# Morpho-Semantic Features of Food Vendor Advertisement in a Nigerian University

Muhammad Mustapha, Ubaidallah Muhammad Bello & Ahmad Anas Musa
Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi

## Abstract

This paper is a morpho-semantic analysis of food vendor advertisement in students' residential areas of Nasarawa State University, Keffi. The research studied the morphological and semantic implications of the artistic use of language by food vendors in students' residential areas. Contextual and descriptive theories were deployed as the theoretical bases for the study. The application of the two theories helped the researchers to contextualize the morphological features and the meanings of the linguistic forms used in the banners and walls where the food vendor advertisements were inscribed. The study adopted a qualitative research design that worked with relevant information that were not numerical. The data were collected through the help of phone camera that was used to snap the banners and wall inscriptions containing food vendor advertisement before they were later transcribed and presented in a table. The data collected were presented in tables and analysed based on the morpho-semantic features in them. The analysis revealed that multilingual elements are evident in the language strategies of food vendor advertisements in students' residential areas. There are also evidences of the use of language to highlight varieties, exotic appeal to customers, directive and imperative terms, and the use of Nigerian Pidgin that helps to make the adverts friendly and familiar within the context of use. The study concludes that morphology and semantics work together to make advertisement appealing and enticing to customers. It is also evident that the vendors, through their decisive use of language, understand the cultural and linguistic contexts that represent the background of the customers.

## Introduction

Language is a human phenomenon that helps humans to carry out diverse activities with distinct intentions. The intentions for the use of language helps in the postulation of the functionalist approach to the study of language. Despite the views on the functionality of language and the fast sway the approach is gaining within the realm of language studies, grammar remains the major component that the helps linguistic elements to germane. In the study of the grammar of English, there are four basic components that work together as indivisible subfields. These components of grammar represent the basic features of the English grammar, which having a grip of their understanding can front one as a competent user of the language. These components are morphology, phonology, semantics and syntax.

In the heart of language lies the interplay between morphology and semantics. Morphology concerns the structure and formation of words, while semantics delves into the meanings conveyed by those words. Together, they form the cornerstone of effective communication, allowing individuals to articulate ideas with precision and clarity. As James (17) observes, "Morphology and semantics are like two sides of the same coin, working together to give language its richness and complexity".

In the context of food vendors' advertisements, language takes on a strategic role. Vendors aim to attract customers and boost sales by carefully crafting messages that encompass both morphological and semantic elements. As Emily posits, "Language in advertising is not just about conveying information; it's about creating a persuasive narrative that resonates with the target audience" (2). Given these dynamics, this research seeks to investigate the morpho-semantic trends prevalent in the advertisements of food vendors operating in Nasarawa State University, Keffi. Analyzing the linguistic strategies employed in these advertisements will help in gaining insights into how vendors leverage language to engage with their audience and drive consumer behaviour.

**Conceptual Review**
**The Concept of Morphology**
Morphology, as a fundamental concept in linguistics, delves into the intricate structure and formation of words within a language system. Scholars have described it as the study of how words are constructed from smaller units known as morphemes. Morphemes are the building blocks of language, representing the smallest meaningful units that contribute to the overall meaning of a word (Fromkin et al. 85). To illustrate, let's dissect the word "unhappiness". In this compound word, we can identify three morphemes: "un-," "happy," and "-ness." The prefix "un-" serves as a morpheme indicating negation or reversal, altering the meaning of the root word "happy" to denote the absence of happiness. The root morpheme "happy" carries the core meaning of the word, conveying a state of contentment or joy. Finally, the suffix "-ness" functions as a morpheme indicating a state or quality, transforming the adjective "happy" into the noun "happiness" to denote the quality or state of being happy (Omachonu 28).

Through the lens of morphology, linguists explore the rules and patterns that govern the formation of words and their various forms. This includes examining processes such as affixation (adding prefixes or suffixes), compounding (combining two or more words), derivation (creating new words from existing ones), and inflection (altering the form of words to indicate grammatical features such as tense, number, or case) (Yusuf 32).

Additionally, morphology sheds light on the morphological typology of languages, categorizing them based on how they form words. Some languages exhibit extensive morphological complexity, employing a rich array of affixes and morphological processes to convey meaning, while others rely more heavily on word order or context (Fromkin et al. 85).

**The Concept of Semantics**
Semantics, a pivotal field within linguistics, is concerned with unraveling the intricate web of meaning that permeates language. Scholars have defined semantics as the study of how words, phrases, sentences, and discourse convey meaning and how this meaning is perceived and interpreted by speakers (Saeed 3). At its core, semantics delves into the relationships between linguistic expressions and the real-world entities or concepts they represent.

One of the primary targets of semantics is to examine the various types of meaning embedded within language. This encompasses denotation, which refers to the literal or dictionary definition of a word, and connotation, which encompasses the associative or implied meanings evoked by a word beyond its literal definition. For example, while the word "home"

may denote a physical dwelling, it can also carry connotations of comfort, security, and belonging, depending on the context in which it is used (Muhammad 14).

Moreover, semantics delves into the principles and mechanisms underlying semantic interpretation. It investigates how speakers navigate the complexities of meaning in language, taking into account factors such as context, inference, ambiguity, and figurative language. Through empirical research and theoretical analysis, semanticists strive to uncover the cognitive processes involved in understanding and generating linguistic meaning (Saeed 4).

Semantics also explores the relationship between linguistic expressions and the conceptual structures they evoke in the minds of speakers. This involves studying how words and phrases map onto abstract concepts and categories, as well as how language shapes and reflects our perception of the world. As Fillmore (12) aptly notes, "Semantics serves as the gateway to understanding how language both mirrors and molds our understanding of reality."

## The Concept of Morpho-semantics

Morpho-semantics serves as the nexus where morphology and semantics intersect, delving into the intricate relationship between the structure of words and their conveyed meanings. Scholars have defined morpho-semantics as the study of how morphological processes influence the semantic interpretation of words (Bauer102). This interdisciplinary field explores how the formation and alteration of word structures, through processes such as affixation, derivation, and compounding, shape the meaning conveyed by linguistic expressions. The focus of morpho-semantics is to examine how morphological processes contribute to changes in word meaning. For instance, the addition of a prefix like "un-" to the word "happy" transforms its meaning from positive to negative, resulting in the word "unhappy." This illustrates how morphological alterations can have a profound impact on the overall semantic interpretation of words (William 22).

Morpho-semantics also investigates the underlying mechanisms by which morphological changes affect semantic interpretation. This includes exploring the principles and constraints that govern the interaction between morphological structure and semantic content. By analyzing empirical data and theoretical frameworks, researchers aim to uncover the cognitive processes involved in mapping morphological forms to semantic representations (Yule 78). Furthermore, morpho-semantics explores how morphological structures contribute to the richness and complexity of meaning in language. It examines how morphologically complex words convey nuanced shades of meaning that cannot be fully captured by simple lexical items. Through case studies and linguistic analyses, scholars seek to elucidate the intricate relationship between form and meaning in linguistic expressions (Bauer 6).

## Theoretical Framework

Using eclectic approach, the study adopted contextual and descriptive theories to parse and analyse the morpho-semantic features in this work. The contextual account of meaning as fronted by J.R Firth (11) aided in the contextualization of the semantic implications of the inscriptions collected from the field, while descriptive morphological model as postulated by Saussure (116-216) and used by Tomori (7-13) was adopted to cater for the morphological analysis of the words used. Contextual theory sees meaning as an unfixed phenomenon that can

be deciphered only based on context of use. On the other hand, descriptive theory is a model for the explanation and analysis of structures of words in the field of morphology.

**Methodology**

This research adopted qualitative research design for studying information that are not numerical. In terms of data collection, the primary data for this study were collected through the help of phone camera by snapping relevant inscriptions on vendors' banners and/or wall inscriptions. The collected data were later transcribed, presented on a tabular form and analysed based on the morpho-semantic features they contain.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

| S/N | Inscriptions on Adverts | Context | Gloss |
|-----|------------------------|---------|-------|
| 1. | **MAMA ESSENCE RESTAURANT** FOOD: JOLLOF RICEI\| FRIED RICE \|\| WHTTE RICE \|\| MASSA \|\| KUNUN GYADA SEMO-VITA \|\| TUMON SHINKAFA \|\| AMALA \|\| EBA \|AKPU \|\| MOIMOI \|\| SALAD \|\| PLANTAIN SOUP: EGUST I\| BITER LEAFI\| VEGETABLE \|\| OGBOND \| KUKA \|EWEDU \| BANGA TEA: HERBAL \|\| ENGLISH \|\| ARABIAN CONTACT: 08137184271 | NSUK, inside campus, adjacent school's library | "Mama" the pidgin name for 'mother' borrowed from Hausa language, and "Essence", the name of the child of the owner of the restaurant. |
| 2. | God First Restaurant and Catering Services Nasarawa State University Keffi Shop Cm9. Opposite NSUK Mains Library OUR SERVICES Jollof Rice-Fried Rice-Chicken-Pounded Yam-Fufu/Akpu CALL: 08036634935 Motto: Our Sufficiency is in God. 2 Corint3:5 | Adjacent the school's library, NSUK | The name and the motto of the restaurant present and owner that is religious. |
| 3. | "J" n "G" KITCHEN BaBz Chicken Kebab Sport | Pepsi Garden, a place inside the university where foods and drinks are sold for students and staff consumption. | "J" and "G" represent the initials of the names of the people that own the restaurant. "n" is a shorten form of 'and'. "BaBz" is a nickname and "Kebab" is |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Pepsi Garden, NSUK    08069043131<br>                                        08069043131<br>                     Campus Delivery<br>Dey<br><br>Full Chicken Kebab<br>Plate of Chicken Kebab<br>Liver Kebab<br>Beef Kebab<br>Gizzard | | and English word for a dish of piece of meat, fish, or vegetable. |
| 4. |                 OYIBO<br>                FOOD<br>  Super<br>     Delicious<br>  SHAWARMA<br><br>WE SELL:<br>• PIZZA,<br>• SHAWARMA<br>• COFFEE<br>• SANDWICH<br>• BURGER,<br>•SUB SANDWICH<br><br>place your Orders Now!<br>09127836476<br><br>I love it oyibofood  official_oyibofood | Pepsi Garden, a place inside the university where foods and drinks are sold for students and staff consumption. | "Oyibo" is the pidgin name for 'white man'. |
| 5. | OYIBO FOOD<br>   Best<br>     Plug<br><br>**ITEMS ON THE MENU:**<br>Burger, Pizza, Sharwarma<br>Chicken Wings, coffee,<br>Milkshake, Smoothie,<br>Mocktail<br>PEPSI GARDEN INSIDE<br>NASARAWA STATE UNIVERSITY KEFFL NIGERIA<br>**9 09127836476, 09134882530** | Pepsi Garden, a place inside the university where foods and drinks are sold for students and staff consumption. | "oyibo" the pidgin English name for 'white man', while "plug" is a slang that stance for 'assurance to get at all time'. |

**Table 1: Vendors' Inscriptions Sourced from Field Work**

In analyzing the morpho-semantic aspects of the advertisements by food vendors in Nasarawa State University, Keffi, we start with the first entry (S/N 1), "MAMA ESSENCE RESTAURANT." The name "MAMA ESSENCE" is a blend of two distinct elements: "Mama," a term borrowed from Hausa language and commonly used in Nigerian Pidgin to mean 'mother,' and "Essence," which is the name of the owner's child. This combination is a morphological strategy that personalizes the business, evoking a sense of familiarity and warmth, likely aimed at attracting students who might be drawn to a homely and welcoming atmosphere. The advertisement lists a variety of food items, categorized under "FOOD," "SOUP," and "TEA." The use of specific food names like "JOLLOF RICE," "FRIED RICE," "WHITE RICE," "MASSA," and "KUNUN GYADA SEMO-VITA" reflects a semantic strategy that emphasizes diversity and choice. The inclusion of both local dishes like "AMALA," "EBA," and "AKPU" and more universal items like "SALAD" and "PLANTAIN" suggests an attempt to cater to a wide range of tastes and preferences among the student population. The soup section includes "EGUSI," "BITER LEAF," "VEGETABLE," "OGOND," "KUKA," "EWEDU," and "BANGA," further highlighting the variety and cultural richness of the offerings. The tea section, with options like "HERBAL," "ENGLISH," and "ARABIAN," adds another layer of diversity, appealing to different cultural and health preferences. The contact information provided at the end is straightforward and practical, facilitating easy communication with potential customers. The context of the advertisement, being inside the campus and adjacent to the school's library, is strategically chosen to maximize visibility and accessibility for students.

Moving to the second entry (S/N 2), "God First Restaurant and Catering Services," the name immediately conveys a religious connotation. The phrase "God First" is a semantic strategy that aligns the business with religious values, potentially appealing to customers who share similar beliefs. The motto, "Our Sufficiency is in God. 2 Corint3:5," reinforces this religious theme, suggesting that the owner's faith is a central aspect of the business's identity. The services listed include "Jollof Rice," "Fried Rice," "Chicken," "Pounded Yam," and "Fufu/Akpu," which are popular and familiar dishes among Nigerian students. The advertisement also provides the shop's location, "Shop Cm9. Opposite NSUK Mains Library," and a contact number, making it easy for students to find and reach the restaurant. The context, being adjacent to the school's library, is again strategic, targeting students who are likely to frequent the library.

In both advertisements, the language choices reflect a blend of local and universal elements, catering to the diverse student population. The use of specific food names, religious themes, and personalized business names are all part of a morpho-semantic strategy aimed at making the advertisements more appealing and relatable to the target audience. The sociolinguistic factors at play include the cultural and religious backgrounds of the vendors and their customers, as well as the multilingual environment of the university campus.

In analyzing the third entry (S/N 3), ""J" n "G" KITCHEN," we observe several interesting morphological and semantic features. The name ""J" n "G" KITCHEN" uses initials and a shortened form of 'and' ("n"), which is a common morphological strategy in informal or casual contexts, particularly in text messaging and social media. This choice of name gives the restaurant a modern and casual feel, potentially appealing to the young student population. The use of initials also adds a personal touch, as they represent the names of the owners. The term

"BaBz" is a nickname, which is another morphological strategy that personalizes the business and creates a sense of familiarity. The word "KITCHEN" is straightforward and universally understood, clearly communicating the type of business. The advertisement then lists various types of kebabs: "Full Chicken Kebab," "Plate of Chicken Kebab," "Liver Kebab," "Beef Kebab," and "Gizzard." The use of specific food names is a semantic strategy that emphasizes the variety of options available, catering to different preferences. The phrase "Pepsi Garden" indicates the location of the restaurant, which is a place inside the university where foods and drinks are sold. The repetition of the contact number "08069043131" ensures that it stands out and is easily noticed. The phrase "Campus Delivery Dey" is a blend of English and Nigerian Pidgin, with "Dey" meaning 'is available.' This linguistic mix is a sociolinguistic strategy that reflects the multilingual environment of the university and makes the advertisement more relatable to the student population.

In analyzing the eleventh entry (S/N 11), we observe a mix of various morpho-semantic strategies used to create an appealing and engaging advertisement for a food vendor targeting students in Nasarawa State University, Keffi. The advertisement starts with the heading "OYIBO FOOD," which immediately communicates the type of cuisine offered. The term "Oyibo," a Nigerian Pidgin word for 'white man' or foreigner, semantically conveys that the restaurant offers Western-style or international food. This choice of words is likely to appeal to students interested in trying new or different foods, reflecting a sociolinguistic understanding of the target audience's curiosity and openness to international cuisine.

The phrase "Super Delicious SHAWARMA" is a notable example of morphological and semantic emphasis. The use of the intensifier "Super" and the adjective "Delicious" is a semantic strategy that highlights the quality and taste of the featured item, shawarma. The capitalization of "SHAWARMA" is a morphological feature that further emphasizes this item, drawing the reader's attention to it. This strategy is designed to make the shawarma more enticing to potential customers.

The list of items under "WE SELL:" includes "PIZZA," "SHAWARMA," "COFFEE," "SANDWICH," "BURGER," and "SUB SANDWICH." This is a semantic strategy that emphasizes the variety of options available, catering to different preferences. The use of specific food names and the list format makes the information clear and easy to understand. The capitalization of each item is a morphological feature that emphasizes each item, making the list more visually striking and easier to read.

The phrase "place your Orders Now!" is a direct and engaging semantic strategy that encourages customers to take immediate action. The use of the imperative "place your Orders" is a call to action, while the adverb "Now!" adds a sense of urgency. The exclamation mark further emphasizes this urgency, making the phrase more compelling. The contact number "09127836476" is provided for customers to place their orders, making the process convenient and straightforward.

The inclusion of the phrase "I love it oyibofood official_oyibofood" is a sociolinguistic strategy that reflects the influence of social media and digital culture. The phrase "I love it" is a direct and engaging expression of enthusiasm, while the use of the vendor's social media handle "official_oyibofood" encourages customers to engage with the business online. This

strategy reflects an understanding of the target audience's digital literacy and social media usage, as it encourages customers to connect with the business in the digital space.

The overall language use in the advertisement is a blend of English and Nigerian Pidgin, reflecting the multilingual environment of the university campus. The use of playful and engaging language, such as the phrase "Now!" and the expression "I love it," creates a friendly and approachable tone that is likely to resonate with the student population. The emphasis on the exotic and international nature of the food, as well as the variety of options available, is a semantic strategy that caters to the diverse preferences and interests of the target audience. The use of capital letters, lists, and imperatives are morphological features that make the advertisement more visually striking and engaging. The inclusion of the social media handle reflects a sociolinguistic understanding of the target audience's digital literacy and social media usage, encouraging customers to engage with the business both online and offline.

In analyzing the twelfth entry (S/N 12), we observe a blend of morpho-semantic strategies used to create an engaging and appealing advertisement for a food vendor targeting students in Nasarawa State University, Keffi. The advertisement starts with the heading "OYIBO FOOD," which immediately communicates the type of cuisine offered. The term "Oyibo," a Nigerian Pidgin word for 'white man' or foreigner, semantically conveys that the restaurant offers Western-style or international food. This choice of words is likely to appeal to students interested in trying new or different foods, reflecting a sociolinguistic understanding of the target audience's curiosity and openness to international cuisine.

The phrase "Best Plug" is a notable example of morphological and semantic emphasis. The use of the superlative "Best" is a semantic strategy that highlights the superior quality of the food and service. The term "Plug" is a slang term that stands for 'assurance to get at all times,' conveying reliability and availability. This morpho-semantic strategy is designed to build trust and attract customers by assuring them of consistent service.

The list of items under "ITEMS ON THE MENU:" includes "Burger, Pizza, Sharwarma, Chicken Wings, Cofee, Milkshake, Smoothie, Mocktail." This is a semantic strategy that emphasizes the variety of options available, catering to different preferences. The use of specific food names and the list format makes the information clear and easy to understand. The capitalization of each item is a morphological feature that emphasizes each item, making the list more visually striking and easier to read.

The location "PEPSI GARDEN INSIDE NASARAWA STATE UNIVERSITY KEFFI NIGERIA" is strategic, as it targets students and staff who are likely to be familiar with the area. The use of a specific and well-known landmark, "Pepsi Garden," helps customers easily locate the eatery. This sociolinguistic strategy reflects an understanding of the target audience's familiarity with the campus environment. The contact numbers "09127836476, 09134882530" are provided for customers to place their orders, making the process convenient and straightforward. The inclusion of multiple contact numbers ensures that customers have various options to reach the vendor, enhancing accessibility.

Generally, the language use in the advertisement is a blend of English and Nigerian Pidgin, reflecting the multilingual environment of the university campus. The use of playful and engaging language, such as the term "Plug," creates a friendly and approachable tone that is likely to resonate with the student population. The emphasis on the exotic and international

nature of the food, as well as the variety of options available, is a semantic strategy that caters to the diverse preferences and interests of the target audience. The use of capital letters, lists, and superlatives are morphological features that make the advertisement more visually striking and engaging. The inclusion of the specific location and multiple contact numbers reflects a sociolinguistic understanding of the target audience's needs and preferences, encouraging customers to engage with the business both online and offline.

## Findings

First, the most noticeable finding from this research is the strategic morpho-semantic use of multilingual elements. Food vendors within the university often mixed English with Nigerian Pidgin or Hausa terms, reflecting the diverse linguistic environment of the university. This multilingual approach makes the advertisements more relatable and engaging to the student population. The morphological blending of languages, at some points, personalizes the business and indicates ownership, making it more appealing to customers who recognize or identify with the etymology of the coined and borrowed words used in the advertisements.

Another prominent strategy identified in this study is the emphasis on variety and exotic appeal. Coming from the semantic point of view, many advertisements highlighted a wide range of food items, from local snacks like "Puff-Puff" to international dishes like "shawarma" and "pizza". This variety caters to the diverse tastes and preferences of the students. Additionally, some vendors emphasized the exotic or unique nature of their offerings, such as the "Oyibo Food" advertisement, to pique curiosity and interest. The use of specific food names and the list format is a semantic strategy that emphasizes the variety of options available, while the capitalization of food items is a morphological feature that makes the list more visually striking and easier to read.

Emotional appeal and personalization were also common strategies identified. Personal touches, such as using the owners' names or nicknames in the business name, make the eateries feel more welcoming and familiar. These strategies help to build a stronger bond with the customers, making them more likely to patronize the business. The use of metaphors and expressive language is a semantic strategy that evokes positive emotional responses and generates interest in the food items.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that morphology and semantics work together to make advertisement appealing and encouraging to customers. It is also evident that the vendors, through their decisive use of language, understand the cultural and linguistic context that represent the background of the customers. Feasible recommendations that are of help to the vendors and the customers were provided at the end.

**Works Cited**

Chomsky, Noah. *Aspect of the Theory of Syntax.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.

De Saussare, Fredrick. *Course in General Linguistics.* Geneva, 1916.

Fromkin, Victoria A. *An Introduction to Language*. 10th ed., Cengage Learning, 2014.

Jackendoff, Ray. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Muhammad, Abdulkadir. *The Hausa Language: An Encyclopedic Reference Grammar*. Yale University Press, 2018.

Omachonu, Victor U. *The Igbo Language and Culture*. University Press of America, 2000.

Radford, Andrew. *Syntax: A Minimalist Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Tomori, Oladele. *Yoruba: A Basic Course*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Yusuf, Wale. *African Languages in Education: The Case of Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria*. Multilingual Matters, 2005.