

Metaphors and Meanings Hidden in Cultures: Dance of the Spirits in an African (Esan) Tradition

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Abstract

Within the rubric of the thought systems of the Esan People of Nigeria, is found the conceptual combination "Dance of the Spirits" associated with the doings – basically the style of dancing and entertainment during festivals and the role played in maintaining peace and order in the community – of the group called *Ikpabònělimin*. *Ikpabònělimin* literally translate as "Clapping for the Spirits" as it is derived from the Esan words *Ikpe*, *Obò* and *Èlimin* which mean "Drumming" (or Clapping), "Hand(s)" and "Spirit(s)" respectively. The individual members of this group are seen as "spirits" and are accorded an esteemed respect and obedience by members of the society as though they were not the biologically composed human beings that they are but in fact, essentially spirits. This sort of conceptualization puts one on a logical ground to ponder if conceptualizing *Ikpabònělimin* as the dance of the spirits or its members as essentially spirits is literal or depicts experience or if the concept is a factual or genuine interpretation of observation. Does this sort of conceptualization present any essential relationship between language, meanings and concepts when viewed or examined from the standpoint of the basic assumptions accorded meanings and concepts by cognitive linguists, scientists and psychologists alike? This paper examines some of these basic assumptions about meanings and concepts to ascertain if there are any grounds for accepting them. The examination of these assumptions is essential for this discourse because it will facilitate the elucidation of concepts like *Ikpabònělimin*. For the outcome of the scrutinization of these basic assumptions will determine whether concepts and meanings are universal or contextual. It will also aid us in determining whether metaphoric expressions being part of our use of language, can be understood outside the frame of reference or context of use. The resolution here will influence how concepts like *Ikpabònělimin* can be viewed, either as rational, purposeful and meaningful, or irrational, useless and meaningless.

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Preliminary Remarks about Meanings and Concepts

Cognitive linguists, scientists and psychologists generally embrace certain assumptions about concepts and meanings among which are the following. They are that,

1. Meanings are senses and are universal.
2. Universal senses determine references.
3. Concepts are the meanings of words.
4. Concepts are decontextualized and universal in scope.ⁱ

It is quite discernible that if these assumptions about concepts and meanings are accepted in its entirety, then, the acceptance of conceptual combinations like “dance of the spirits” (*Ikpabòńlìmin*) as meaningful will *de facto* be unfeasible, for biologically composed human beings cannot be seen as, and accorded the same respect and reverence accorded spirits (assuming they exist); neither can their dancing (or other activities such as settlement of cases, which are regarded as conclusive and absolute in Esan communities) be seen as that of the spirits.

In visualizing the prospect of accepting or declining these assumptions, a lucid, though quite brief and critical insight into the above assumptions will be essential as this will not simply aid in grasping the precise nature of meanings and concepts but also in achieving the purpose of this paper: to determine the prospect of accepting or declining concepts like *Ikpabòńlìmin* found in different cultures though they do not directly depict experience

Some scholars have explained meanings in psychological terms equating it with ideas, senses, impressions or concepts and, for recent psychologists, maps, schemes, neural signals or holograms.ⁱⁱ These scholars believe that “understanding the concept associated with a word (i.e. its sense) explains the meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱ Exponents of this view include B. Lloyd, E. Rosch and J. J. Katz. Thus, the statement “This is a ball game” is meaningful to ‘X’ once he understands the concept or idea of a ball game, i.e. its sense. However, the concept of a ball game as its sense differs from the extension of all ball games in the universe as its reference.

Hence, when the statement “This is a ball game” is made, ‘X’ needs more than the mere concept of a ball game for such a statement to be meaningful to him but also the particular extension of ball game, —football game, handball game, baseball game, basketball game, etc.— which is being referred to or denoted.

It is for this reason that the denotational or referential theory of meaning still subsists in the philosophy of language even with its shortcomings. H. Putnam has therefore argued vehemently in his paper "Meaning and Reference" that meanings are not in the head nor associated with some mental processes but depend on referents in the environment. It is his opinion that a term like "food" refers to a particular physical substance regardless of people's impression about it (i.e. their concept or sense).^{iv}

Notwithstanding the laudability of the referential theory of meaning, it suffers a major setback as identified by G. Frege, in his "On Sense and Nomination." This is the possibility of two (or more) words or names to have different meanings or senses but yet refer to a particular object. He explains this using the example of the linguistic expressions "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" which, though denote or refer to the planet Venus, are patently different in meaning.^v There is also a substantial possibility for a word to be used in different ways in different circumstances by the speaker of a particular language which makes it lack a particular sense or referent. This is the Wittgensteinian Use theory of meaning where meaning is based on the context of use. Put succinctly, "words do not have fixed meaning except within the sentence in which they occur. Or, as Wittgenstein states it, 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'"^{vi}

Illustrating this with our previous example, the statement "This is a ball game", it becomes obvious that when this statement is made, the meaning cannot be found simply in its sense or reference but also in the context in which the linguistic expression 'ball game' is used in the sentence. This is because 'ball game' can be used in different ways and in different circumstances, which makes its senses and reference not enough criteria for understanding the meaning of the sentence. Ball game could be used to mean a game played with ball. It could also mean a set of circumstances ("a whole new ball game" implies a "completely new set of circumstances"). Hence, understanding the context of use, besides understanding the sense or reference of a linguistic expression, is in understanding the meaning of a sentence.

The concept and meaning of linguistic expressions cannot, by implication, be sort outside the context of use. If this is done, meaning would be lost and there certainly will be lack of understanding.

It is the inability of some scholars to seek the concept and meaning of some linguistic expression (mainly in traditional thought systems) contextually that runs them into the antinomies of characterizing them as meaningless, incomprehensible and irrational. R. Rorty has thus maintained that all objects are always contextualized and that there is no need taking an object out of its context.^{vii}

The above assumptions specifically held in psychology and cognitive linguistics cannot be naively accepted following from the above insight into concepts and meanings. Meanings are not mere senses, impressions or concepts even though they depend on the concepts of the linguistic expressions to establish their references and also on the way and circumstances in which the linguistic expressions are used to determine the specific references. Meanings are also contextual as circumstances of the speakers of the linguistic expressions vary and a word can denote more than a single thing. L. W. Barsalou, et. al., in the paper "Concepts and Meaning" explain the contextual nature of meaning with the following example. If someone says, "I worked in my yard last weekend", entities in this situation are established as potential referents. If the speaker then says, "The lawn needed to be cut", the word 'lawn' refers to the particular lawn in the speaker's yard. If the speaker had introduced a different situation by saying, "I worked at the park last weekend", and then said, "The lawn needed to be cut", the word 'lawn' has a different reference. Most importantly, the reference in neither case is universal. "Lawn" does not pick out the entire set of lawns in existence (i.e. its extension); instead, it denotes two specific individuals in different situations (circumstances).^{viii}

On the assumption that "universal senses determine references" it is quite obvious that these senses or impressions are not innate but rather acquired somehow directly or indirectly via sense experience. If I have the sense of redness, it is because I have experienced it and gotten the impression of it; so when someone talks of a red flower, a red car, I am able to conceive the idea of redness he/she is referring to. This a man born blind cannot do. Even complex ideas or fictional ideas somehow and in some way, depend on experience for its conception. If I should have the concept of a flying horse, it's simply because I have the idea of a horse and that of flying, or of a golden mountain, it's due to the concept of gold and mountain that I already have. David Hume therefore says,

Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man which not only escapes all human power and authority but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters and incongruous shapes and appearances,...

But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.... In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment; the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will.^{ix}

Even concepts of abstract, theoretical or connective words like 'freedom', 'democracy', 'liberty', 'slavery' 'and' and 'about' are somehow based on experience; if not directly on sense experience but on experience of some other sort like learning a language, understanding sentences and sets of sentences and the operations and performances with such symbols that are governed by linguistic rules.^x If we then acquiesce to the fact that experience play a primary role in our conceptualisation, or in acquiring the idea or sense we have about anything, it will not seem reasonable to accept the assumption that senses, ideas or concepts are universal since experience determine them. This is because experience and how we conceptualize or make meaning out of our experiences could vary from one place, circumstances, thought system or situation to another; and simply because different unique experiences by different individual in different (or even similar) environment and circumstances seem to coincide does not necessarily mean that such is a universal idea or concept.

In centuries past, there was the general (universal) conception or idea that human procreation can only come about through sexual intercourse between a male and a female. The fact that this conception was experience-based was hardly appreciated but simply seen as a natural occurrence that could not be changed. Recent scientific advancement has however distorted this idea as it is now possible for a child to be conceived either in a woman's womb or in a test tube without any sexual intercourse but by simply fusing a male semen with a female ovum without the male and female necessarily knowing each other.

This fusing is done via an in vitro fertilization and then either inserted into a female to grow or kept in an artificial womb to grow. Hence two concepts now exist concerning human procreation. Some are cognizant of only the former and hence believe that it is a universal concept of procreation and would not believe that there could be any other way of conception until they somehow stumble into the latter fact. For those who are privileged to be cognizant of both, they also will not accept that any other means could be possible besides these two until another invention dazes them. However, if these two sets of people acknowledge the role of experience in conceptualization and how experience could vary, it will be easier for them to see the possibility of more than one concept of a thing.

L. W. Barsalou *et. al.* have therefore, explained a concept as a single frame representing a single type of individual (object), with this frame manifesting itself as different specialized models in different generic situations. Because the specialized models within a concept are tailored to situations, a concept is not a universal sense that represent properties true of all individuals (objects). Instead, each specialized model in a concept represents properties true of some individuals in a specific situation.^{xi} Concepts are therefore also contextual rather than universal because the sense or idea of a word varies from one individual (or society) to another based on the specific situation at hand. Thus, if our intention is to make sense of the concept "*Ikpabónélimin*" we need to first understand its context of use. But this is not all; we also need to understand the role metaphors play in concepts and meanings.

Metaphors in Linguistic Expressions

At this junction, it is also essential to know that the understanding of the concept and meaning of some linguistic expressions or utterances are made possible not only by understanding the sense, reference and context of use but also metaphorically because the sense, reference and context of use could be known yet the utterance would still lack meaning. Situations do arise in which an utterance can only be understood metaphorically.

When people lack any experiential knowledge of a domain or scope of a situation or subject, the meaning of a sentence about it must be established through metaphor. Consider a man's understanding of a woman saying to him: "During labor, my contractions were like an endless string of hamstring cramps".

Because the man has never experienced labour contractions, but has probably experienced hamstring cramps, his sole means of understanding “contractions” is the source domain (what is being used to explain the situation or subject), “hamstring cramps”. Under such conditions, metaphors may provide the only source of meaning. When people have direct experience of the target domain (the situation being explained), however, the direct experience becomes the important source for understanding the target domain. For example, women who have experienced labor possess direct knowledge of contractions, such that “contractions” in the above sentence is understood primarily in terms of experiencing contractions, with “hamstring cramps” representing the limited understanding that the man, to whom the utterance was directed, could have of them.^{xii}

As the example illustrates, the meaning of a metaphorically motivated utterance is represented at several levels. At the most basic level, the meaning of such utterances rests on their reference and context of use. If someone says, “Were you surprised at the meeting yesterday when I blew my stack,” the most basic part of the meaning for “blew my stack” is the actual event to which the speaker refers. Whatever memory speakers have of this event is the referent of “blew my stack” and constitutes its most basic source of meaning. However, other levels of conceptualization enter into the meaning as well. Both the speaker and listener possess generic situations for being angry (“blew my stack” being a metaphor used to express anger), which are represented in terms of perceptual symbols for this type of event. These perceptual symbols may have been extracted from the introspection of anger, the visual and auditory perception of another person’s angry behavior, and so forth. This makes it obvious that this generic situation is built up from direct experience. Consequently, when someone says he blew his stack, the referent event is conceptualized, at least partly, in terms of the generic situation developed from this type of experience. In a Fregean manner, the generic situation provides a sense, or running commentary, on the referent event.^{xiii}

In the absence of a clear referent, these experientially based generic situations may provide possible referents for meaning. If I say, “I blew my stack this morning on discovering that the newspaper was soggy,” you have no direct experience of this event.

Consequently, you must use your knowledge of the generic situations to establish a domain of reference, creating an imagined episodic situation by combining generic situations for picking up newspapers and being angry (based on the circumstance that the paper was soggy or uninteresting). Once established, these generic situations provide direct experiential referents for “blew my stack.” You may specialize them if you know something about where I pick up my newspaper, and if you are familiar with my expressive mannerisms. Even in such cases, though, the basic meaning for “blew my stack” is grounded in direct experience, not in a metaphorically related domain. It is important to note here, however, that metaphorical conceptualization may provide important running commentary or sense on referent events. Most importantly, it may play central roles in conceptualizing the referent event. First, it may highlight a particular aspect of the referent event and make the corresponding generic situation salient. For example, “blew my stack” may focus attention on the particular moment when anger was released, as opposed to some other parts of the event (e.g., the initiating conditions, ensuing actions, etc.). Subsequently, the generic situation that applies to the release of anger may become part of the sense, and not other generic situations that apply to other aspects of the event. Second, the metaphorical level may contribute significantly to beliefs and understandings about the nature of the referent event. For example, the utterance, “heated liquid exploding out of a container which provides a metaphorical understanding of anger or outburst, may lead speakers to believe that emotions reflect psychic energies in ‘regions of the mind,’ breaking forth from time to time to produce behavioral outbursts. In this way, the metaphorical level may provide intuitive theories about aspects of direct experience that remain unobservable. Although the metaphorical level may play central roles in meaning, it usually accompanies referent events and generic situations that are grounded in direct experience.

Spirits in Esan: *Ikpabonèlimin* as a Contextual Metaphorical Concept

Examining the conceptualization, *Ikpabonèlimin* (Dance of the Spirits), it is inevitable that, even within the (Esan) culture in question, it will lack meaning when viewed from an experiential angle, —no Esan person will agree that *Ikpabonèlimin* is actually composed of spirits and that their dancing and other activities are performed by spirits. However, knowing the metaphoric sense, generic situation and context in which it is being used, it becomes meaningful to him/her.

The Esan understanding of being in relation to spirits or supernatural forces is essential I understanding *Ikpabonèlimin*.

According to C. E. Ukhun, Spirits are sacrosanct and form the quintessential or the bedrock of existence of the traditional Esan tradition. In traditional Esan, the material has significance only in reference to the spiritual and not vice-versa... Every aspect of life of an Esan person is captured within a spiritual milieu and not necessarily in material terms. Although in Esan tradition a person may aspire to material acquisition or sees himself or herself as a physical entity, he or she is fully aware that there is a potent spiritual force behind his or her existence.^{xiv}

Spirits, to an Esan person (and indeed Africans alike) are in a higher realm than the earthly biological person in the hierarchy of beings, hence closer than the human being to the Supreme Being.^{xv} Spirits are revered and dreaded in Esan (or African) community because it is believed that they possess the powers to influence positively or negatively the lives of the living. Through the aid of priests, the people receive messages and instructions from the "spirit realm" and such instructions are carried out without hesitations to avoid the wrought of the spirit involved. For instance, it is believed that a spirit from the patrilineage of a man (say, the dead father) of an unfaithful (adulterous) woman continues to torment greatly the life of the unfaithful woman until she confesses her deed and perform certain sacrifices before the spirit can stop such torments. There also exist in Esan communities, evil spirits known to perform various havocs in the communities. Wicked individuals in the communities who are fortunate to have the ability to communicate with the "spirit realm" often manipulate them to do evil. However, the doings of these evil spirits are averted by appealing to beings higher than them in the hierarchy of beings (divinities and ancestors) or to the Supreme Being, who created and has authority over all beings and their activities.^{xvi}

Having this idea about spirits and their activities, the concept of *Ikpabónèlimin* becomes very meaningful to an Esan person, given that he knows the idea and context of its use. He is very much aware that the composite members of this group are neither spirits nor their activities spirit-inclined but that the concept of "spirit" has been used in the conceptual combination as a metaphorical representation of the respect, reverence and authority embedded in the group which ought to be fully acknowledged by the individual members of the communities as they are aware of the contextual use of the word "spirit".

Gaining the psyche of the individuals of the community, they are able to carry out their various activities respectfully and authoritatively.

Members of the *Ikpabonelimin* group, dressed in clothes made from dry grass,^{xvii} carry out various activities ranging from entertainment to other social activities. In terms of entertainment activities, the group are known to display very energetic, vigorous and interesting singing and dancing ranging from vigorous acrobatics and tumbling to fluting and drumming mainly during festivities. The vigorous, exuberant way in which this dancing and singing are done gives a clear representation of the vigour, verve and strength of the spirits. For it is believed only the spirits could dance that way, hence the linguistic expression "Dance of the Spirits". During this entertainment, the group sustains orderliness within the arena of the festival. This is, however, easy for them to achieve due to the respect and awe the metaphorical expression has gained for them. The group are also known to carry out other social activities with this same ease. Such include ensuring the cleaning of the community's public places (e.g. market place and village square), ensure compliance of all individual members of the community to the local Sabbath day called *Ekèn* day by ensuring that no one goes out to work in the farm, on that day, and also settlement of certain cases between or among people, where such verdict or judgement are regarded as final and absolute as it is believed that it is the spirits that have settled such a case.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing, certain lucid and essential facts can be drawn. First, concepts are not simply the sense of a linguistic expression, but rather the contextual sense of a linguistic expression based on experience. Hence, they are not often universal. Second, meanings of a linguistic expression are neither sense nor are they simply references but include also the way or context of the way a concept is used in a sentence. Hence, like concepts, they cannot be said to be universal. Third, the generic, particular or contextual situation of the concept of a linguistic expression establishes where its meaning is to be sort. Fourth, metaphorical conceptualisation gives a better understanding of the purpose behind the generation of a concept especially when it is feared that the targeted audience would not get such an understanding from a direct experiential conceptualization nor be submissive to its objectives

Notes

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- ⁱ See L. W. Barsalou, et.al., "Concepts and Meaning" in K. Beals, et. al. (eds), Chicago Linguistics Society 29: Papers from the Parasession on Conceptual Representation (Chicago: University of Chicago, Chicago Linguistics Society, 1993) pp. 23-61.
- ⁱⁱ See, for details on the psychological theory of meaning, J. A. Aigbodioh & M. L. Igbafen, *Philosophy of Language: From an African Perspective*, Ekpoma, Nigeria: A. Inno Printing Press, 2004.:35-38
- ⁱⁱⁱ L. W. Barsalou, et.al. op. cit.
- ^{iv} H. Putnam, "Meaning and Reference", *Journal of Philosophy*, 70: 699-711.
- ^v G. Frege, "On Sense and Nomination", A. Marras (ed) *Intentionality, Mind and Language*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972: 337 ff.
- ^{vi} L. Wittgenstein, as cited by J. A. Aigbodioh, et.al., op. cit: 38.
- ^{vii} See R. Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- ^{viii} L. W. Barsalou, et.al., op. cit.
- ^{ix} D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1751: Section 3, Paragraph 4&5.
- ^x For more details on how concepts are based on experience, see J. Hospers' evaluation of concepts in his *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973: 101-13.
- ^{xi} L. W. Barsalou, et.al., op. cit.
- ^{xii} *Ibid*
- ^{xiii} *Ibid*
- ^{xiv} Christopher E. Ukhun, "Metaphysical Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought." *Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies*, 1(1), 2006: 143–153.
- ^{xv} A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International Private Ltd., 1978: 9-10.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid*: 34-35.
- ^{xvii} It is for this reason that they are mainly seen during the dry season, between October and March, to avoid contact with rainfall during their activities which will wet the grass clothes as such will lead to the itching of the individual putting on the grass-made clothes.