

ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL OPPOSITES IN OWERE-IGBO

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This paper investigates the semantic structure of a dialect of the Igbo language referred to as **Owere-Igbo**. This dialect of **Igbo** is predominantly spoken by the people of **Owerri** in **Imo** State, Nigeria. The essence of the study was to analyze the semantic properties of polarity and markedness of oppositeness in the dialect. The researcher adopted the descriptive survey method and used native speakers of **Owere-Igbo** as research collaborators in addition to native speaker intuition. Interview schedule was employed as a research instrument for collecting data from fluent speakers of **Owere-Igbo**. The method of study adopted involved conducting oral interviews with fluent speakers of **Owere-Igbo** speakers selected for the study. The result of the research revealed that polarity manifests itself to perfection in **Owere-Igbo** opposites. The findings also show that in terms of polarity some pairs of opposites in **Owere-Igbo** are constant, while for others, it is the contexts that determine their polarity. This investigation further revealed that **Owèrè-Igbo** speakers adjudged the positive members of opposite pairs to be the unmarked terms and the negative members as the marked terms of their respective oppositions. Based on these findings, I concluded that there exists a kind of interplay between the semantic properties of polarity and markedness in the use of lexical opposites in **Owere** dialect of the **Igbo** language.

Cet article s'intéresse à la structure sémantique d'un dialecte de la langue igbo connu sous le nom de **owere-igbo**. Ce dialecte d'igbo est parlé en majorité par les gens d'**Owerri** dans l'État de **Imo** au Nigéria. L'étude se proposait d'analyser les propriétés sémantiques de polarité et de marquage des oppositions dans le dialecte. Le chercheur a adopté la méthode d'enquête descriptive et s'est servi, en plus de son intuition de locuteur natif, des locuteurs natifs d'**owere-igbo** comme collaborateurs de recherche. Comme technique d'enquête, elle a utilisé l'interview pour la collecte des données à partir des locuteurs qui étaient fluides en **owere-igbo**. La méthode d'étude adoptée impliquait le fait de mener des interviews orales avec des locuteurs fluides en **owere-igbo** choisis pour le besoin de l'enquête. Le résultat de la recherche a révélé que la polarité se manifeste de manière parfaite dans les mots opposés en **owere-igbo**. Les résultats montrent en outre que, en termes de polarité, certaines paires de mots opposés en **owere-igbo** sont constantes tandis que pour d'autres, c'est le contexte qui détermine leur polarité. Cette investigation a en outre révélé que les locuteurs d'**owere-igbo** jugeaient les membres positifs des mots de ces paires opposées d'être les termes non marqués et les membres négatifs comme les termes marqués de leurs oppositions respectives. Sur la base de ces résultats, l'auteur conclut qu'il existe une sorte d'interaction entre les propriétés sémantiques de polarité et de marquage dans l'emploi des lexèmes opposés dans le dialecte **owere** de la langue **igbo**.

0. INTRODUCTION

Oppositeness is a lexical-meaning relation which, according to Mowarin (2009:57), is an indispensable part of the field of semantics known as lexical semantics. Lexical semantics deals with the study of lexis. It focuses attention on denotation and lexical relations, such as oppositeness, synonymy, polysemy, etc. Oppositeness is, thus, one of the lexical meaning relations a lexeme can enter into.

Oppositeness of meaning is one of the basic structural relations in the vocabularies of human languages. Cruse (1986:197) stated that of all the relations of sense that semanticists propose, that of oppositeness is probably the most readily apprehended by speakers. Oppositeness, according to Lyons (1977:271), oppositeness appears to be a universal human tendency to categorize experience in terms of binary contrast. The ability of humans to think in opposites is also evidenced by children. Cruse is of the opinion that the basic idea of oppositeness is apprehended at a very early age. He also asserted that the basic notion of oppositeness is well within the

grasp of 3-year olds. Speakers of a language, therefore, not only have complex knowledge of meaning that allows them to interpret words and sentences, assigning to them grammatical meanings, but this knowledge also gives speakers the ability to recognize opposites. Knowing the meaning of lexemes in language is just like having syntactic, morphological and phonological knowledge of the language. In this way, one knows what is grammatical and meaningful and what is not, though lack of grammaticality, as we know, does not preclude us from coming up with some kind of interpretation. To some extent, this is evidenced in understanding child language even though the grammatical rules the child employs may deviate from those of adult grammar.

Opposites are inherently binary and manifest the properties of gradability, i.e. the ability of opposites to permit comparison or intensification, using such means as comparative/superlative form and adverbs of degree; markedness, i.e. the principle whereby pairs of opposites are assigned values of unmarked (neutral or expected) vs. marked (unusual) and polarity, i.e. the principle whereby opposites are given values of positive (or unmarked) and negative (or marked).

Although researches on most languages of the world, especially the Indo-European languages reveal that oppositeness is a universal feature of language, it is also evident from these researches that opposites possess certain semantic properties, especially the properties of polarity and markedness, which have not been adequately characterised in **Owere-Igbo**, unlike most Indo-European languages, especially English. For instance, in English, there is a strong intuitive feeling in most lexical opposites that there is a positive term and a negative term even when no negative marker is present and that the positive term is the unmarked term of the opposite pair, while the negative term is the marked term.

1.2 AIMS OF THE STUDY

This paper analyzes and shows the semantic properties of polarity and markedness of **Owere-Igbo** opposites. The major aim is to show that a pair of opposites in **Owere-Igbo** can be distinguished semantically in terms of their positive (or unmarked) and negative (or marked) polarity and that there exists a kind of interplay between the semantic properties of polarity and markedness in **Owere-Igbo** opposites.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is relevant to researchers interested in lexical semantics, especially at the paradigmatic level. The work will also add to the volume of available literature on the lexical structure of **Owere-Igbo**, especially in the area of oppositeness as well as provide a useful clue for the appreciation of the lexical structure of the **Igbo** language.

The study will encourage further research on semantics in general and oppositeness in particular. In Igbo linguistics, for instance, comparatively a lot has been written in the areas of grammar and phonology, but little or no work in the area of Igbo semantics.

The study will contribute to the general development of the Igbo language. Much has been published on standard Igbo, but not much on the various dialects of Igbo. In order to come up with a general description of Igbo, there is the need to adequately describe its dialects. An adequate description of **Owere-Igbo** (or any other dialect of Igbo) will not only contribute to the development and harmonization of the language, but will also help in the enrichment and systemization of its vocabulary.

1.4 DATA SOURCES

Data for this study were obtained from a group of competent native speakers of **Owere-Igbo** who have spent not less than fifteen years in **Owere-Igbo** speaking areas. As a native speaker of **Owere-Igbo**, my intuition played a major role in generating the needed data and providing the background information necessary for the study. Secondary data were collected from textbooks and journals which are gratefully acknowledged.

1.5 METHOD OF STUDY

Using the direct oral interview method, I was involved in a discussion with the native speakers. Before the interview date with each of these respondents, I prepared a list of questions to be asked. Definitions of certain technical terms were provided along with the questions because some technical terms are particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation. During the interview session, I used a notebook in recording some important facts. This was to enable me to remember to include every essential piece of information in the final write-up.

The native speakers who served as respondents were asked questions relating to the concepts of polarity and markedness and these respondents provided very useful and authentic data on positive and negative terms of opposite pairs in **Owere Igbo** and the on the notion of markedness.

Questioning (and in some cases verbal description) was a strategy employed for determining what Owere-Igbo speakers view as 'positive' and 'negative' terms. Using this method, I asked speakers to make choices between pairs of lexical opposites they supplied. They also gave reasons for their choices (Positive/Negative). Their responses were recorded and later analyzed. The views of these speakers helped in determining the positive and negative terms in **Owere-Igbo**.

The results of the interviews with these native speakers which form the bases of my data for analysis are discussed in section 3 of this study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In traditional terminology, words that are opposites are referred to as antonyms (Saeed, 2009:66). Cruse (1986) remarks that, in spite of the robustness of the speaker's intuition concerning opposites, the overall class is not a well-defined one, and its adequate characterization is far from easy. In other words, it is difficult to give an explicit explanation of the concept of oppositeness because the basic property of two words that are opposites, according to Fromkin and Rodman (1998), is that they share all, but one semantic property.

Oppositions, according to Lyons (1977:286), are drawn along some dimension of similarity. Cruse (1986:197) added that the paradox of simultaneous difference and similarity is partly resolved by the fact that opposites typically differ along only one dimension of meaning. 'Hot' and 'big' are not opposites, while 'hot' and 'cold' are. The property they do not share is present in one and absent in the other. For instance, 'hot' and 'cold' share the notion 'temperature', they differ only in degree. Thus, in order for two lexemes to be opposites, they must be semantically similar. In other words, for there to be definable oppositions, there must be feature(s) which is/are shared by the lexemes that are compared; there must be some grounds for comparison.

For instance, it makes more sense to compare 'hot' with 'cold' with which it shares features of meaning than to compare 'hot' with 'big' or 'fat'.

The examples below show that lexical items in opposition share some features in common. In other words, what is positively specified in one of the opposition is negatively specified in the other.

- | | | | |
|----|-------|---|-------|
| 1. | Alive | : | +LIVE |
| | Dead | : | -LIVE |
| 2. | Large | : | +BIG |
| | Small | : | -BIG |

Lexical opposites also exhibit the property of polarity. According to Cruse (1990:159), there is a strong intuitive feeling in the case of most lexical opposites that there is a positive term and a negative term, even when no negative marker is present. Cruse (1990:159) also explained the differences between positiveness and negativeness of lexemes in opposition. According to him,

Positiveness is generally associated with a relatively high (as opposed to low) value of some scaled property such as length, speed or weight: long: (short) fast: (slow), heavy: (light); with a favourable (rather than unfavourable) evaluative attitude: good: (bad), clean: (dirty), kind: (cruel); and with constructive or ordering activity (as opposed to destructive or disordering activity): build: (demolish), pack: (unpack), arrange: (disarrange).

Cruse further argued that the negative terms are opposed to the positive terms in the ways just mentioned above. Opposites are also co-ordinated in what (Malkiel, 1959) calls irreversible binominal 'good' and 'bad', 'high' and 'low', 'great' and 'small'. This principle of preferred sequence, according to Lyons, is of much wider application. It enables us to distinguish a 'positive' and a 'negative' member in such contrasting pairs as good/bad, clean/dirty

Lyons also quotes Lehrer (1973:27) as saying that it is the negative case which approaches some limit or zero point, while this is not true of the positive case. A thing can be so narrow or so short or so small that it approaches zero in extension, but there is no corresponding limit to how large, wide or tall something can be. This notion of limit is relevant to only a subset of opposite pairs in a language and most obviously to lexemes having to do with spatial and temporal extension.

The concept of markedness, broadly speaking, is concerned with the distinction between what is neutral, natural or most expected (unmarked), and what departs from the neutral or more unusual quality (marked) along some designated parameter (Kean 1992).

According to Crystal (1997), one of the earliest uses of the notion was by the Prague school where it was developed by Trubetzkoy in his theory of phonology. The role played by markedness in the linguistic theory was relatively little until the 1960s. Since that time, the term markedness has been employed in both phonology, syntax and semantics by linguists working in a variety of frameworks (see also Kean 1992).

By semantic markedness I mean that one member of an opposite pair functions as the more general member of the pair. This more general member is what is referred to as the unmarked term, while the other member, which is more specific, is the marked term.

Cruse (1990:160) argues that a close relationship exists between markedness and polarity. According to him, there is a strong tendency for the positive term to also be the unmarked term, and the negative term, the marked term. Most semanticists are of this view and many researches in this regard seem to yield the same result. For my purpose, I have adopted Cruse's view expressed above and this has served as the basis of my investigation of the markedness hypothesis.

3. POLARITY IN OWERE-IGBO

Polarity is a system of positive and negative contrastivity found in a language, expressed syntactically (e.g. not), morphologically (e.g. kind vs. unkind), or lexically (e.g. fat vs. thin). **Owere-Igbo** speakers interviewed were of the view that lexical opposites in **Owere-Igbo** exhibit the property of polarity. In most lexical opposites in **Owere-Igbo**, there is a positive term and a negative term, even when no negative marker is present. In the pair **oma/ojōō** 'good'/'bad', for instance, **ojōō** 'bad' is said to be negative, though neither of the members of the pair bears a negative marker. In other words, **Owere-Igbo** speakers assume that **ojōō** 'bad' is covertly negative, i.e. negative in meaning, but without an overt negative marker, while **oma** is positive in meaning.

Owere-Igbo speakers regard the positive term as that member of an opposite pair which has higher value than the other member. It is, according to them, the more illuminating and favourable member of a pair of opposites. For instance, relative to the scale over which **oma** 'good' and **ojōō** 'bad' operate, **oma** 'good' is the positive term, while **ojōō** 'bad' is the negative term. **Owere-Igbo** speakers, therefore, regard **oma** 'good' as the positive term because it is the more favourable, more appreciated and has a higher value than **ojōō** 'bad'.

Òwèrè-Igbo speakers also identify 'positive' and 'negative' terms of a pair of opposites in terms of their ordering. Positive terms are said to precede the negative terms when opposites are co-ordinated in what Malkiel (1959) calls irreversible binominals. For example, **kwazhie** 'arrange' precedes **kwasaa** 'disarrange'. Similarly, **ezhi agwa** 'good habit' precedes **ajọ agwa** 'bad habit', **he oma** 'good thing' precedes **he ojōō** 'bad thing.'

es a more useful purpose than the negative term. For instance, in the opposite pair . For this reason, the positive term is said to precede the negative term.

Table 2 below shows that **Owere-Igbo** lexical opposite can be classified as 'positive' and 'negative' terms respectively, as shown on Table 2.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Terms in **Òwèrè-Igbo**

Positive	Negative	Gloss
oma	ojōō	'good/bad'
ùcha	ntiri	'cleanness/dirtiness'
aũũ	ferefere	'heaviness/lightness'
mmā	njō	'beauty/ugliness'
obi oma	obi ojōō	'kindness/cruelty'
okhu	oyi	'hotness/coldness'

ogologo	ntìshì	‘tallness/shortness’
ùba	ùkọ	‘abundance/scarcity’
ọhụrũ	oshiè	‘newness/oldness’
ukwuù	owedè	‘big/smallness’
aĩũ kwazhie nkọ,	Ferefere kwasaa akpuda	‘heaviness/lightness’ ‘arrange’/‘disarrange’ ‘sharp/blunt’

My interview further revealed that contexts are relevant in determining polarity (positive and negative terms) in **Owere-Igbo**. I gathered from **Owere-Igbo** speakers during the interview sessions that some pairs of opposites are described as context-dependent terms, while some are described as context-independent term. The context-dependent terms are so described because it is the contexts in which the terms occur that determine whether they are to be interpreted as ‘positive’ or as ‘negative’ terms. In other words, the above classification does not necessarily mean that the positive terms, for instance, are always positive (i.e. in all conceivable contexts) neither does it mean that all negative terms are always negative in meaning. There are contexts in which some of the positive terms could lose their positive values. Examples of positive terms which could lose their positive values in certain contexts include **ọkhụ/oyi** ‘hotness/coldness’, **aĩũ/ferefere** ‘heaviness/lightness’ and **ukwuù/owedè** ‘big/ smallness’.

The pair **ọkhụ/oyi** ‘hotness/coldness’ are context-independent or sensitive terms because If, for instance, one is cold, the person would naturally go for a hot bath or hot food (in this context ‘hot’ is a positive term because it is the favourable or more appreciated member of the pair), while a cold bath in a very hot weather would be more favourable or preferred (in which case ‘cold’ becomes the positive term).

This observation corresponds to the intuition of most of my respondents who also agreed that for a pair like **ọkhụ/oyi** ‘hotness/ coldness’, it is the context that determines which is to be classified as the positive term or as the negative term. One can, therefore, say that the reliable guide to polarity for such terms as **ọkhụ/oyi** ‘hotness/ coldness’ or **aĩũ/ferefere** ‘heaviness/ lightness’ is the context in which the terms occur.

Some pairs of opposites which are context-independent include **oma/ọjọ** ‘good/bad’ and **obioma/obiọjọ** ‘kindness/cruelty’. These pairs do not depend on the context for their polarity to be determined. **Oma** ‘good’, for instance, is always positive no matter the context, and nobody can doubt the positiveness of **oma** ‘good’ over **ọjọ** ‘bad’ on the scale of merit. This, however, excludes the figurative use of these terms because a negative term, for instance, can be used figuratively in the positive sense, and a positive term can also be used figuratively in the negative sense. I shall illustrate this by using the pair **mma/njọ** ‘beauty/ugliness’. In the Igbo culture area, when one visits a new born baby and this baby happens to be ‘pretty’ or ‘handsome’, the visitor is not expected to use the positive term **mma** ‘beauty’ or ‘handsome’ in praising the baby. He is rather expected to use the negative term **njọ** ‘ugliness’. A statement such as (10) is appropriate.

(10) **Nwa à àjọola njō**

Baby this be ugly ugliness
 ‘This baby is ugly’

Njō ‘ugliness’ is used because it is culturally believed that if the positive term **mma** ‘beauty’/‘handsomeness’ is used, the water spirit would take the baby away from the mother. In this sense, **njō** ‘ugliness’ which is a negative term serves a positive function; hence, it is used figuratively.

I have referred to those terms whose polarity stand out clearly as exhibiting ABSOLUTE POLARITY or as context-independent terms, while those terms which depend on the context for their polarity to be determined are described as exhibiting CONTEXTUAL POLARITY or as context-dependent terms.

3.1 MARKEDNESS IN OWERE-IGBO

It has been argued that in each pair of opposites, one of the members always functions as the semantically unmarked term and the other member as the marked term, in that only one member is used simply to ask about or describe the degree of gradability. A lexeme is ‘unmarked’ if it is the more general member of a pair, which is not marked for a particular quality of the pair, i.e., a generic cover term for the common quality involved in both members. Through questioning of my respondents, I gathered that in **Owere-Igbo** opposites, there is a marked term and an unmarked term in a pair of opposites and that the possibility of forming a neutral question is a characteristic of unmarked terms. For instance, in the opposite pair **egbelegbe/ntìshì** ‘tallness/shortness’, **egbelegbe** ‘tallness’ is said to be the unmarked term, while **ntìshì** is the marked term because it is only **egbelegbe** ‘tallness’ that is used in forming a neutral question. For example, someone who asks:

(11) **Àrīj̄ kpà Àda ã̄ egbelegbe?**

How be **Ada** be tallness
 ‘How is **Ada** in terms of tallness?’/ ‘How tall is **Ada**?’

betrays no preconception concerning **Ada**’s height. On the other hand, the somewhat less probable question:

(12) **Àrīj̄ kpà Àda ã̄ ntìshì?**

How be **Ada** be shortness
 ‘How is **Ada** in terms of shortness?’/ ‘How short is **Ada**?’

would indicate that the questioner was assuming that **Ada** was on the short side.

Similarly one says;

(13) **Àrīj̄ kpa mmirī Nwaorìè ã̄ urū?**

How be river **Nwaorie** be deepness
 ‘How is **Nwaorie** River in terms of deepness?’/ ‘How deep is **Nwaorie** River?’

with no implication that the river is either ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’. But the question:

(14) **Àrīj̄ kpa mmirī Nwaorìè ã̄ njanja?**

How be river **Nwaorie** be shallowness
 ‘How is **Nwaorie** River in terms of shallowness?’/ ‘How shallow is **Nwaorie** River?’

carries the implication that lack of depth is at issue. **Egbelegbe** ‘tallness’ and **ùru** ‘depth’ are, therefore, the unmarked terms of their respective oppositions. Only one term of a pair of opposites (again the unmarked one) is capable of yielding a name for the underlying dimension. One says,

- (15) **Egbelegbe** **ḥe** **è** **wụ** **mità** **àbụō**
 Longness thing this be metre two
 ‘The length of this thing is two metres’.

rather than

- (16) **Ntishì** **ḥe** **è** **wụ** **mità** **àbụō**
 Shortness thing this be metre two
 ‘The shortness of this thing is two metres’

3.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLARITY AND MARKEDNESS IN OWERE-IGBO

My investigation reveals that **Òwèrè-Igbo** speakers adjudged the positive members of opposite pairs to be the unmarked terms and the negative members as the marked terms of their respective oppositions. In this sense, it is the positive terms that form neutral questions in **Òwèrè-Igbo**. For instance, in (11) above, **egbelegbe** ‘tallness’, which is a positive term, is used without any presupposition or implication that the referent **Ada** is ‘tall’, rather than ‘short’, while in (12) **ntishì** ‘shortness’ carries with it presupposition that the referent **Ada** is ‘short’ rather than ‘tall’ (in relation to some relevant norm). To further prove that

To further prove that a close relationship exists between markedness and polarity, a test was conducted using certain syntactic frames in **Owèrè-Igbo**. The tests showed that only positive (or unmarked) term can fit into the test-frame ‘*How X is Y?*’ to form a neutral question. For example, the question:

- (17) **Àrìjì** **kpà** **uzò** **aḥù** **ḥa** **mbara?**
 How be path that be wideness
 ‘How wide is that path?’

is neutral because it is equivalent to asking, ‘Is the path wide or narrow?’

It should be noted that this test has its limitations because it is not all the positive terms that can fit into the frame ‘*How X is Y?*’ to form a neutral question. For example, the positive term **mma** ‘beauty’ cannot, as shown in (18) below:

- (18) ***Àrìjì** **kpà** **Ñkèchi** **ḥa** **mmā?**
 *How be **Nkechi** be beaut

because **mma** does not express physical measurement. Terms such as **egbelegbe/ntishì** ‘tallness/shortness’, **elū/mgbemgbe** ‘highness/lowness’ and **ukwuù/owede** ‘big/smallness’ presuppose dimensions that can easily be measured and can, therefore, fit into the test frame. On the other hand, terms such as **mmā** ‘beauty’ and **obioma** ‘kindness’, which cannot be measured, cannot, therefore, fit into the test frame. For instance, most **Òwèrè-Igbo** speakers see it as unnatural to measure someone’s beauty because no objective scale exists for the measurement of beauty.

Terms which have evaluative polarity as part of their meaning are logically distinct from other polarities because their truth-values depend on whoever is using

them. **Mmā** ‘beauty’ is basically evaluative. What is beautiful to one person may be ugly to the other person. Beauty is a vague concept, and there is no standard or model of comparison for it. In the following

- (19) **Èbere** **ò** **màrà** **mmā?**
Ebere she (pro) be beautiful beauty
‘Is **Ebere** beautiful?’

the questioner betrays no preconception about how the object of inquiry is. The object in question may be ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’. In other words the question is neutral. It should be noted that this test for markedness is too general and does not bring anything radically new to the picture. However, the essential point to note in this discussion is that the positive terms which are also the unmarked terms are used in the neutral contexts. Another important point to note is that, if one defines lexical opposites in terms of markedness, it is possible in **Òwèrè-Igbo** to use the positive term in both unmarked and marked senses, while the negative member is normally just marked. For instance, the sentence:

- (20) **A mà** **ì** **kpà** **tebùlù** **aḥù** **ḥa** **egbelegbe**
I know I how table that be longness
‘I am familiar with the length of that table’.

has two possible readings, viz. “I have information about the relative length of the table” (with unmarked length) and ‘I am aware that the table is longer than most tables’ (with marked length). **Egbelegbe** ‘length’, therefore, has two interpretations, one marked and one unmarked. But there is only one interpretation of **ntìshì** ‘shortness’, its opposite, as the sentence below shows:

- (21) **A mà** **m** **kpà** **tebùlù** **aḥù** **ḥa** **ntìshì**
I know I how table that be shortness
‘I am familiar with the shortness of the table’

This means that I am aware that the table is shorter than most other tables. **Ntìshì** ‘shortness’ can only be marked. Most **Òwèrè-Igbo** speakers argue that the verb **ḥaduru** ‘to be up to’ can sometimes show when a positive term is used in a marked sense. Consider sentences (22) and (23) below:

- (22) **Àrìjì** **kpà** **Òkoro** **ḥa** **egbelegbe?**
How be **Okoro** be tallness
‘How tall is **Okoro**?’
- (23) **Àrìjì** **kpà** **Òkoro** **ḥaduru** **egbelegbe**
How be **Okoro** be up to tallness
‘How tall is **Okoro** (now)?’

The two sentences differ due to the presence of **dùrù**. Sentence (22) tells us nothing about **Okoro**’s height. The questioner here expresses no presumption or expectation concerning the height of the questioned item. On the other hand, (23) carries the presupposition that ‘tallness’, rather than ‘shortness’ would be an appropriate description of the questioned item. It may, however, mean ‘taller’ than the last time the speaker saw him.

It should also be mentioned that when the positive term is used in the marked sense, the presupposition has quite a distinct scope. It involves what might be called 'contextual scope' (cf. Ljung 1974:78). The speaker knows from the immediate context that the positive term is used in a marked sense. For instance, (23) implies that the speaker already knows that the referent **Okoro** is tall.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have seen that a pair of opposites can be distinguished semantically in terms of their positive and negative polarity even when no negative marker is present. I argued that the concept of polarity is clear and universal, but for some pairs of opposites in **Owere-Igbo**, it is constant, while for others, it is the context that determines the polarity.

I further observed that in each pair of opposites, there is a marked term and there is an unmarked term. In the English examples, it is the positive term that appears to be unmarked, but this does not appear to be a universal feature because I discovered that in **Òwèrè-Igbo**, the positive term can occur in both the unmarked and marked contexts, while the negative term is always marked. For example, in **Owere-Igbo**, in the following pair of opposites **egbelegbe** / **ntishi** 'tallness / shortness', **egbelegbe** which is the positive term can occur in both unmarked and marked contexts, while the negative term normally marked.

It was also apparent from the investigation that there is a kind of interplay between the semantic properties of polarity and markedness, because it is the positive term that is also the unmarked term and used to ask about or describe the degree of gradability, while the negative term is always the marked term.

From this observation, I concluded that opposition which is one of the most important principles governing the structure of language is a very prominent feature of **Owere-Igbo** which serves the important function of expressing oppositeness of meaning.

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