriate contexts in which they can use the language in normal free-flowing everyday conversations. The homonymous lexical items that were observed in the recorded speeches were later extracted and sorted out, paying attention to the appropriate context in which they have been used. The extracted data were thereafter observed and objectively described. The analysis shows that the homonymous forms of the Ẹdo gbè verb are ordered along the lines of the different contexts of usage and each is further organized into sub-contextual fields. The paper concludes that homonym distributions in the Ẹdo language are ordered into various contextual and sub-contextual fields that account for their effective disambiguation and conversational appropriateness.

Keywords: Ẹdo, homonym distribution, contextual usages, semantic field, verb.

1.   Introduction

This study sets out to examine the observed different forms of the verb *gbè* in the Ẹdo verbal system. The objectives are to investigate the homonymous forms of *gbè* and to show how its meaning varies in different contexts of usage in the Ẹdo language. The study is motivated by the observed differences in the use of the verb *gbè* in different contexts. This observation was made while analyzing synchronic data for a different study on the Ẹdo verbal and adjectival classes. Upon preliminary investigation, *gbè* was observed to have homonymous forms, thus giving rise to the present study in which a more critical account of the forms is presented. This paper is a descriptive one that holds onto no particular theoretical framework.

According to Greenberg (1966), Ẹdo is a Kwa language. Elugbe (1989) has the language as Edo(Bini) in his Edoid language family while it is classified as a Benue Congo language by Williamson and Blench (2000). The native speakers of Ẹdo language are spread across seven local government areas in Edo State, Nigeria. These areas include Egor, Oredo, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Uhunmwode, Ovia North East, and Ovia South West. It is observed in Imasuen (1998) that native speakers of Ẹdo are also found to be permanently resident in some communities of Delta and Ondo States. The language is tonal and has a total of twelve (12) vowels and twenty-seven (27) consonants (Omozuwa 1987, 1989, 2010; Adeniyi 2000; Evbuomwan 2018, Evbuomwan & Edobor-Uzamere 2019).

2.   Homonyms

Homonyms are words that have the same form but differ in meaning. As Abu-Humeid and Altai (2010:964) explained, "the word "homonym" comes from the conjunction of the Greek prefix *homo-* meaning "same", and suffix *-ōnymos*, meaning "name" and Mamedova (2019) observed that the phenomenon has generated several debates in the attempt to approximately classify it and account for its true nature. It is generally seen as "a term used in semantics for lexical items that are identical in spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings" (Lyons 1982:72, Richards & Schmidt 2002:241, Yule 2006:107). In addition to this "strictly traditional view" as Tulloch, 2017:1 puts it), words that sound alike, irrespective of spellings are also considered as homonyms by linguists such as Hartmann and Stork (1976) and Atichison (1993).

In Lyons (1982) and Allan (1986), a distinction is made between *complete*, *full* or *absolute* homonyms, where words are identical in both pronunciation and spellings and *partial* homonyms where the identity is only in one of their spellings and pronunciations. Other types of homonyms explained in Abu-Humeid and Altai (2010) include *word homonym* in which all aspects of the paradigm and possible collocation of words are identical, *lexical homonym* in which the homonymous words belong to the same lexical class but differ only in their lexical meanings (for example, *trunk* may be a part of an elephant, or a storage chest), as well as *grammatical homonym* in which case the differences between words are not only lexical but also grammatical, as in *cut* which may be a verb, a noun, or an adjective.

3.   Methodology
The data analyzed in the study comprises varied usages of the verb *gbè* in different contexts, including lexical, phrasal, and clausal structures in the language. The data were sourced from eight (08) speakers of the Ẹdo language in the seven local government areas in which the native speakers of the language are found in Edo State, Nigeria. The informants cut across different local government areas of origin, occupations, levels of education, sexes, and ages. They were engaged in different discussions on various issues in both guided and unguided interviews, to get natural everyday constructions in free-flowing ordinary Ẹdo expressions that show the true nature of the language. The conversations were recorded with a digital voice recorder.

The different semantic usages of the verb *gbè* that were observed in the recorded utterances were later extracted, and organized as used in different contexts. The organized data were further read out to three other Ẹdo speakers, two of which are practicing linguists, for verification and confirmation of usages before they are discussed in the study.

4.   The Verb *Gbè*
The verb *gbè* is observed, in this study, to have varied semantic interpretations when used in different contexts. The study observed that the meanings of the verb are different in each case from, though related to, the lexical meanings of the verb. In this section, the lexical and contextual usages of *gbè* are discussed.

4.1   Lexical Meanings
The verb *gbè* has, at least, four (04) basic lexical meanings in what can be described as a homonymous relationship. These meaning variations are shown below.

    1. gbè 'kill' → a) Úyì gbè òfẹ́n
                     Uyi kill rat
                     'Uyi is killing a rat'
                   b) Íràn gbè ùdián
                     3pl kill tsetse-fly
                     'They are killing tsetse fly'

    2. gbè 'beat' → a) Vbè ọ́ gbè Òsàyí?
                     QM 3sg beat Osayi
                     'What is making Osayi cry?'
                   b) Ghẹ́ gbè mwẹ́ ọmọ́
                     NEG beat poss child
                     'do not beat my child.'

    3. gbè 'hit' → a) Ọ̀ dé gbè mwẹ̀ òwẹ́
                     3sg fall hit poss leg
                     'It fell on my leg.'
                   b) Òtà bí ẹ̀khù gbè ẹ́rè
                     Ota push door hit 3sg
                     'Ota hit it with the door'

    4. gbè 'dance' → a) Íran gbè vbè èmwá
                     3pl dance in   here

'They are dancing here'
    b)   Íyè   gbè yé ìhuàn Òsàyọ̀mọ́rré
         mother dance in song Osayomorre
         'Mother is dancing to Osayomorre's songs'

In the examples in 1a-b, the verb *gbè* means 'to kill'. In these contexts, *gbè* represents *kill+present tense*, hence *Úyì gbè òfẹ́n* in 1a means that "Uyi is killing a rat" while *Írà gbè ùdián* in 1b means "They are killing tsetse fly". In 2a-b, the homonymous *gbè* is used in different contexts where it means "to beat". Thus, *Vbè ọ́ gbè Òsàyí* in 2a and *Ghẹ́ gbè mwẹ̀ ọ̀mọ́* in 2b mean "What is making Osayi cry?" (that is, what beats Osayi") and "Do not beat/flog my child", respectively. In 3a-b, another homonymous form of *gbè* is used to express the concept of "hit" in different contexts of *Ọ̀ dé gbè mwẹ̀ òwẹ̀* "it fell on my leg" (in 3a) and *Òtà bí ẹ̀khù gbè ẹ́rè* "Ota hit it with the door" (in 3b). The homonymous form in 4a-b means "to dance" as in *Íran gbè vbè èmwá* "They are dancing here" (in 4a) and *Íyè gbè yé ìhuàn* Òsàyọ̀mọ́rré "Mother is dancing to Osayomorre's songs" (in 4b).

Given the different meanings of the verb *gbè*, the word can be given four different lexical statuses in the Ẹdo language. In this sense, there are four different lexical entries for the form, and this gives four forms – (1) *gbè* "kill", (2) *gbè* "beat", (3) *gbè* "hit", and (4) *gbè* "dance". These are homonymous, having the same form and the same pronunciation in each case, but having different meanings. The same form and the different meaning realizations are represented in the illustration below.

5.   Gbè   kill / beat / hit / dance
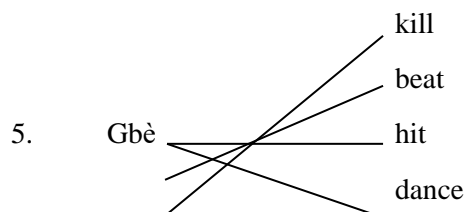
Thus, the forms are different lexical items in the language that are similar in pronunciation and their spellings but have varied homonym distribution. The different lexical status of each item is established by the fact that they can stand on their own as lexical morphemes, and these meanings are primary options that the speakers of the language readily think of as the meaning of the form when presented with the term, in the different context of use. In addition to these, the study observes that the form can also manifest phi-features when inflected for tense and number as shown in the following.

    6a)   Ímádé gbè òfẹ́n 'Imade is killing a rat'
      b)   Ímádé gbé òfẹ́n ' Ímádé killed a rat'
      c)   Ímádé gbèlè òfẹ́n ' Ímádé is killing a rats'
    7a)   Dè èmwí nè ọ̀ gbè ọ̀mọ́ ná? 'What is making this child cry?'
      b)   Dè èmwí nè ọ́ gbè ọ̀mọ́ ná? 'What made this child cry?'
      c)   Dè èmwí nè ọ̀ gbèlè èmọ́ ná? 'What is making these children cry?'

The examples in 6 and 7, above, demonstrate instances in which the verb *gbè* may be inflected for tense and number. for instance, *gbè* in 6a bears a low tone and is in the present tense while *gbè* in 6b which is in the past bears a high tone. in 6c, the verb is affixed with *-lè* which inflects it for plurality (i.e. number). In a similar way, *gbè* is in the present tense and bears a low tone in 7a, past tense with a high tone in 7b, and is inflected for number in 7c where the suffix *-lè* is also added to the base form.

Besides these lexical usages, the verb *gbè* is also used in other structural contexts in Ẹdo. Where this is the case, the usages have varied semantic implications, as discussed in the following subsections.

4.2   Causative Meanings

The data for the present study reveal that the verb *gbè* can be used to express causative actions in phrasal structures in which it is followed, immediately, by a noun. Consider the following.

    8.a)   gbè + úgbó   →   gbúgbó
                   farm   'to make farm'

      b)   gbè + ọ́dẹ̀n   →   gbọ́dẹ̀n

| | | joke | | 'to make a joke' |

c)	gbè + ódán	→	gbódán
	negate		'to negate/oppose an idea'

9.a)	gbè + ízẹ̀	→	gbízẹ̀
	rice		'to produce rice'

b)	gbè + ògì	→	gbógì
	melon		'to break/crack melon'

c)	gbè + ùnú	→	gbùnú
	mouth		'to become dumb'

d)	gbè + àvién	→	gbàviẹ́n
	vagina		'to have sex with a lady'

e)	gbè + àkhé + àmẹ̀	→	gbàkhámẹ̀
	pot water		'to rupture the amniotic sac'

f)	gbè + àkhé + èvé	→	gbàkhévè
	pot tears		'to burst into tears'

The verb *gbè* in 8, though lexical upon initial consideration, cannot be said to occur as individual items, given that its interpretation differs on the account of the object noun that it occurs with, thus manifesting varied semantic distributions. That is, *to make* in 8a-b (as in to make a farm, make a joke), and *evoke* in 8c (as in to bring about the opposite of what is intended). In each case of 8a-d, the verb *gbè* functions as a causative agent, bringing about some volition in the phrases. Its true meaning is, therefore, specified by its co-occurrence with an appropriate noun. This way, its context determines its distributional meaning.

In 9a-d, in addition to the context determinacy in each usage, the meanings are observed to be pragmatic. This way, *gbè* means to *mill/process* in 9a-b (as in refining produce into consumable forms), to *close/lock* in 9c, to *penetrate* in 9d, and to *burst open* in 9e-f. Again, the verb is distributed along different semantic lines, though the forms are homonymous, and serves as the causative agent that initiates the action expresses in each of the presented examples. It is worthy of note that the phrases, though made up of two or more words, are used as single terms in actual speech situations. This is attributed to the fact that the structures have been so used over time and the verb *gbè* has lost its individual meaning in the phrases. It will have no specific lexical meaning in this context if any attempt is made to decompose the phrase.

4.3   Reproving Meanings
The corpus analyzed in the present study show instances in which the verb, *gbè* is used in a sentence to express reproval. In this case, the meaning of each homonymous forms depends on the sentential context in which it is used. These are illustrated in 10 below.

10.a)	Gbè íràn ùdián nè ọ̀ rrì íràn
	3pl tsetse-fly comp 3sg eat 3pl (kill the tsetse fly that is biting them)
	'Reprove their behaviours'

b)	Làhọ́, gbè úyì rùẹ́ yè ègbé
	please respect 2sgPoss in self (attach your respect to yourself)
	'Please, respect/behave yourself'

c)	Ghẹ́ gbè mwẹ̀ ọ̀kán
	Neg poss mockery (Do not rub mockery on me)
	'Do not mock me'

      d)   Íràn gbè mwẹ̀ ọ̀tàgiẹ́
           3sg   1sg talk-of-laughter (They rubbed mockery on me)
           'They are making me a subject of ridicule'

      e)   Gbè ènẹ́ ègbè   ruẹ́   yè ègbé
            comp body 2sgPoss in   body (rub your body's on your body)
           'Mind your business'

Here, the meaning of the verb *gbè* is only determined by the understanding of the entire sentence. Its use in 10a-e is figurative and within the purview of pragmatics. Although *gbè* may mean *kill* in 10a and *apply to* or *rub onto* in 10b-e, in its lexical form, these meanings are lost, so to say, in the figurative interpretation of the sentence and do not feature in the pragmatic usages. The contexts of use also help to disambiguate the meanings of the verb in each sentence.

The verb *gbè* is used in 10 to achieve satiric and behavioral reproval purposes. What this means is that *gbè*, in addition to the context of usage, is used to ridicule negative manners as well as to correct erring members of the society towards making them conform to acceptable societal norms.

5.   Conclusion
This paper has described the homonymous usages of the verb *gbè* in the Ẹdo language. The study analyzes synchronic data that show the different semantic implications of the verb in different contexts of use. The paper established four basic lexical meanings for the verb *gbè* and reveals that it is used to express causative and reproving intentions in the language, in addition to its lexical meanings. The meanings of the different homonymous forms of *gbè* in Ẹdo are effectively disambiguated by the different contexts in which they are used.

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