Exploring the Socio-Semantic and Communicative Dimensions of Idiomatic Expressions in Ibibio

Aniedi F. Etim

Akwa Ibom State University of Education, Afaha Nsit

Abstract. *Language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of cultural knowledge and social experience. Idiomatic expressions, as fixed or semi-fixed linguistic units, encapsulate a community's worldview, values, and modes of interaction. This study explores the socio-semantic and communicative dimensions of idiomatic expressions in Ibibio, a Lower Cross language spoken predominantly in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The research examines how Ibibio idioms reflect social realities, encode cultural meanings, and perform pragmatic functions within diverse communicative contexts. Drawing from sociolinguistic, semantic, and pragmatic frameworks, the study employs both qualitative and descriptive approaches, relying on oral interviews, native speaker intuitions, and textual sources for data collection. The data recorded were analyzed using the contextual theory. The analysis focuses on the relationship between idiomatic meaning and socio-cultural context, highlighting how figurative language serves as a communicative strategy for expressing emotions, moral values, and social hierarchies. Findings reveal that Ibibio idioms are deeply embedded in communal experiences and social cognition, functioning not only as linguistic artifacts but also as vehicles of social cohesion and moral instruction. By highlighting the interplay between form, meaning, and social use, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how language reflects and shapes cultural identity in African linguistic communities. The work recommends a documentation and preservation of Ibibio idioms, while contributing to the theoretical insight in the language, as well as the Ibibio socio- cultural knowledge and its conservation.*

Key words: *Ibibio language, idioms, socio-semantics, communication, culture, pragmatics, figurative meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a system of signs or symbols; it constitutes a living repository of human thought, culture, and social experience. Through language, speech communities encode their worldview, values, and modes of interaction (Sapir, 1921, as cited in Essien, 2008; Ayuwo, 2013). Idioms are fixed expressions, whose meanings cannot be deduced solely from the meanings of their constituent parts. They make up a significant part of phraseological studies, and play a crucial role in communication, offering brevity and cultural insight (Gries, 2008).

In African linguistic contexts, idioms often function as carriers of moral instruction, social norms, humour, and communal wisdom. As observed by Ismail, (2022), they are deployed in everyday conversation, folklore, and ritual contexts to express what literal language fails to capture with the same aesthetic or cultural resonance. The Ibibio language is likewise documented to contain idiomatic expressions as part of its figurative language repertoire. For instance, Udosen, Offong, & Ekah (2017) investigate the structure of idioms in Ibibio, showing that they occur as NP (noun-phrase) idioms, sentence-idioms (interrogative, declarative, imperative), and even negative or infinitive constructions. Apart from this structural work, less has been done to explore how Ibibio idioms

function socio-semantically (i.e., how their meanings are shaped by social context) and communicatively (i.e., how they are used in real communicative interaction). This gap suggests a need for a focused examination of how idioms in Ibibio reflect social relationships, cultural values, and interactive practices.

Statement of the problem

It has been observed that although idioms are important requirements for effective communication, very few detailed research works have been done on this element of the Ibibio language. The only outstanding work in this area is that of Udosen et al (2017), which focuses on the structural analysis of Ibibio idioms. There is therefore a scant documentation of the socio-cultural values and communicative strategies encoded in Ibibio idiomatic expressions. Thus, a lack of a comprehensive socio-semantic and communicative analysis of idiomatic expressions in Ibibio, an analysis that links form, meaning, culture, and interaction.

Furthermore, within the Ibibio speech community, it is generally observed that idioms are common among the elders. The youths, who should transfer the language to the next generation, have not known much about idioms, nor shown interest in using or learning this aspect of the language. Their communication lacks the artistic beauty, the linguistic ingredients that beautify and enrich such communications expected of native speakers. This study is therefore necessary, considering the degree at which this element of the language is fast disappearing. The research was carried out against this back drop.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to explore the socio-semantic and communicative dimensions of idiomatic expressions in Ibibio. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify and categorize common idiomatic expressions used in Ibibio.

2. Examine the semantic structures and metaphorical or figurative patterns underlying these idioms.

3. Analyze the communicative and pragmatic functions of Ibibio idioms in everyday discourse.

4. Investigate the socio-cultural values, norms, and world-views reflected in Ibibio idioms.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in both theory and practice.

In theory, the work supports contextual theory of meaning. The contextual theory explains the role of the environment, and context in explaining the meanings of idioms in the work.

In practice, the work is significant in the area of literature as it contributes to African linguistics and phraseology by foregrounding socio-semantic and communicative perspectives on idioms in Ibibio. It moves beyond purely structural analysis (such as Udosen et al., 2017) toward a picture of how idioms function in socially situated interaction and cultural context. Also, the work is significant in the area of cultural and traditional knowledge conservation, especially in an era of language shift and globalization. The work has a pedagogical value, as insights from this study can inform language teaching, translation, and intercultural communication among Ibibio speakers and learners. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the study sheds light on how idiomatic expressions contribute to identity constitution, social cohesion, and communicative competence within speech communities.

The concept of idiom

Idiom is an aspect of phraseology which typically expresses non-literal or figurative meaning. It is a fundamental component of language that conveys meaning through fixed expressions. These expressions often carry cultural, historical, and social significance, making them essential for effective communication, particularly in informal and conversational contexts. They are expressions that are commonly used in communication, especially when someone tries to avoid talking about something directly. The word 'idiom' comes from the Greek word "idios", meaning "one's own" or

"private". The meaning of idiom in Greek puts it right and simple for easy understanding of the term, since idioms are just like private jokes between the people who know them (Bhanoo, 2023).

The term idiom may be defined as a fixed phrase with figurative meaning, which cannot be predicted from the meanings of the individual words that make up the phrase. Structurally, idioms are non-compositional in nature (Moon, 1998; Sprenger, 2003; Bhanoo, 2023). The study of idioms cuts across many disciplines, including linguistics, cognitive science, and cultural studies, due to their complexity and widespread use across languages.

Different scholars have studied idioms from different viewpoints. Some of such works include O'Grady (1998), who embarked on a syntactic study of idioms using the continuity constraint framework. The work was based on the claim that idioms are subject to the continuity constraint, a framework which described the structure of Idioms in terms of head - based licensing relations. O'Gardy in his consideration of idioms sees it as an expression with a meaning that is different from the literal (non-figurative) meaning of their part, and that they manifest a high level of conventionality in the choice of component lexical items.

Crystal (2003) defines idiom as "a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit." Considering the definition semantically, according to Crystal, the sum of the meanings of the individual words cannot produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression. Syntactically, the words that make up the idiomatic phrase do not allow any kind of variability which they usually exhibit in other contexts. The author used the following examples to demonstrate this point:

Example 1:

a. "Kick the bucket" which means "to die", cannot be replaced with "kick a bucket".

b. "Spill the beans": "to reveal secret" cannot be replaced with "spill the yam"

To Udo &Akpan (2011), idiomatic expressions are non-standard speech or slangs that are natural to native speakers of a language, whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal definitions and arrangements of its constituent part, but figuratively inferred through conventional usage. To these scholars, idioms are colloquial metaphors which require some background knowledge, understanding and information or experience of the culture of reference.

Richards and Schomidt (2012) describe idioms as expressions that operate as single units, whose meanings cannot be produced from its separate part.

Saeed (2003) gives a definition of idioms as multi word units, since they are made up of strings of words that can represent a single semantic unit.

Idioms are culturally specific and highly localized. That means, they are used within a particular speech community. This may be one of the reasons why idioms do not translate directly and correctly from one language into another. An attempt at direct or word-for-word translation of idioms usually results in a change of meaning or meaninglessness. Liberman (2023) observed that although idioms are phrases, they are learnt the same way words are learnt; since it is the whole phrase that has/carries the meaning. Bhanoo (2023) refers to idioms as a kind of "literary or cultural shorthand".

Cognitive process in the understanding of idioms:

Understanding idioms requires more than the knowledge of the individual words. It involves complex cognitive processes. Different theories are used to explain how idioms are processed and understood by speakers of a language. One of such theories is the blending theory. Blending theory, also known as conceptual blending or conceptual integration was developed in the 1990s by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. It is a cognitive theory that explains how humans combine different mental spaces to create new meaning, ideas, or concepts. According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002), idioms result from conceptual blending, where two distinct conceptual spaces combine to create a novel interpretation. For instance, the idiom "barking up the wrong tree" involves blending a physical action (barking) with the metaphorical concept of pursuing the wrong course of action, creating a novel cognitive structure that conveys the intended meaning.

Features/Characteristics of Idioms

Idioms are generally known to possess several key features. The following are the general features of idioms:

i)   Semantically, idioms are non-compositional in nature. That is, the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual components.

ii) Structurally, idioms are fixed in nature. It means that they generally consist of fixed word combinations that do not allow for internal variability.

iii) Idioms are marked with shortness; they are mostly phrases and simple sentences.

iv) Idioms are colloquial metaphors, and descriptive in nature.

v)   Idioms are culture/language specific. That is, they are used within a particular speech community, and do not translate directly and correctly from one language into another. They often reflect cultural norms, historical events of shared experience that make them unique to particular linguistic communities.

vi) They are figurative and lack literal meaning.

vii) They are instantly understood by some language speakers, since they are competent members of such language communities.

viii) Idioms constitute a single semantic unit. That is, the whole phrase/expression is considered as one word with a single meaning.

The socio-semantic and Communicative Functions of Idioms

Socio-semantics examines how meaning is shaped by social context: it attends to how cultural norms, social relations, roles, power dynamics and worldview influence the interpretation and use of linguistic forms (Acka, Salawu & Saminu, 2022). Through this lens, idioms are not only lexical items but social artefacts, enmeshed in the beliefs and practices of a speech community.

Idiom is one of the linguistic devices that play crucial roles in transmitting culture and morality in African societies. In African languages, idiomatic expressions are semantically rich, serving as tools for socialization, education and the reinforcement of communal value. In languages spoken in Nigeria, and many other African languages, these expressions encapsulate traditional wisdom and offer nuanced insights into communal life.

Idioms are culturally established expressions that serve as figurative anchors of social norms. They are fundamental to the moral and ethical socialization of community members because they represent underlying socio-cultural values and moral expectations, as well as cultural conventions and taboos in all languages, especially in African languages. All languages make use of idiomatic expressions and such expressions function as natural reflections of customs, cultural belief, social conventions and norms. This aligns with Senam and Ukut's (2010) assertion which highlights the use of the stylistic expressions in Ibibio. The authors assert that to cultivate the habit of speaking charismatically, speakers have to make use of the figurative expressions to spice up their communication, and that such use bestows linguistic and stylistic impetus on speakers.

Udoh and Akpan (2011) worked on the socio-semantic description of idiomatic expressions in Anaang language. To the authors, every idiom has a culture behind it and they function to emphasize a particular point in the course of a discourse or communicatively heighten a particular phenomenon so much that a stylistic effect is left on the hearers. The following examples were used in the work to demonstrate the figurative meaning and cultural logic of idiomatic expressions in Anaang:

Example 2:

    Útóñ ísòñ

    Ear   ground

    A grounded ear

(Someone who knows/hears every piece of information)

The authors explain that the ear is generally known as the organ for hearing, and ground is everywhere around us. It is therefore a common sense that if the ear is equated with the ground, such ear should hear everything since it is everywhere. It means that the whole human who is represented by the part "ear", is someone who has access to all kinds of information, no matter how concealed or obscure such information might be. The expression, apart from being idiomatic, also makes use of a figurative language (Synecdoche) by using the ear (a part) to represent the human (a whole). This also makes the whole expression doubly non-literal. This kind of idiom is used to indirectly show disapproval and offer caution, reinforcing the community's preferences in this kind of matters (Interfering or prying into other people's affairs in the community).

From the Communicative / Pragmatic Dimension, idioms function in discourse beyond their lexical content. They are tools for interpersonal communication: they may serve to admonish, warn, praise, create solidarity, or assert identity. For example, Akanmu's (2019), a study in Yoruba, shows that new idioms among students can index in-group identity and informal registers. In African contexts, idiomatic expressions may also serve educational or moral functions, reinforcing societal norms (Ismail, 2022).

Scholars agree that idioms function as socio-pragmatic devices in African languages, helping speakers navigate culturally sensitive issues and maintain harmony (Obeng, 2002; Essien, 2006). Their fixed structure and metaphorical meaning make them powerful conveyors of moral judgment and group norms.

Semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies meaning in language. It focuses on how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning, and how these meanings are interpreted by speakers and listeners. It delves into the relationship between words and the concept or things they represent. Part of this process determines the distinction between sense and reference (Lobner, 2013; Saeed, 2016)

It interfaces closely with syntax and pragmatics, addressing topics like reference, sense relations, quantification, modality, tense/aspect, and presupposition (Maienborn, von Heusinger, & Portner, 2019; Saeed, 2016).

Subfields of Semantics

Subfields of semantics include lexical semantics, formal semantics and computational/distributional semantics:

Lexical semantics has to do with word meaning and word relations. That is, lexical semantics analyzes word meaning, sense relations, and the lexicon-syntax interface (Murphy, 2010). Formal semantics on the other hand deals with theoretical accounts of sentence meaning and compositionality (Maienborn et al., 2019). Within formal semantics, truth-conditional methods model reference, quantification, modality, and information structure. Computational/distributional semantics models meaning from usage patterns in corpora. It complements both lexical and formal semantics with distributional and neural approaches where meanings are inferred from contextual usage (Jurafsky & Martin, 2025). Together these perspectives treat meaning both as a system of abstract structures and as patterns grounded in real language use (Saeed, 2016)). These strands jointly define contemporary semantics as the study of meaning at the word-, phrase-, and sentence-levels, and at the interfaces with syntax and pragmatics (Löbner, 2013; Saeed, 2016).

Communication

Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings between individuals or groups. It involves a sender, a message, a medium or channel, and a receiver. Communication can be verbal (spoken or written words), nonverbal (gestures, facial expressions, tone), or visual (signs, symbols, images). In ither words, communication is understood as the process of creating, transmitting, and interpreting messages among individuals, groups or systems, using verbal, nonverbal, and mediated channels. It is both a social process and a meaning-making practice. At its

core, communication is a transactional process of message exchange that create shared meaning (Adler, et. al 2018; West &Turner, 2018). It is context- dependent and shared cultural, relational, and situational factors (Hall, 2005).

Communication plays a huge role in identity construction, social coordination, persuasion, and cultural transmission (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2019). Scholars emphasize that communication cannot be separated from context and culture, since meaning depends on situational and sociocultural frameworks (Gudykunst, 2004; Hall, 2005). Recently, digital communication studies highlight its transformation by technology, social media, and globalization. This in line with the words of Baym (2015), who asserts that contemporary perspectives examine how communication is reshaped in digital and networked environments

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical model employed in this work is the Contextual Theory of Meaning.

Contextual Theory

The Contextual Theory of Meaning was originally proposed by Bronisław Malinowski in his anthropological and linguistic work. Malinowski (1923) argued that the meaning of words cannot be studied in isolation but must be understood in relation to the context of situation in which they are used. He maintained that language functions as a mode of action and that meanings are embedded in cultural and social practices. This insight laid the foundation for later developments by linguists such as J.R. Firth, who elaborated on Malinowski's ideas and emphasized the importance of co-text and situation in meaning-making (Firth, 1957). Thus, while Malinowski is credited as the originator, Firth is recognized as the major developer of contextual theory within modern linguistics. The contextual theory of meaning is also closely associated with other scholars such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michael Halliday, etc.

Empirical review on idioms in Ibibio and Related Languages

Although there are limited documentations on idioms in Ibibio, Udosen, Offong & Ekah, (2017) is an important work, which investigates the structural patterns of idioms in Ibibio. The work shows that idiomatic expressions in Ibibio include noun-phrase idioms, sentence idioms (interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives), compound idioms, infinitive phrases and negative constructions. The scholars adopt the "Continuity Constraint" framework to explain that the lexical components of an idiom must occur together, else the meaning changes. While this sheds light on structural variety, it focuses less on socio-semantic or communicative function.

Another study, Udo & Umoh, (2008) examines how proverbs in Ibibio carry ethical and social values such as unity, obedience, and social harmony. Though it concerns proverbs rather than idioms, the findings underscore how figurative language in Ibibio is culturally loaded.

Dawet, Kyarawal & Datebs, (2024) worked on the Classification of Mwaghavul Idioms. This work classifies idioms in the Mwaghavul language into "opaque" and "transparent" types based on the semantic relations between constituent words and idiomatic meaning. Similarly, Abraham & Kwararafa, (2023) embarked on the study of idiomatic and metaphorical expressions in the Idoma language. The work investigates idioms as communicative metaphors supporting development discourse. These studies provide useful models for analysing idioms both structurally and functionally in African languages.

In sum, the literature shows that idioms are significant both structurally and functionally in language, and that within African languages they carry cultural meaning and serve communicative roles. For the Ibibio language, structural work has laid a foundation, but fewer studies have explored how idioms embed social meaning and function in discourse. This study responds to that gap by investigating the socio-semantic and communicative dimensions of idiomatic expressions in Ibibio, thereby combining linguistic form, cultural context and interactional function.

Methodology

Both qualitative and descriptive approaches were adopted for this study. Data for this work were elicited from the Ibibio language native speakers, during oral interviews on the use of fixed expressions in the language. Reference was also made to library materials where necessary. The respondents were drawn from three Ibibio speaking Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State, including Uyo, Itu, Etinan. The researcher also used her native speaker intuition to select what may be acceptable as ideophones in the language. The data collected were analyzed using the X-Bar model of Government and Binding theory as well as the interlinear morpheme-to-morpheme glossing.

The study employs both qualitative and descriptive approaches, relying on oral interviews, native speaker intuitions, and textual sources for data collection. The data recorded were analyzed using the contextual theory. The analysis focuses on the relationship between idiomatic meaning and socio-cultural context, highlighting how figurative language serves as a communicative strategy for expressing emotions, moral values, and social hierarchies. Findings reveal that Ibibio idioms are deeply embedded in communal experiences and social cognition, functioning not only as linguistic artifacts but also as vehicles of social cohesion and moral instruction. By highlighting the interplay between form, meaning, and social use, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how language reflects and shapes cultural identity in African linguistic communities. The work recommends a documentation and preservation of Ibibio idioms, while contributing to the theoretical insight in the language, as well as the Ibibio socio- cultural knowledge and its conservation.

Presentation of Data

Idioms

Idioms are culturally embedded expressions that are known as the figurative anchors of social norms. In Ibibio land, idioms reflect deep socio-cultural values and moral expectations, they frequently reflect cultural norms and taboos, making them essential in the moral and ethical socialization of community members. Idiomatic expressions capture the peculiarities of the society within which it is used. To understand certain idioms, one should have the knowledge of the belief system, norms, values, traditions and practices of the speech community.

Example 3:

Ìkịm   á - nwịm údúòd

Gourd 3SG-bloom specie

Gourd reproduces its kind/specie

The idiom "ìkìm ánwim údúòd" - literally translated as "Gourd reproduces its specie", is a rich expression in Ibibio that communicates inherited characteristics or the replication of traits across generations. The following is a detailed analysis of this idiom:

Semantic Analysis

Literal meaning:

The phrase literally depicts a gourd that brings forth another gourd of the same type. Semantically, the gourd functions metaphorically as a symbol of biological reproduction or lineage continuity.

Figurative meaning:

The idiom semantically encodes the idea that offspring resemble or inherit traits from their parents, whether physically, intellectually, behaviorally, or morally. It's a metaphorical encapsulation of genetic or behavioral resemblance between parents and their offsprings.

Contextual Analysis

The idiom is typically used in interpersonal or communal conversations when someone exhibits traits that strongly resemble those of their parent, guardian, or lineage. For example:

1. A child displaying bravery like the father

2. A girl with the mother's sharp tongue

3. A young person excelling academically, as did a relative

Cultural context:

In Ibibio culture, kinship and family lineage are fundamental to social identity. Observing continuity of traits is both a form of cultural knowledge transmission and social commentary. This idiom reflects communal values that emphasize family resemblance, inheritance of character, and moral continuity.

1. **Tone and intent:** The tone can be positive or neutral, depending on the trait being referenced. It may carry pride, amusement, or resignation. For instance:

2. **Pride:** "ìkịm ánwịm údùòd – he is bold like his grandfather."

3. **Criticism:** "ìkịm ánwịm údùòd – just as stubborn as his father."

Communicative Function

This idiom performs several pragmatic functions in discourse:

a) **Descriptive Function:** It describes resemblance, functioning as a linguistic way of stating that someone is "just like their parent or ancestor."

b) **Evaluative Function**: It often carries an implicit evaluation of the trait in question (positive or negative), thus allowing the speaker to comment indirectly.

c) **Identity Assertion:** By pointing to inherited traits, it reinforces family or clan identity, emphasizing the idea that people carry the marks of their origin.

d) **Didactic Function:** It has an educational or moralizing tone, suggesting that behaviors (good or bad) are not accidental, and that society is always watching and connecting traits

Example 4:

Èkà   ébôt   á -   tùàk   ńdìbéné   nnọ èsíén

Mother goat   3SG - push   wall   to   outside

A mother goat that pushes the walls to the outside

This idiom is a socially charged expression used to criticize disloyalty within a family or community, especially when one favors outsiders over his own. It is a vivid cultural expression of internal sabotage. It uses the mother goat metaphor to symbolize the betrayal of nurturing duties, emphasizing that true loyalty begins at home. Through semantic richness and cultural resonance, the idiom plays a key role in social control, moral education, and community cohesion in Ibibio discourse.

Semantic Analysis

a) **Literal Meaning:** The literal image is of a mother goat using its strength not to protect or support the structure (the house or pen) but to weaken it by pushing the walls outward.

b) **Figurative/Idiomatic Meaning:**

The idiom refers to a person (often a family or community member) who supports or defends outsiders in ways that harm their own group, be it family, clan, or close community. It reflects betrayal, disloyalty, or lack of solidarity.

c) **Conceptual or underlying metaphor:**

The home (or wall) metaphorically represents the unity and protection of the family or community, while the mother goat symbolizes a core member, expected to nurture, not destroy.

Contextual Analysis

a) **Situational Context:**

1. The idiom is typically used in family disputes, community disagreements, or political settings where someone is perceived to be aligning with external interests at the expense of their own people.

2. It may be directed at:

A sibling who takes sides with an in-law against their own family

a. A community leader who exploits locals for outsiders' benefit

b. A politician who neglects their constituency while pleasing foreign or central powers

b) **Cultural Context**

In Ibibio society, collective loyalty is a deeply held value. There is a strong emphasis on family solidarity, communal interest, and the protection of internal structures before addressing external concerns. The mother figure (eka ebôt) in Ibibio culture symbolizes nurturing, protection, and unity so portraying her as one who destroys her home is a powerful inversion meant to express disgust or deep disappointment.

Communicative Logic and Pragmatic Function

a) **Moral Implication:**

The idiom reflects a moral norm: "One should not harm their own while helping outsiders." It warns against hypocrisy, betrayal, and the erosion of familial or communal trust. It serves a didactic purpose, reminding listeners that one's first duty is to protect and build from within, not to empower forces that weaken the home.

b) **Evaluative Function:**

The idiom is a form of indirect criticism or rebuke. Instead of direct confrontation, it provides a coded message that conveys judgment and disapproval.

Example 5

Ímá   ábukpà yè   èkpu

Love   maize and   rats

A cunning or crafty kind of love

This idiom serves both a moral and social regulatory role in Ibibio discourse. It is a negative evaluation. It carries an implicit moral judgment: such love is wrong, insincere, and socially unacceptable.

Literal Structure and Semantic Breakdown

Lexical items:

ima = love

abukpa = maize

ekpu = rat

Literal meaning:

"The rat–maize kind of love."

Cultural grounding:

In Ibibio (and other agrarian West African cultures), rats are notorious for being destructive to stored maize. Their "affection" for maize is not benevolent, it is entirely self-serving, destructive, and exploitative. This makes the metaphor rich in negative connotation. The rat's "love" for maize is not love in a moral or mutual sense; it is a predatory desire that benefits the rat but harms the maize.

Semantic Analysis

Denotative meaning:

It refers to a relationship (romantic, familial, or friendly) in which one party's attachment is based on selfish gain.

Connotative meaning:

It conveys cunning, exploitation, hidden self-interest, and lack of genuine affection. The idiom positions the subject as deceitful, that is, someone whose "love" is only a façade for personal enrichment.

Communicative (Pragmatic) Analysis

Primarily, this idiom is a condemnation or warning, often functioning as a form of moral instruction.

a) It warns or criticizes someone's motive, exposing it as exploitative rather than genuine.

b) Creates awareness of hidden selfishness in relationships.

c) Shames or deters the hearer (or referenced third party) from such behavior.

Possible Contexts of Use

1. **Romantic relationships:**

When a young woman marries an older wealthy man only for his money, elders might comment:

Ima abukpa ye ekpu! - "This is the rat-maize kind of love."

2. **Friendship:**

When someone stays close to a friend only to benefit from his resources or influence.

3. **Family obligations:**

If a relative visits often only when there is food or money to take home.

4. **Politics / social leadership:**

When a politician's "love" for the people is really about exploiting public funds.

5. **Broader Social Function**

Moral: It warns against deceptive affection.

Social: It helps maintain trust by discouraging exploitation within relationships.

Cultural pedagogy: Often used in storytelling, proverbs, or informal conversation to teach younger generations about sincerity.

Example 6

Àkìd   èdèm   ké àkép-kép

3Sg-See   back   in lightning

An adulterous woman

This idiom works as a cultural surveillance tool. It polices moral behaviour, especially for women, by associating nocturnal sexual activity with shame and social disapproval. It also reflects traditional Ibibio night-time life, where visibility is low and lightning becomes a metaphor for brief, revealing glimpses of hidden actions.

Literal Structure and Semantic Breakdown

Lexical items:

Akid edem = "See back" (literally, the human back or figure when turned away)

ke akepkep = "in lightning" (the brief, sudden flash of light during a storm)

Literal meaning:

"The back seen only in lightning."

Cultural grounding:

In Ibibio rural settings, without constant electric lighting, lightning is one of the few things that suddenly and briefly illuminates the night. A person "seen only in lightning" is someone who appears in the open only for a fleeting moment, often under secrecy, and vanishes quickly. This situation is here applied metaphorically to a prostitute or promiscuous woman who moves stealthily at night.

Semantic Analysis

1. Denotative meaning:

Describes a woman whose movements are so discreet and nocturnal that she is glimpsed only briefly, as in a flash of lightning.

2. Connotative meaning:

Secrecy: It connotes movement under the cover of night, avoiding public view.

Illicitness: It shows involvement in socially condemned sexual activity (prostitution).

Underlying conceptual metaphor:

Secret movement is darkness / illicitness: That is the person exists socially "in the shadows."

Communicative (Pragmatic) Analysis

1. The idiom is a social condemnation, often with an undertone of moral instruction.
2. It criticizes a woman for engaging in prostitution or illicit nocturnal activities.
3. It warns others (especially younger women) against such behavior.
4. It evokes shame for the person being described.
5. It reinforces community norms about female sexual propriety.
6. It creates a mental image that stigmatizes nocturnal sexual activity.

Possible Contexts of Use

1. Gossip/social commentary:

Women in a community might refer to a known sex worker:

Akid edem ke akepkep - "She is the back seen only in lightning."

2. Parental warning:

A mother may use it in warning her daughter about avoiding the path of prostitution.

3. Moral storytelling/folk narrative:

It may be used by elders in oral tradition to illustrate the shame and dangers of secret nocturnal behaviour.

4. Humorous but pointed banter:

It is sometimes employed in jest to tease someone who disappears at night for unknown reasons.

Summary of Findings

1. Ibibio idioms encapsulate socio-semantic meanings tied to morality, cooperation, and social hierarchy.
2. Idioms serve crucial communicative functions such as moral teaching, humour, caution, and solidarity.

3. The figurative and contextual interpretation of idioms depends heavily on cultural knowledge and situational awareness.

4. The pragmatic use of idioms reflects politeness, indirectness, and shared identity within Ibibio speech communities.

5. Idiomatic expressions contribute to linguistic creativity, maintaining cultural continuity in an evolving communicative environment.

Conclusion

This study concludes that idiomatic expressions in Ibibio reflect an intricate relationship between language, culture, and social interaction. They serve as repositories of collective memory, embodying the values, norms, and worldview of the Ibibio people. The socio-semantic analysis demonstrates that idioms convey meaning through metaphorical mapping rooted in communal experiences, particularly those tied to moral behaviour, cooperation, and authority.

From a communicative standpoint, idioms perform strategic roles in discourse: they encode politeness, manage conflict, and reinforce social cohesion. In line with previous studies (Abraham & Kwararafa, 2023; Udo & Umoh, 2008), the findings affirm that idioms in African languages are not peripheral linguistic features but **core communicative resources** essential to pragmatic competence and cultural continuity.

The Ibibio idiomatic repertoire thus reveals how figurative language sustains cultural identity and social harmony, confirming the interdependence of linguistic meaning and sociocultural context.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Documentation and Preservation

Linguists and cultural institutions should undertake systematic documentation of Ibibio idioms to prevent their erosion in the face of language shift and modernization. Such documentation could take the form of idiom dictionaries, oral archives, and multimedia databases.

2. Pedagogical Integration

Educators and curriculum developers should incorporate idioms into language and literature instruction at all levels. This will promote cultural awareness and enhance students' communicative competence in both Ibibio and English.

3. Further Research

Future studies should adopt comparative and corpus-based methods to examine idiomatic expressions across other Lower Cross languages, thereby contributing to broader African phraseological research.

4. Sociolinguistic Revitalization

Community organizations should encourage the continued use of idioms in public communication, storytelling, and media. This will strengthen cultural identity and ensure the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge.

5. Pragmatic Studies

Researchers are encouraged to explore idioms within specific discourse genres—such as political rhetoric, religious communication, and digital media—to further illuminate their evolving communicative roles.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to linguistic scholarship by:

a. Extending the theoretical application of socio-semantics and pragmatics to an under-documented language (Ibibio).

b. Demonstrating the interrelation of idiom form, meaning, and function within African communicative systems.

c. Providing empirical evidence that supports the universality of idioms as cultural mirrors of human experience while highlighting their local specificities.

d. Creating a framework that future African linguists can adopt for the socio-pragmatic analysis of figurative expressions.

References

1. Acka, K.-V. K., Salawu, R., & Saminu, I. (2022). A socio-semantic analysis of code-switching in Nigerian universities. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, 25*(1), 45–65.

2. Adler, R. B., Rosenfeld, L. B., & Proctor, R. F. (2018). *Interplay: The process of interpersonal communication* (14th ed.). Oxford University Press

3. Akanmu, D. (2019). Communicative and stylistic utilisation of new Yorùbá idioms among students of higher institutions. *Cultural Analysis, 17*(1).

4. Abraham, J. O., & Kwararafa, E. A. F. (2023). The communicative metaphor in Idoma idiomatic expression and English as panacea for development initiatives. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria.*

5. Bhanoo, S. (2023). *What is an idiom? Definition and Examples*. Oregon State University Press.

6. Crystal, D. (2003). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Blackwell Publishing.

7. Essien, O. (2008). *A grammar of the Ibibio language*. University Press Limited.

8. Firth, J. R. (1957). *Papers in linguistics* 1934–1951. Oxford University Press.

9. Gudykunst, W. B. (2004). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (4th ed.). Sage.

10. Hall, E. T. (2005). *Beyond culture. Anchor Books*. (Reprint ed.)

11. Ismail, A. Y. M. (2022). Understanding African idioms and proverbs. *American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences, 76*(1), 125–139.

12. Jurafsky, D., & Martin, J. H. (2025). *Speech and Language Processing* (3rd ed., online).

13. Liberman, A (2023). Take my word for it: A dictionary of English Idiom. University of Minisota Press.

14. Löbner, S. (2013). *Understanding Semantics* (2nd ed.). Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

15. Malinowski, B. (1923*).* The problem of meaning in primitive languages. In C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards (Eds.), *The meaning of meaning* (pp. 296–336). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

16. Maienborn, C., von Heusinger, K., & Portner, P. (Eds.). (2019). Semantics—Interfaces (Vol. 3 of Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning). De Gruyter

17. Moon, R. (1998). *Fixed expressions and Idioms in English: A corpus-based approach*. Clarendon press

18. Murphy, M. L. (2010). *Lexical Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.

19. O'Grady, W. (1998). The Syntax of idioms. Natural language and linguistic theory. Vol 16, No. 2. Pp. 279-312.

20. Richards, J. & Schmidt, R. (2012) *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics.* Pearson Education Limited.

21. Saeed, J. (2003). *Semantics (2nd Ed.)* Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

22. Saeed, J. I. (2016). *Semantics* (4th ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

23. Senam $ Ukut, (2010). Communicative Analysis of Ibibio poverbs. USEM – Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literature.

24. Sprenger, S. A (2003). *Fixed expressions and the Production of Idioms*. Ponsen and Looijen.

25. Udo, K. I., & Umoh, D. (2008). Language and socio-cultural value: An analysis of Ibibio proverbs. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 5*(3), 127–140.

26. Udosen, E. E., Offong, I. J., & Ekah, M.-H. (2017). The structure of idioms in Ibibio. *International Journal of Language & Literature, 5*(2), 185–196.