

## THE ANALYSIS OF NAMES OF MENU ITEMS IN SOME SOCIAL CULTURAL SEMIOSPHERE USING A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

This study examined names of menu items as aspects of language and communication done beyond the spoken and written words to the level of language as a system of signs. The framework is Charles Peirce's concept of signs. Among three different sign vehicles mentioned, the icon was chosen as the tool for analysis. The research is saying that names of menu items are not just names for identification but are communicative tools that communicate iconically. The iconic manifestation here is at the level of graphic and semantics. The concepts of menu and names were introduced as well as the background to the study. It went further to demonstrate how names of menu items manifested their iconicity graphically and semantically. Based on the analysis, it was said that names of menu items are not just tags for identification but communicate the nature of the menu thereby, enhancing effective communication.

Semiotics is a term which “derives from the Greek [semeiotikos]”, ‘observant of signs’ [from – semeion, ‘a sign mark’] and it was first used in English by Henry Stubbes [1670] in a very precise sense to denote the branches of science relating to the interpretation of signs....” [Robbins and Langton: 2001:1-2]. Semiotics which is the science of signification is often known to have derived its source from two major sources- Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss- French linguist [1857-1913] and Charles Sanders Peirce, an Anglo- American Philosopher [1839-1914]. But to some other sources, Saussure has been earmarked to be the founder, closely followed by Peirce and later Charles Morris [1901-1979]. Among them, the theoretical background adopted for this study is Charles Sanders Peirce concept of semiotics which he defines in one of his many definitions as “anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I called its interpretant, that the later is hereby mediately determined by the former” [Atkin Albert 2006:3]. The adoption of a semiotic approach to the study of names of menu items in this work is based on the need to examine and account for the communicative features or elements that lie beyond the spoken or written words to the level of language as a system of signs or signification which is purely a linguistic model of communication. This is different from a purely linguistic approach to communication which entails a speaker encoding thoughts into words and the listener decoding words back into thoughts.

Peirce developed a semiotic theory or theory of signs that is triadic. It is triadic because it is found upon three philosophical categories that bring three terms into relation; the sign or representamen, object and interpretant. The sign could be an icon or index or symbol. The reference between a sign and an object is iconic if there is resemblance or similarity between them. Among the three different types of sign vehicles adopted by Peirce- icon, symbol and index, this study adopts the

'icon' as a sign vehicle to explicate names of menu items as symbols of language and communication to their referent; as a result, we shall limit our discussion to it. The icon is a sign which shares certain obvious similarities with what it signifies. According to Omorogbe and Akhabue [2011:117], an 'icon' means a "portrait, likeness, statute, phantom and sometimes simile usually implies relation" and it implies that the connection between a sign and its object is that of similitude or similarity or/and resemblance. The similarity could be in the nature, function or structure of the object: just as Peirce says of an icon "a relationship that exists between a sign and its referent lies in the 'sharing' or joint possession of some quality or property" [Omorogbe and Akhabue, 117].

Furthermore, some names of menu items which are here regarded as signs or 'codes' as Leech and Short call it, could convey meanings or communicate something to the audience involved through their similarities. Hence "a code is iconic to the extent that it imitates in its signals or textual form, the meaning that they represent" [Leech and Short 1981:223]. The resemblances that iconic signs manifest could be at different linguistic and literary domains. Linguistically, it could be demonstrated at the semantic, syntactic, morphemic and phonetic levels. Again, it could be manifested at the graphic level. But this study demonstrates that some menu names possess the features and qualities of an icon; in the sense that the name shares certain obvious resemblance or similarity with what it signifies. Where the name is the sign, the menu is the object and the essence or meaning is the interpretant. Iconic features manifested at the graphic and semantic levels will be discussed here. The name associative, suggestive, attributive, descriptive, denotative or connotative as the case may be. Thus the name suggests or speaks for that menu which demonstrates that there is iconic tie between the name and the menu. The word 'menu' is French in origin. Ultimately, it derives from the Latin 'minutus' which is something made small. In French, it was applied to a detailed list or 'resume' of any kind. "The word 'menu' dates back to the eighteenth century, although the custom of making a list of the courses for a meal is much older. Modern menus first appeared during the early nineteenth century, in the Parisian restaurants of the Palais- Royal" [Lillicrap and Cousins, 2010:90].

On the other hand, Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary [1993:474] describes a name as a "word by which a person, place or thing is called" [474]. When applied to menu, it means a name or words with which a particular menu is known or recognised. But in this study, menu or food or meal or diet, as the case may be, is addressed from the point of view of their semiosis- how the names could exact some levels of meanings or communication in relation to the menus themselves at situated context. That means names are meaningful- associative, descriptive and suggestive of the interpretation and meaning of the menu. This corroborates the fact that the name speaks for it or communicates its essence. This is communication beyond the spoken and written words. Most names of menus are consciously symbolic, so that they can instantly and rapidly communicate some senses, meanings or cultural values in situated context. The term is used to include names of different types of foods, beverages, pastries, vegetables, drinks etc. This study therefore demonstrates that some names of menus are not just names but iconic representation that gives interpretation and meaning to menu symbolically. The name could be an iconic description of the nature, content, or structure of the menu. In other words, there is a correspondence between a particular name of menu and the menu itself.

### **The Concept of Semiosphere**

Semiosphere here means the whole semiotic space of the culture in question in which different languages and media interact [Term Wiki 1]. The concept was developed by Juri Lotman to mean "the sphere of semiosis in which the sign process operates in the set of all interconnected

umwealts [German word for environment or surrounding world]" [Wikia 1]. So, semiosphere is used in this study to mean different cultural environments- where culture in the context of semiotics "is the sum of rule-governed, shared, learned and learnable, transmittable, symbolic activity used by a group in any given place and time" [Irvine Martin 2005:1]. This is applied to names in general and names of menu items in particular. So, contrary to the English cultural environment where anything could be given as name- just for recognition and identification, names in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular are vital part of their culture. Names are not given arbitrarily. When a child is born, a suitable name that could convey or assert the circumstances surrounding the birth is given. In other words, names are significant and symbolic. They could be descriptive, suggestive, connotative and even historic. However, the researchers are saying in this work that, in as much as human names communicate the circumstances surrounding their birth, menu names also communicate in different in different social cultural environments. Hence, this work involves an analysis of different names of menu items from different languages and cultural background ranging from menus that have English names and menu names from other languages in Nigeria. However, most people are unaware that communication takes place in certain activities they engaged in. Accordingly, this study exemplifies some names of menu as aspect of human activities that communicate. The icon as a sign language is adopted with a view to discovering how this manifest in the names thus helping to suggest their meaning.

#### **Semantic form of Iconicity in Names of Menu Items**

"Semantics is the study of meaning of words and sentences, their denotations, connotations and ambiguity" [MacArthur 1996:825]. There are varieties of meanings that are not found in the dictionaries yet they communicate. Various types of meanings have been identified such as denotative or conceptual, connotative, stylistic, affective, reflective, collective and thematic meanings. Eco [1996:177] explains that "the semantic markers of any given 'sememe' [content unit or semantic unit] may be either denotative or connotative. .... Denotative markers form the content of an expression, but connotative markers form the content of a 'sign function'". In addition, Adrian [2003:217] says, meaning could be linguistic meaning which is concerned with language meaning and idiolect meaning or speaker meaning which describes literal and non-literal meaning. However, the non-literal meaning is demonstrated by sarcasm, irony, metaphor etc. Now, metaphor is a comparism of two things based on resemblance or similarities without the use of 'like' or 'as' by saying that one thing is another. Metaphorical meaning is based on semantic properties that are inferred or that provide some kind of resemblances. The metaphor as a level of manifestation of the icon is simply attributing the quality or property of one thing to another. Lyon [1996:103] says; "the extension of meaning is from a basic sense to a transferred or metaphorical sense..... Where any or part or even the quality of a thing has been associated with thing". Here are some semantically oriented icons;

**Oleoyibo:** It is a type of yam that is known as sweet potato. Different varieties with whitish and pinkish colour exit. The name means 'oyibo yam' which came as a result of the colour. The name is derived from a comparism of the colour of the peel to the white man's colour because of the attractive nature of it. This is metaphorical. The name which is now the sign shares a feature with the colour of the peels of the yam and this makes it iconic. The iconicity is consequently found to the extent that the name signifies the peel of the yam. 'Oleyibo' is likened to the pinkish colour in the outer cover; as icons always have something in common with what they refer to or represent.

**Sapele-Water:** Sapele is a drink processed or distilled from palm wine and it is also known as 'ogogoro'. The name Sapele water became popular among the people of the Warri/Sapele axis because it is very commonly found around the sapele area where palm wine trees are common along the creeks and the swampy region. Being a delta region where rivers empty into the sea, a lot of water is found there- so this drink is as common as water in Sapele area. Hence, the iconicity in the name is at the metaphoric level. It means the similarity is that of comparism; comparing the drink to the massive water in the Sapele area. Also, the people in this area drink it like water- in some areas they use it to wash mouth every morning like water thereby reducing it to the level of water. It is therefore iconic of the reality of the concept. This was what Lyon referred to in his statement that " our recognition of the resemblance between a sign and its object is frequently based upon our knowledge of certain cultural conventions of interpretation." [102]. It thus indicates the influence of cultural context which leads to the aspect of the role of pragmatics.

**Edikaikon:** Edikaikon is a very common menu found among the Akwa Ibom and Calabar speaking people, but with time, it spread to other cultural environment. The menu's name describes something dried or something without water. It is prepared with varieties of vegetables but no addition of water except the water that comes out of the vegetable; this is what connotes the dryness that the name signifies. The menu is prepared in such a way that water is not found in it. This element of the menu resembles the description of the name thereby giving it iconic features. It therefore means the menu shares the property of the name thus making it iconically relevant.

**Ngwogwo:** Ngwogwo is an Ibo food and the name 'ngwogwo' is derived from the different or assorted parts of meat and/or varieties of fish used in the preparation of the meal. In other words, there is something common between the name and the menu- hence we say there is a measure of iconicity in the name as it relates to menu. This illustrates why the relationship between the menu and name is regarded as iconic.

**Ake:** The name 'ake' denotes something hard or what cannot be destroyed easily. The menu being referred to here is the palm kernel- that is naturally hard and strong and difficult to break except you apply pressure in chewing. Lyon describes the relationship in iconicity to be either natural or cultural. The relationship that exists between this sign and its object is a natural one. What they share in common is the hardness in the nature of the menu which the name denotes hence it is iconically relevant at the semantic level.

**Dodo:** Dodo is made from plantain that is ripe and soft. The name is Yoruba in origin. The name dodo therefore describes the softness of the meal, thereby sharing a feature with the name. This shared feature is what iconicity is about. The softness therefore reveals the similitude of the object to the sign. When you hear the name, it quickly comes to mind that you are to encounter something soft. This form of icon is derived in its denotative meaning.

**Water-melon:** It is a fruit that has a kind of watery substance in the content. It is embedded within it that as soon as it is opened, it begins to melt out watery substances- that is what the name denotes in reality. Semantically, the name presents a meaning relation between the sign and the object which determines the interpretation and meaning of the menu. This is a characteristic that lies between the sign and the object. An iconic sign is present in it because there is a resemblance between the name and the menu. Here, the name speaks for the watery nature of the substance in the content.

**Scent-leaves:** The scent leaf is a vegetable that has certain aroma that comes out of it even after it's been cooked. Consequently, the name suggests the meaning or the nature of the menu. In other words, similarity exists between the name and the vegetable which makes it iconically applicable. The scent

in the name speaks for the nature of the menu -that when you hear the name, the meaning of it readily comes to mind. Hence, the connection between the sign and the object gives interpretation to the object. The sign –scent leaves is then iconic to the extent that it reflects the characteristics of the object.

**Furu- kana:** In Izon language, this is a vegetable that has an aroma. The name itself means leaves that have scent and this vegetable actually produces scent which attests to the fact that there is resemblance between the name and the menu. Iconicity in this sense is seen in the fact that there is similitude between the object and the sign which lies in the scent.

**Bitter-leaves:** Bitter leaf is a vegetable that has a very bitter taste. And when we talk of iconicity, we are referring to the characteristic or similarity that exists between the sign- form and the object-nature of the menu. So, the bitterness in the form is denotative. Consequently, this sign is an iconic sign because the form and the menu share certain characteristics or features. As the name is heard, certain quality of the object comes to mind that suggests or speaks for the meaning thereby making it explicit, therefore there is communication beyond the spoken words.

**Sugar-cane:** As the name implies, sugar cane is cane-like substance that people normally chew. Sugar cane has a sugary taste as it is signified by the name. There is an exhibition of iconicity between the name and the menu- which is the sign and the object relation. The name shares some property of the reality of the menu which makes it iconic.

**Pepper-Fruit:** The pepper fruit is peppery in nature as the name implies. The name which signifies pepper is reflective of the actual nature or the essence of the fruit. This name in reality shares same qualities with what it stands for or represents. The shared feature on the form of the sign stands for the object by signifying it by analogy thus the sign vehicle is iconic to the extent that it signifies its object. The name truly enhances the interpretation and meaning as it communicates to the hearer.

**Bitter-Kola:** The bitter kola is another type of crop or fruit well known in nearly all cultural background across Nigeria. As it is, the name is an embodiment of the nature of this menu. When we say ‘bitter kola’, the name really communicates the nature of it. It is this bitterness that they have in common which is a true reflection of the menu. This is what iconicity is about- a semiotic notion that refers to a natural resemblance between the form of the sign and the object in the world or rather our perception of the world.

**Water-Leaf:** The water leaf is a vegetable that is very soft and watery in nature. The name is a replica or reflection of it as it naturally melts to water after preparation. By implication, it means there is similitude between the sign and the object hence it helps to explain the meaning. This resemblance is natural just as Wikipedia, Lyon, Leech and Short subsume that iconicity depends on some natural resemblances.

**Bonga-Fish:** Bonga fish in its natural state is very bony. Consequently, the name is a reflection or depiction of the bony nature of the fish. It thus reflects a case of natural resemblance- the name ‘bonga’ presents a similitude to the bony nature of the menu, in so far that the sign vividly reflects the feature of the object. Thus, the interpretation of the concept of iconicity as it relates to this menu makes it clearer and easier to understand. In so doing, the name is iconic to the extent that it resembles its referent.

**Grass-cutter:** Another name of menu item that brings to mind the immediacy of iconic signs is the grass-cutter- an animal that cuts grasses extensively. For instance, it can cut a whole cassava farm within a twinkle of an eye. As the name goes, it is a direct reflection or description of the characteristics of the object hence one could confidently deduce the name as an icon. The menu shares

the likeness of having the ability to cut grass expansively which is what the name signifies. It therefore communicates iconically because the shared feature between the sign and the object speak for the menu thus communicating the essence of the menu non- verbally.

**Ice-cream:** The ice-cream as the name goes is creamy in nature and its method of preservation is by making sure it is always iced. Hence, the name communicates the meaning of the menu by its shared qualities and this is the characteristic of an icon. This is language construed beyond the spoken words.

### **Graphic form of Iconicity in Some Names of Menu Items**

According to the Free Dictionary, the concept of graphic is “giving a clear and effective picture or vivid picture of something or depicted in a realistic or vivid manner- pictorial, lifelike etc” [1]. In this case, a mental picture of the concept is created or imagined. The Free Online Dictionary has similar explanation as it describes it as “evoking lifelike images within the mind.....a lifelike portrait..... A vivid description” [1]. Graphic is not used here in the other writing sense of it. Consequently, when applied to names of menus, the names evoke a clear and vivid description of something that relates to the interpretation and the meaning of the menu. For instance, the menu name ‘uwamila’ gives a vivid description or picture of the tongue of a cow which the shape of this menu- a vegetable describes. This is where the iconicity lies as Brandt says “graphic iconicity is made immediately obvious when linguistic signifiers form images” [4].

**Fish-roll:** As it is, the fish- roll is a pastry made from flour and other ingredients with scattered pieces of fish embedded or rolled within it. A look at the name gives a vivid description and interpretation of the nature of the menu- hence we could say that there is a resemblance between the name and the menu which demonstrates that it is an icon. It is an icon because they share a feature that is referred to as the roll. The graphic form of an icon comes to mind because a mental picture of the coil is created in the mind of the reader.

**Egg-roll:** Egg-roll is a menu or pastry that is made from flour, sugar, egg and other ingredients. It has a shape that is like that of an egg or ball which explains that it has the ability to roll like an egg or ball not necessarily because there is an egg within, but the shape. The name gives a clear picture of an egg as the structure of the menu thus demonstrating that there is a characteristic that the name and the menu share- the sign and the object share. This is iconicity at the graphic medium since a mental picture of the shape of an egg comes to mind when the name is mentioned thus helping to explain the nature of the menu.

**Garden egg:** Garden egg is vegetable that has the shape of an egg and it is this shape that associates the name with its object. This is a graphical representation. Thus, the connection between the object and the sign is in the shape which is an identifiable characteristic common to the sign-name and object-menu. The sign is therefore iconic because to some extent it reflects the characteristic of the given object - the menu because an icon must have something in common with what it represents. What we have in this case is a visual resemblance hence iconicity is motivated at the level of graphic which has to do with a vivid and pictorial representation.

**Okporoko:** Okporoko is a kind of fish commonly found amongst the Ibo speaking people but now eaten in so many other cultures as well. It is very dry and hard to the extent that ordinary knife cannot cut it. The name describes hardness/dryness which is what you picture in the menu. This is what the menu and the name share together. According to Eco [1996:178] “as far as icons are concerned, it should be remembered that the possibility of making deductions by observing those icons which are called diagrams depends on the fact that diagrams can be interpreted and do arouse interpretants in the

minds of their interpreters''. Though this is not a diagram, there is something in the name that arouses interpretations in the minds of interpreters that proves this to be an icon.

**Uwami-imila:** The name uwami-imila is descriptive in the sense that it gives the leaf a graphical description of something that has the shape of a cow tongue. The menu in question is a vegetable- the one commonly referred to as waterleaf. Merely looking at the leaf of this vegetable, the name actually speaks for it because the shape of the leaf has the resemblance of the cow tongue which is thick and oval in shape. In other words, the vegetable which is now the object possesses the features of the name which is the sign. The name is therefore iconic to the extent that the mental picture it creates describes the nature of the menu.

**Uyoyo:** Uyoyo in the Isoko language is a vegetable that has leaves that look weak and withered. However, the name signifies something that is weightless, frail, withered and/or fragile. In one of Morris's many definitions of an icon, he says an iconic sign is that "which would denote any object having certain properties it possesses itself" [68]. Thus, the name essentially shares certain properties that originally belong to the menu which is in the weakness and the frail nature of it.

**Origbe:** The name of this menu means 'the one of scales', This is a type of bush meat that looks like grass- cutter but the only difference is that the hairs are big and sharp like the needle or tooth-pick. They can stand or relax at some moment based on the mood of the animal. When the hairs are relaxed, they will have the resemblance of scales. The name signifies 'the one of scales' which is a resemblance or a feature of this animal. It therefore means a level of iconicity is established between this sign and its object. This is in line with Posner's definition [1982:42] that iconicity is a "relation between a sign and its designatum, it holds if the sign assigns a property to the designatum by virtue of having a similar property itself".

**Ussi:** Another menu of interest here is the 'ussi' which is mostly eaten by people in the Delta area. The Urhobo people call it [ussi] and the name means something elastic. Then, in actual sense of it, this menu that is called starch in English is sticky and elastic. People who are not used to eating it tend to draw it in the process of cutting. This is where the name becomes significant to semiotics- the study of necessary features of signs. In essence, there is a measure of iconicity in the sign and its object which lies in the elasticity in the name and the menu.

**Isiawvu:** This one is called okra in English and isiawvu as the Urhobos will call it, is symbolic of something that sticks and elastic that cannot be cut. In reality, the menu actually elastic or draws; therefore we say that the sign and the reality share certain similarity. It could therefore be said to be iconic to the extent that it shares certain obvious similarity which lies in the elasticity.

**Urrie:** Urrie is a type of fish – snaky in nature but has a very smooth skin and the Urhobo people call it by this name. The name- urrie is descriptive of something smooth and slippery; that if it touches someone's skin, you have the feeling of something smooth and cold. That is what the name signifies. Then, in relation to semiosis, the name- urrie is the sign while the fish is the object. The name however shares its feeling of smoothness, slipperiness and coldness with the qualities of the fish and gives it iconic quality. The sign therefore shares similarities with the object.

**Ogbene:** Ogbene as the Isoko people call it, is another type of fish that looks like a snake just like the urrie but the difference is that this one is scaly and that is what the name signifies. This is a shared resemblance between the sign and the object which qualifies it to be an icon. The name which is the sign therefore communicates of gives information about the object. According to Masagbor and Igharha [2011:107], "iconicity is the visual relationship between a symbol and its referent". Based on

this assertion, some iconic symbols have similarities that are optical; hence this menu stands as an icon with a visual resemblance or relationship.

**Osako:** Osako is yet another type of fish as the Isokos will call it - that has long and sharp teeth that it uses to bite. The name here gives a description of the teeth that has space which resembles the type found in the fish. As it is, an icon is anything that displays similarities, resemblance or shares common characteristics or features with its object. As said above, there is similitude between the sign and the object which makes the sign an icon.

**Oriri:** This is an Isoko name for a type of fish that possesses a very soft, watery, and succulent skin. It also possesses the ability to chock- that is it shocks like electric if it is touched. That is why some call it electric fish. On the other hand, the name demonstrates someone or thing that lacks power or strength. So, the softness of this fish that is obvious in the skin is thus compared to a thing that lacks power or strength. Hence, it is being said here that a degree of iconicity exist between the sign and the object. In other words, there is shared similarity or characteristics between the object and the sign by virtue of the quality of softness that abound between the two.

**Ubiemeri:** The menu is a type of fish and the name of this menu means 'seed of a fish'. As the name goes, the fish is rounded, firm and scaly in nature with a slightly pointed head. The name gives a graphic description of something strong, rounded and nut-like [such as the palm nut].

### **Conclusion**

The study explored some levels of iconic manifestation in names of menu items with English names and other cultural background in Nigeria. So far, the discussion has touched on some significant qualities or features relevant to iconicity in relation to names of menu items. In doing this, the semiotic paradigm or concept of Peirce's triadic signhood was employed and this was reviewed at the onset. This was characterized by the sign, object and interpretant; where out of the sign vehicles [the icon, symbol and index], the icon which shares some properties with its object to arrive at its interpretation was adopted as the analytical tool. Some distinct features of the iconic medium were identified in the work such as the graphic and semantic domain of iconicity. It was discovered that iconicity motivated at the level of semantics were enacted by metaphoric similarities and meanings deduced denotatively and connotatively. Another at the semantic level is the reflective meaning that gives a replica interpretation of menu. The aspect on graphic centers on names that give a mental, clear and vivid picture of what they depict thereby evoking a clear picture of the interpretation and meaning. Consequently, it has been established in this work that names of menu items are not just tags or words for identification but codes that serve as communication tool at different context and cultural background. That iconically oriented names show that names associated with menu items are highly imitative and exhibit various forms of similitude. However, it should be mentioned here that not all names of menu items are iconic; some are mere labels for identification. The study of the iconic nature of names of menu items make salient contributions to understanding and comprehension of the meaning relations in menus and their names thereby enhancing effective communication.

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