

Lexico-semantic Extensions of Food-based Metaphors in Nigeria's 'Renewed Hope' Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines the lexico-semantic extension of food-related expressions in Nigeria's "Renewed Hope" discourse, showing how everyday terms such as *akara*, *kilikuli*, and *corn* function as socio-political symbols. These items move beyond literal meanings to encode experiences of economic hardship, survival, and inequality. While metaphor in political discourse has been widely studied, limited attention has been paid to word-level semantic shifts within culturally grounded domains like food. The study is anchored in Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Relevance Theory, which together explain how concrete food concepts structure abstract socio-economic realities and how meaning is inferred through contextual assumptions. Using a qualitative analytical approach, the findings reveal that food expressions operate as culturally embedded metaphors, enabling compressed yet powerful communication. Their interpretation depends on shared knowledge and relevance-driven inference, generating rich implicatures. The study concludes that food discourse is a vital dimension of Nigerian socio-political communication, reflecting lived economic realities.

Keywords: Lexical Semantics; Relevance Theory; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Food Discourse; Nigerian Political Discourse; Meaning

Introduction

Language is a dynamic resource through which speakers encode, interpret, and negotiate socio-economic realities. Beyond its referential function, language serves as a powerful tool for representing lived experiences, shaping public perception, and articulating social critique. In

contemporary Nigeria, the “Renewed Hope” discourse has emerged as a dominant political narrative, influencing public conversations across formal domains such as political speeches and media reports, as well as informal spaces including social media and everyday interactions. Within this discourse, language is strategically employed not only to communicate policy and ideology but also to reflect citizens’ responses to economic conditions and governance.

A striking feature of this discourse is the increasing use of everyday lexical items—particularly food-related expressions such as *akara*, *kilikuli*, and *corn*—in metaphorical ways that extend beyond their literal meanings. These items, deeply embedded in Nigerian cultural experience, have become symbolic resources for expressing economic hardship, survival strategies, and socio-political dissatisfaction. Their usage reflects a broader linguistic phenomenon in which ordinary vocabulary undergoes semantic extension to encode complex social realities. From a lexico-semantic perspective, this phenomenon illustrates that word meaning is not fixed but dynamic, evolving in response to contextual pressures and communicative needs. Food-based lexical items function as conceptual and cultural anchors, allowing speakers to map concrete, familiar experiences onto abstract socio-economic conditions. This aligns with insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which posits that metaphor is fundamental to human thought and enables the understanding of abstract domains through more concrete source domains. However, beyond identifying metaphorical mappings, it is crucial to explain how such meanings are interpreted in actual communicative contexts. This study therefore adopts Relevance Theory to account for the inferential processes through which hearers derive intended meanings. According to this framework, interpretation is guided by contextual assumptions, shared knowledge, and the search for optimal relevance, resulting in both explicatures (explicit meanings) and implicatures (inferred meanings). In the case of food-based metaphors, understanding often depends on culturally shared experiences of food, economy, and daily survival. By integrating lexico-semantic analysis with a relevance-theoretic approach, this study examines how food-related expressions in Nigeria’s “Renewed Hope” discourse function as socio-political symbols

and how their meanings are constructed and interpreted. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarship in cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and discourse studies by providing a context-sensitive account of how language encodes economic experience in contemporary African society.

Literature Review

Lexical Semantics and Meaning Extension

Lexical semantics is concerned with the systematic study of word meaning and the relationships that exist between lexical items within a language. Foundational scholars such as Lyons (1977) and Cruse (2000) argue that lexical meaning is not limited to a word's basic denotative sense but also includes its connotative, associative, and context-dependent meanings. This dual nature of meaning implies that lexical items are inherently flexible and capable of semantic expansion when used in discourse. In natural language use, words rarely remain confined to their literal meanings. Instead, they undergo processes of semantic extension, whereby their meanings are expanded, shifted, or reinterpreted to accommodate new communicative needs. This phenomenon is particularly evident in socio-cultural and political discourse, where speakers rely on familiar lexical items to express complex and abstract realities.

Semantic extension may occur through several key processes. One of the most prominent is metaphor, which involves understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Through metaphORIZATION, concrete experiences such as food consumption are mapped onto abstract domains like economic hardship or political governance. For example, references to simple or cheap food items may symbolically represent poverty or survival strategies.

Another important mechanism is metonymy, where a word or phrase is used to stand for something closely associated with it. In food discourse, specific food items may represent broader socio-economic conditions or cultural identities. Additionally, processes such as semantic broadening and narrowing further illustrate how word meanings evolve. Semantic broadening occurs when a word acquires a more general meaning over time, while narrowing restricts its meaning to a more specific context. In socio-political discourse, these processes enable

ordinary lexical items to encode complex ideological, economic, and experiential realities. Words associated with everyday life, particularly food, become powerful linguistic tools for expressing dissatisfaction, resilience, and social commentary. Thus, lexical semantics provides a crucial framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and extended in discourse.

Metaphor and Food Discourse

Food discourse has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a significant domain of meaning-making, particularly within cultural and linguistic studies (Fill & Penz, 2017). Food is not merely a material substance for sustenance; it functions as a cultural symbol that reflects identity, social class, economic conditions, and shared experiences. As such, food-related expressions often carry meanings that extend far beyond their literal interpretations. In many African contexts, food metaphors are especially salient because they are grounded in collective cultural knowledge and everyday lived experiences. Food items such as staple meals, snacks, and local delicacies are deeply embedded in social practices and thus provide a rich source of metaphorical meaning. These metaphors often serve as accessible and relatable means of expressing complex socio-economic realities.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasize that metaphor is not merely a stylistic or rhetorical device but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition. According to their conceptual metaphor theory, people understand abstract concepts through more concrete and embodied experiences. In this regard, food serves as a source domain through which abstract issues such as economic hardship, inequality, and survival are conceptualized. For instance, references to basic or low-cost food items may metaphorically represent economic struggle, while more luxurious food items may symbolize wealth and privilege. Furthermore, food discourse operates within a broader semiotic system where meaning is shaped by cultural context and shared understanding. As Fill and Penz (2017) argue, environmental and cultural discourses including food discourse are deeply intertwined with social values and ideologies. This

makes food metaphors particularly effective in conveying implicit meanings, as they draw on shared knowledge and collective experience.

Political Discourse in Nigeria

Political discourse in Nigeria has been widely studied as a dynamic and complex form of communication characterized by indirectness, creativity, and strategic ambiguity. Scholars such as Opeibi (2006) and Adegaju (2015) note that language in Nigerian political contexts often relies on implicit meanings, rhetorical devices, and culturally grounded expressions to communicate messages of dissent, criticism, and resistance. One notable feature of Nigerian political discourse is its reliance on shared socio-cultural knowledge. Speakers frequently use familiar expressions, proverbs, and metaphors to encode political messages in ways that are both accessible and contextually meaningful. This is particularly evident in protest discourse and everyday conversations, where citizens employ indirect language to critique governance, express frustration, and articulate socio-economic concerns.

Despite the richness of research on Nigerian political communication, relatively limited attention has been given to food-based metaphors as a distinct category of discourse. Yet, food expressions are increasingly prominent in contemporary socio-political narratives, especially within the context of economic hardship and public discourse surrounding governance. In the emerging “Renewed Hope” discourse, food-related expressions have become a salient means of articulating lived realities. References to everyday food items are used metaphorically to represent issues such as inflation, poverty, and survival. These expressions are not only linguistically significant but also socially and politically meaningful, as they reflect the intersection of language, economy, and lived experience. This gap in existing literature underscores the need for a focused investigation into the lexico-semantic extensions of food-based metaphors within Nigeria’s current political discourse. Such a study will contribute to both linguistic scholarship and the understanding of how language functions as a tool for social commentary and meaning-making in contemporary Nigeria.

Empirical Review on Food Discourse

Empirical studies on food discourse have consistently established that food functions as a semiotic and linguistic resource for meaning-making rather than merely a nutritional entity. Across cultures, food-related expressions encode social values, identity, and experiential knowledge. For instance, Essien and Okon (2018), through an ethnographic study of Efik proverbs in Nigeria, demonstrate that food metaphors are deeply embedded in cultural systems and serve as frameworks for expressing moral values and social norms. Their findings reveal that food discourse reflects collective cognition and cultural memory, reinforcing the idea that food operates as a symbolic communicative tool within indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, research grounded in cognitive linguistics has shown that food metaphors structure human thought and language. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor and metonymy provide the semantic foundation for many idiomatic expressions, particularly those involving food. Their study reveals that food idioms are motivated by conceptual mappings, where literal food experiences are extended to abstract domains such as emotions, behavior, and social relations. This supports the claim that lexical items undergo systematic semantic extension through metaphorization. Extending this argument, Kövecses (2010) demonstrates that metaphorical extensions are not arbitrary but are rooted in embodied experience, further emphasizing the cognitive basis of food discourse.

Corpus-based studies further reinforce the productivity of food metaphors in language use. For example, Stubbs (2001) analyzes expressions such as “eat up” and “consume” and shows that food-related lexical items are frequently extended to represent non-food domains, including knowledge acquisition, power relations, and resource utilization. His findings confirm that food metaphors are shaped by recurrent patterns of usage and lexical priming, thereby highlighting the role of discourse frequency in semantic extension. In a similar vein, Partington (1998) demonstrates that collocational patterns in large corpora reveal how food-related terms acquire extended meanings through habitual usage in different communicative contexts.

Cross-cultural research also highlights both the universality and variability of food discourse. Sharifian (2011) examines cultural

conceptualizations across languages and identifies both universal patterns and culture-specific variations in how food is used metaphorically. Likewise, Al-Sharafi (2004) demonstrates that food metaphors in Arabic are central to expressing social meaning, emphasizing that metaphor is a key tool for conceptualizing experience across linguistic communities. These studies collectively show that while food metaphors may be universal in function, their meanings are culturally grounded and context-dependent. In addition, studies on the multimodal and experiential dimensions of food discourse indicate that food metaphors extend beyond language into sensory and performative domains. Stano (2015) illustrates how food metaphors are realized through visual, sensory, and cultural experiences, reinforcing the idea that food serves as a bridge between embodied experience and abstract meaning. This perspective aligns with broader semiotic approaches that view food as a multimodal sign system. Recent work on social communication further reveals that food metaphors play a significant role in discourse construction, particularly in media and public communication. Goatly (2007) demonstrates that food-based expressions are widely used to represent social relations, ideologies, and power structures in discourse. Similarly, Charteris-Black (2011) shows that metaphor, including food metaphor, is central to persuasive communication in political and media discourse. These findings indicate that food discourse is inherently context-dependent, socially embedded, and ideologically loaded, making it a valuable resource for analyzing contemporary socio-political narratives such as Nigeria's *Renewed Hope* discourse.

Recent empirical studies (2021–2026) significantly strengthen the analytical depth of this study by providing contemporary insights into the structure, function, and socio-cognitive relevance of food discourse across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. For instance, corpus-based research demonstrates that food metaphors such as “eat up” and “consume” are systematically used to conceptualize multiple abstract domains, revealing patterned collocational behaviour and semantic prosody that distinguish metaphorical from literal usage (Kheovichai, 2025). This aligns with the present study's claim that food-related

expressions are not arbitrary but cognitively structured and context-dependent.

In a similar vein, cross-cultural and sociolinguistic investigations show that food metaphors serve as powerful tools for constructing identity, expressing social values, and negotiating interpersonal relationships. Studies on Jordanian Arabic reveal that such metaphors are shaped by variables such as age, gender, and cultural norms, demonstrating that meaning is dynamically constructed within specific socio-cultural environments (Khalifah et al., 2026). Likewise, comparative linguistic analyses across languages confirm that gastronomic metaphors function as universal cognitive resources while also encoding culture-specific meanings and value systems (Omarova et al., 2025; Rami et al., 2025). Beyond traditional linguistic contexts, recent research extends food discourse into digital and media spaces. Studies on online food and tourism discourse highlight the role of figurative language and sensory appeal in shaping audience perception, emphasizing the stylistic and evaluative dimensions of food discourse (Del Fante & Iori, 2025; Liang & Kou, 2022). Similarly, investigations into communicative and affective dimensions of language use demonstrate how emotion and audience engagement contribute to meaning-making, positioning food discourse as an interactive and multimodal phenomenon (Kronrod et al., 2021). Furthermore, emerging scholarship in cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis underscores the ideological implications of metaphor in shaping perception and framing social realities. Studies show how metaphor can normalize certain worldviews while marginalizing others, thereby influencing public interpretation and behaviour (Musolff, 2021; Yan & Zhang, 2025). In addition, recent interdisciplinary work highlights how metaphor operates within broader cognitive systems, including political and social representations, reinforcing its relevance to socio-political discourse (Meng et al., 2025).

Collectively, these studies provide strong empirical support for this research by demonstrating that food discourse operates at the intersection of cognition, culture, and communication. They validate the application of Relevance Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory by showing that meaning is not inherent in linguistic expressions but emerges

through inferential processes shaped by contextual knowledge and shared experience. Consequently, this study builds on and extends existing scholarship by situating Nigerian “Renewed Hope” food metaphors within a broader global and interdisciplinary framework of food discourse research.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework combining Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to explain both the cognitive structuring and pragmatic interpretation of meaning in Nigeria’s “Renewed Hope” discourse. This integration provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing how food-based lexical items function as socio-political symbols through lexico-semantic extension. Relevance Theory views communication as an inferential process in which speakers provide cues to their intentions and hearers interpret meaning using contextual assumptions. It is guided by the principle of optimal relevance, where interpretation seeks maximum cognitive effect with minimal processing effort. In this study, food-related expressions serve as ostensive stimuli, prompting hearers to infer meanings such as economic hardship, inflation, and survival based on shared socio-cultural knowledge. Conceptual Metaphor Theory complements this by explaining how abstract socio-political realities are understood through concrete domains. It posits that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which individuals map familiar experiences (source domains), such as food, onto abstract domains like politics and the economy (target domains). Thus, everyday food items become symbolic representations of broader societal conditions.

The integration of both theories captures how meaning is both formed and interpreted. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains the cognitive mappings that enable semantic extension, while Relevance Theory accounts for how such meanings are contextually inferred. This is further reinforced by the distinction between explicature and implicature: while food expressions may carry literal meanings (explicature), their socio-political significance emerges through inference (implicature). Both frameworks also emphasize the role of shared context. Cultural knowledge

of food practices and economic realities in Nigeria provides the common ground necessary for interpreting these metaphors effectively. Consequently, food-based expressions achieve high relevance due to their familiarity and strong contextual effects. In summary, the combined application of Relevance Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory offers a robust analytical framework for this study. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory accounts for the cognitive basis of meaning extension, Relevance Theory explains its pragmatic interpretation, providing a holistic account of how food-related expressions encode and communicate socio-economic realities in contemporary Nigerian discourse.

Gap in Literature

Existing studies have extensively examined metaphor, political discourse, and pragmatic meaning across linguistic traditions. Research in cognitive linguistics highlights the role of metaphor in structuring thought, while studies on Nigerian political discourse emphasize language as a tool for expressing socio-political realities (Opeibi, 2006; Adegoju, 2015). However, notable gaps remain. First, limited attention has been given to lexico-semantic extension in food discourse, particularly how individual lexical items shift from literal meanings to encode socio-economic realities. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory is well developed, word-level semantic change remains underexplored. Second, everyday food items as socio-political symbols have not been sufficiently studied. Common foods are often used to represent hardship and inequality, yet their linguistic and symbolic functions lack adequate empirical analysis. Third, there is a scarcity of studies applying Relevance Theory to food-based metaphors, especially in Nigeria. Since interpretation depends on shared knowledge and inference, this limits a full understanding of meaning construction.

Furthermore, most research is Western-focused, with little attention to contemporary Nigerian discourse, particularly the “Renewed Hope” narrative. The role of food discourse in expressing lived economic realities also remains underexplored. Addressing these gaps, this study examines the lexico-semantic extensions of food metaphors in Nigeria’s “Renewed Hope” discourse, showing how everyday expressions function

as socio-political symbols and how their meanings emerge through relevance-driven inferential processes.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the lexico-semantic extension and pragmatic interpretation of food-based metaphors in Nigeria's "Renewed Hope" discourse. The approach is suitable as it focuses on meaning construction, interpretation, and socio-cultural context rather than quantitative measurement. The study is both descriptive and interpretive. It identifies and categorises food-related lexical items in socio-political discourse and interprets how they function metaphorically to convey deeper meanings. Data are drawn from contemporary Nigerian public discourse, including political speeches, media reports, and social media platforms such as Twitter/X and Facebook. These sources provide natural instances of language use within real socio-political contexts.

Purposive sampling technique is used to select relevant data, focusing on widely circulated expressions where food-related lexical items convey socio-economic or political meanings. Data collection involves document analysis and digital ethnography. Relevant texts are extracted and analyzed within their contexts to ensure accurate interpretation. The analysis is guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Relevance Theory. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains the mapping between food (source domain) and socio-political realities (target domain), while Relevance Theory accounts for meaning interpretation through explication, implicature, and contextual inference. The analytical procedure involves identifying food-related expressions, classifying their literal and metaphorical meanings, analyzing their conceptual mappings, and interpreting their pragmatic meanings. The study then relates these findings to broader socio-political issues such as poverty, inflation, governance, and survival.

Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Akara as a Metaphor of Economic Survival

Expression: "Na akara we dey chop now"

Denotation: Bean cake

Semantic Extension: Affordable, low-cost food
Implicature: Economic hardship

Analysis:

The lexical item *akara* undergoes significant semantic broadening, extending beyond its literal meaning as a fried bean cake to function as a socio-economic symbol within contemporary Nigerian discourse. At the literal level, *akara* is a common, inexpensive food widely consumed across different social classes. However, within this utterance, it acquires an extended meaning that indexes economic constraint, survival, and reduced purchasing power. From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), this usage reflects a systematic mapping between the source domain of food and the target domain of economic conditions. Specifically, *akara*—as a cheap and accessible meal—represents a downgraded standard of living. This mapping can be conceptualized through the underlying metaphor ECONOMIC CONDITION IS FOOD QUALITY, where the type and quality of food consumed serve as indicators of an individual's or group's economic status. In this framework, consuming *akara* “now” implies a shift from previously higher-quality or more expensive meals, thereby signaling economic decline.

Furthermore, the temporal marker “now” plays a crucial role in strengthening the metaphorical meaning. It introduces a contrast between past and present conditions, suggesting that the current reliance on *akara* is not merely habitual but a consequence of changing economic realities. This aligns with another conceptual metaphor: CHANGE IN ECONOMIC STATUS IS CHANGE IN DIET, where dietary shifts reflect broader socio-economic transitions.

From a Relevance Theory perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995), the utterance operates as an ostensive stimulus that guides the hearer toward an intended interpretation. The explicature—the explicitly communicated meaning—is simply that the speaker is currently eating *akara*. However, this literal interpretation is pragmatically insufficient in context. The hearer, drawing on shared socio-economic knowledge such as inflation, rising food prices, and declining purchasing power, enriches

this explicature to derive the implicature that economic conditions have worsened. This inferential process is facilitated by shared cultural knowledge in which *akara* is widely recognized as a low-cost, everyday food often associated with modest living conditions. Because this knowledge is part of the common ground between speaker and hearer, the interpretation requires minimal cognitive effort while yielding substantial cognitive effects. This aligns with the principle of optimal relevance, as the utterance efficiently communicates a complex socio-economic reality through a simple and culturally salient expression.

In addition, the expression demonstrates how food-based metaphors function as indexical signs of socio-economic identity. By invoking *akara*, the speaker not only comments on economic hardship but also positions themselves within a particular socio-economic experience shared by many Nigerians. This collective resonance enhances the communicative power of the metaphor, transforming it from an individual statement into a broader social commentary. Moreover, the metaphor carries an evaluative dimension. It implicitly critiques prevailing economic conditions and governance by highlighting the necessity of resorting to cheaper food options. Thus, the utterance functions not only as a descriptive statement but also as a subtle form of socio-political critique, encoded through everyday language.

In summary, the expression “Na akara we dey chop now” exemplifies how a simple lexical item can undergo lexico-semantic extension to become a powerful communicative tool. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains the cognitive mapping that enables *akara* to represent economic survival, while Relevance Theory accounts for the inferential processes through which this meaning is derived. Together, these frameworks reveal how the expression achieves high communicative efficiency, condensing complex socio-economic realities into a brief yet deeply meaningful utterance.

2. *Kilikuli* as a Metaphor of Austerity

Expression: “Renewed hope nakilikuli life”

Denotation: Groundnut snack

Extended Meaning: Minimal survival

Implicature: Economic decline

Analysis:

The lexical item *kilikuli* undergoes a process of lexico-semantic extension, shifting from its literal meaning as a fried groundnut snack to a symbolic representation of austerity, deprivation, and constrained living. While *kilikuli* is widely recognized as a simple, inexpensive snack, its use in this expression transcends its literal sense to encode a broader socio-economic condition characterized by scarcity and reduced living standards.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), this usage reflects a structured mapping between the source domain of food and the target domain of economic life. In this mapping, *kilikuli*—as a low-cost, non-essential, and nutritionally limited snack—corresponds to a life of minimal survival and economic hardship. The underlying conceptual metaphor can be framed as POVERTY IS EATING CHEAP FOOD, where the quality, type, and social value of food serve as indicators of economic status. Additionally, the expression evokes a related metaphor: AUSTERITY IS A RESTRICTED DIET, suggesting that economic hardship limits not only income but also consumption choices.

The phrase “*kilikuli* life” is particularly significant because it nominalizes the metaphor, transforming it into a state of existence rather than a temporary condition. This linguistic construction intensifies the meaning, presenting austerity as a lived reality rather than an occasional experience. Furthermore, the inclusion of “Renewed hope” introduces an ironic or evaluative dimension, implying a contrast between political promises and actual lived conditions. This contrast strengthens the metaphor by framing *kilikuli* not just as a symbol of poverty, but as evidence of perceived policy failure or unmet expectations.

From a Relevance Theory perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995), the utterance functions as an ostensive stimulus that directs the hearer toward an intended interpretation beyond its literal meaning. The explicature refers to a type of food or lifestyle associated with *kilikuli*, but this surface meaning is pragmatically enriched through contextual assumptions. The hearer draws on shared socio-cultural knowledge—

particularly the understanding that *kilikuli* is inexpensive, often consumed in modest circumstances, and not typically associated with affluence—to derive the implicature of economic decline and hardship.

This inferential process is facilitated by the principle of optimal relevance, as the expression achieves a high level of communicative efficiency. With minimal linguistic input, the speaker conveys a complex socio-economic critique that resonates strongly with the audience. The metaphor requires little processing effort because it relies on widely shared cultural knowledge, yet it produces significant cognitive effects by evoking experiences of scarcity, frustration, and socio-economic struggle. Moreover, the metaphor functions as a form of implicit socio-political evaluation. By equating the “Renewed Hope” agenda with a “*kilikuli* life,” the speaker encodes criticism of economic conditions without making an explicit political statement. This indirectness enhances the communicative subtlety of the utterance, allowing it to operate simultaneously as description, evaluation, and critique. In this sense, the metaphor serves both a cognitive and rhetorical function, shaping perception while also expressing dissent. In addition, *kilikuli* operates as a culturally grounded symbol that reinforces collective understanding. Because it is a familiar item within Nigerian society, its metaphorical use activates shared experiences of consumption, affordability, and economic limitation. This shared cultural grounding strengthens the interpretive process, ensuring that the intended meaning is readily accessible to the audience.

In summary, the expression “Renewed hope nakilikuli life” exemplifies how everyday lexical items can be transformed into powerful socio-political symbols through processes of metaphorical mapping and pragmatic inference. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains how *kilikuli* comes to represent austerity through systematic domain mapping, while Relevance Theory accounts for how this meaning is inferentially derived in context. Together, these frameworks demonstrate how the expression achieves both cognitive depth and communicative efficiency in representing economic hardship within contemporary Nigerian discourse.

3. *Corn* as a Metaphor of Regression

Expression: “We don go back to corn”

Denotation: Staple grain

Extended Meaning: Subsistence living

Implicature: Economic regression

Analysis:

The lexical item *corn* in this expression undergoes a significant process of pragmatic and metaphorical extension, shifting from its literal meaning as a staple grain to a symbolic representation of economic regression and diminished living standards. Although corn is a culturally valued and widely consumed food, its invocation in this context is ideologically marked, signaling not abundance but constraint, not preference but necessity.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the expression reflects a systematic mapping between the source domain of food consumption and the target domain of socio-economic experience. In this mapping, *corn*—as a basic, traditional, and relatively inexpensive staple—is projected onto the idea of subsistence-level existence. The conceptual metaphor underlying this mapping can be formulated as ECONOMIC PROGRESS IS DIETARY ADVANCEMENT, where more diverse, processed, or protein-rich foods symbolize development and affluence, while reliance on simple staples signifies economic limitation.

Crucially, the phrase “go back” introduces a directional and temporal schema, activating a second layer of metaphorical meaning. This aligns with the broader conceptual metaphor PROGRESS IS FORWARD MOVEMENT, while REGRESSION IS BACKWARD MOVEMENT. Thus, “going back to corn” does not merely describe a dietary shift but encodes a perceived reversal in socio-economic trajectory. The metaphor suggests that individuals or society have moved away from a more advanced state of living to a more primitive or constrained condition, thereby reinforcing the notion of decline.

The expression also carries an implicit evaluative stance. In many contemporary Nigerian contexts, dietary diversity—such as the inclusion of rice, meat, and processed foods—is often associated with improved socio-economic status, while reliance on basic staples like corn may be interpreted as a sign of hardship. Therefore, the metaphor draws on shared socio-cultural hierarchies of food value to construct meaning, making the utterance both culturally resonant and ideologically potent.

From a Relevance Theory perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995), the utterance operates as an ostensive stimulus that guides the hearer toward an intended interpretation beyond its literal content. The explicature—indicating a return to eating corn—serves as a minimal propositional base. However, the hearer enriches this meaning through contextual assumptions about economic conditions, living standards, and the symbolic value of food.

The temporal marker “back” plays a crucial inferential role by triggering assumptions about past and present states. It presupposes that there was a prior condition of relative economic stability or improvement, from which there has been a decline. This encourages the hearer to construct a contrastive interpretation: a movement from better to worse, from abundance to scarcity, and from progress to regression. The resulting implicature—economic decline—is therefore not explicitly stated but strongly communicated.

The utterance achieves optimal relevance by balancing minimal linguistic effort with maximal cognitive effect. With a short and culturally familiar expression, the speaker conveys a complex socio-economic critique that encompasses themes of hardship, disappointment, and perceived policy failure. The reliance on shared cultural knowledge ensures that the intended meaning is easily accessible, while the metaphorical structure adds depth and evaluative force. Furthermore, the expression functions as a form of implicit socio-political commentary. By framing economic conditions in terms of dietary regression, the speaker indirectly critiques governance and economic management without making overt accusations. This indirectness enhances the rhetorical effectiveness of the utterance, allowing it to operate simultaneously as description, evaluation, and protest discourse. In addition, *corn* serves as a

collective cultural symbol, anchoring the interpretation in shared experiences of food, survival, and economic adaptation. Its familiarity ensures that the metaphor resonates across different social groups, thereby strengthening its communicative impact. The phrase “we don go back” also introduces a collective pronoun, which expands the scope of the critique from individual experience to shared societal condition, reinforcing the sense of communal hardship.

In summary, the expression “We don go back to corn” exemplifies how everyday food items are mobilized as powerful metaphorical resources in socio-political discourse. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains the cognitive mappings that enable *corn* to represent regression, while Relevance Theory accounts for the inferential processes through which this meaning is derived. Together, these frameworks demonstrate how the utterance achieves both semantic richness and pragmatic efficiency in conveying economic decline within contemporary Nigerian protest discourse.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis reveals that food-based lexical items within Nigeria’s “Renewed Hope” discourse function as highly productive cognitive, cultural, and pragmatic resources for meaning construction. These expressions are not stylistically ornamental; rather, they are systematically structured and ideologically loaded linguistic choices that encode complex socio-economic realities through culturally grounded representations.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the findings demonstrate that food operates as a primary source domain for conceptualizing abstract socio-economic experiences. Everyday food items such as garri, kilikuli, and corn are mapped onto target domains such as poverty, austerity, inflation, and regression. This mapping is not arbitrary but reflects deeply entrenched cultural models in which food is directly tied to survival, status, and well-being. The recurrent metaphorical patterns observed in the data—such as POVERTY IS EATING CHEAP FOOD, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IS SUBSISTENCE DIET, and ECONOMIC PROGRESS IS DIETARY ADVANCEMENT—

indicate that speakers rely on embodied and culturally shared experiences of consumption to structure their understanding of economic conditions. Importantly, these metaphors are not merely cognitive constructs but also function as ideological tools. By framing economic hardship in terms of food scarcity or dietary downgrade, speakers implicitly evaluate governance, policy outcomes, and socio-economic inequalities. Thus, metaphor becomes a means of social critique, enabling speakers to articulate dissatisfaction in ways that are both accessible and rhetorically powerful. Complementing this cognitive perspective, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) provides a robust explanation for how these metaphorical expressions are interpreted in real-time communication. The findings show that meaning does not reside solely in the lexical items themselves but emerges through a dynamic process of contextual enrichment and inferential reasoning. The distinction between explicature and implicature is particularly central in this regard.

At the level of explicature, food-related expressions present minimal propositional content—for example, references to eating garri or returning to corn. However, these explicit meanings serve primarily as inferential triggers that guide the hearer toward deeper interpretations. Through shared contextual assumptions—such as knowledge of economic hardship, food hierarchies, and current political discourse—the hearer derives implicatures relating to poverty, inflation, or economic decline. This process underscores the fundamentally inferential nature of communication, where intended meanings are constructed rather than simply decoded.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the role of shared socio-cultural knowledge (common ground) in facilitating interpretation. The effectiveness of these metaphors depends on the audience's familiarity with the cultural significance of the food items referenced. For instance, understanding garri or kilikuli as markers of modest living is crucial for accessing the intended socio-economic critique. This shared knowledge reduces processing effort while enhancing cognitive effects, thereby enabling the utterances to achieve optimal relevance.

Another significant finding is that food-based metaphors function as semantic condensers, compressing complex and multidimensional

socio-economic realities into short, memorable expressions. In contexts such as protest discourse or everyday political commentary, where brevity and immediacy are essential, these metaphors provide an efficient means of communication. They allow speakers to encode layered meanings—economic, political, emotional, and evaluative—within a single phrase. This compression not only enhances communicative efficiency but also increases the rhetorical impact of the utterance, making it more likely to resonate with a broad audience.

In addition, the findings reveal that these expressions often incorporate evaluative and affective dimensions, reflecting emotions such as frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment. The metaphors do not merely describe economic conditions; they also position the speaker in relation to those conditions, thereby contributing to the construction of stance and identity within discourse. This aligns with the broader understanding of language as a tool for both representation and social positioning.

The integration of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Relevance Theory proves particularly effective in capturing the multidimensional nature of these expressions. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory accounts for the cognitive structuring and systematicity of metaphorical mappings, Relevance Theory explains the pragmatic processes and inferential mechanisms through which meaning is derived in context. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive account that bridges cognition and communication, demonstrating how metaphor is both mentally structured and interactionally realized.

Overall, the findings underscore the transformative potential of everyday lexical items in discourse. Food terms, which are ordinarily associated with basic human needs, are recontextualized as powerful socio-political symbols that encode critique, reflect lived experience, and mobilize collective understanding. In the context of Nigeria's contemporary socio-political environment, these metaphorical expressions serve not only as linguistic devices but also as vehicles of resistance, commentary, and meaning-making. In summary, the study demonstrates that food discourse in the "Renewed Hope" narrative is a site of rich pragmatic and cognitive activity, where metaphor, inference, and shared

knowledge converge to produce deeply resonant socio-economic meanings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that food-based metaphors in Nigeria's "Renewed Hope" discourse are not merely stylistic but reflect processes of lexico-semantic extension shaped by socio-economic realities. Everyday food items such as *akara*, *kilikuli*, and *corn* extend beyond their literal meanings to symbolize conditions like poverty, austerity, and economic decline, showing how speakers use culturally familiar resources to express complex socio-political experiences. Drawing on Relevance Theory, the study shows that meaning emerges through the interaction of linguistic form and context. The interpretation of these expressions depends on inferential processes, where hearers move from explicature to implicature using shared socio-cultural knowledge. As a result, food metaphors function as efficient pragmatic tools, compressing complex realities into brief but meaningful forms that achieve optimal relevance. The study contributes to lexico-semantic research in African linguistics by highlighting the role of culturally embedded lexical items in meaning construction. It also extends the application of Relevance Theory to real-life socio-political discourse, demonstrating its explanatory power beyond abstract contexts. The findings underscore how language encodes and negotiates economic experience, enabling speakers to articulate lived realities and critique socio-political conditions. The study thus provides insight into the interplay of language, culture, and society, and opens avenues for further research on metaphor and meaning construction in African discourse.

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