

METONYMY AND MEANING IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study explores the semantic dimensions of metonymy in Nigerian English, examining its dominant forms, domains of use, and communicative functions. Anchored in the Referential Theory of Meaning, the research analyzes twenty-five metonymic expressions drawn from Nigerian media discourse and everyday conversations. The analysis identifies five major metonymic patterns—place-for-institution, object-for-role, body-part-for-person, process-for-outcome, and person-for-action—with the first two occurring most frequently. Findings reveal that metonymy functions as a pervasive semantic strategy in Nigerian English, performing key roles in linguistic economy, cultural expression, and rhetorical persuasion. By relying on shared sociocultural knowledge, metonymy enables speakers to encode authority, identity, and ideology succinctly. The study concludes that metonymy is not merely a stylistic ornament but a cognitive and cultural mechanism that reflects how Nigerians conceptualize and communicate social realities.

Keywords: Metonymy, Semantics, Nigerian English, Communicative Functions

1.1 Background to the Study

Language is a system through which human beings not only exchange information but also create, organize, and interpret meaning. Ofoegbu (2022) explains that language is the general human system of communication. Within this system, semantic processes play a vital role because they account for how words, phrases, and expressions acquire meanings beyond their literal sense. One of the most important of these processes is metonymy, a figure of language in which a term is used to represent another with which it is closely associated.

Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language “the human system of communication ... man and man is language ... man uses language for his everyday interaction.” Ofoegbu (2024) posits that language is uniquely a human phenomenon; used for communication, expression of identity, play, imaginative expressions and emotional release.

Metonymy is not simply a decorative feature of language but a cognitive and communicative strategy that enables economy of expression, cultural symbolism, and rhetorical effectiveness. In many world languages, English inclusive, metonymy is pervasive in both formal and informal communication. It allows speakers to use familiar references to capture broader realities: places can stand for institutions, objects for activities, or parts for wholes. Such substitutions are easily understood within shared cultural contexts, which makes them powerful tools in everyday interaction and in institutional discourse. In Nigeria, where English functions as the official language and a key medium of education, governance, media, and inter-ethnic communication, metonymic usage has become an integral feature of expression. Nigerian English reflects not only the structures of Standard English but also the creativity and pragmatism of its speakers. Metonymy emerges here as a resource for conveying political authority, social identity, religious power, and cultural values. It helps speakers compress complex realities into accessible linguistic signs that resonate with listeners and readers who share the same socio-cultural background.

The significance of studying metonymy in Nigerian English arises from the fact that it sheds light on how meaning is constructed and negotiated in a multilingual society. While research on Nigerian English has often emphasized its phonological, grammatical, and lexical peculiarities, less attention has been paid to its semantic innovations. Metonymy, despite being one of the most recurrent devices in Nigerian communication, has not been subjected to sustained scholarly analysis. Exploring its patterns therefore provides insights not only into the semantics of Nigerian English but also into the sociolinguistic practices of Nigerians. This study focuses on semantic analysis of metonymy as it appears in Nigerian English.

1.2 Aims and Objective

The overall aim of this study is to analyze the semantic patterns and communicative functions of metonymy in Nigerian English. The study specifically seeks to achieve the following objectives;

1. To identify the predominant types of metonymy used in Nigerian English.

1.3 Research Question

1. What are the predominant types of metonymy found in Nigerian English?

2.1 Literature Review

The study of metonymy has gained prominence within cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis, particularly following the works of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who conceptualizes metonymy as a fundamental cognitive process in which one entity stands for another within the same domain. This view is extended by Kövecses (2010), who emphasizes the centrality of metonymy in meaning construction and cultural expression. In English and its global varieties, metonymy is often deployed to encode social, political, and cultural meanings that are both context-sensitive and audience-oriented.

Within African and Nigerian linguistic contexts, scholars have increasingly examined figurative language as a central component of discourse. For instance, Adegoju (2005) investigates the use of metaphors and metonymy in Nigerian political speeches, showing that such devices are employed not merely for stylistic embellishment but as instruments of persuasion and ideology. In a similar vein, Taiwo (2007) analyzes Nigerian newspaper headlines and finds that metonymic expressions are routinely used to achieve brevity, evoke shared knowledge, and foreground institutional power. These findings resonate with Ogunyemi's (2014) observation that metonymy in Nigerian media discourse frequently reduces complex political or social realities into symbolic shorthand, thereby shaping public perception.

Although much of the scholarship has centered on media discourse, other studies have highlighted the role of metonymy in everyday communicative practices. For example, Ononye (2018) demonstrates how Nigerian proverbs and idiomatic expressions frequently rely on metonymic mapping, whereby body parts, places, or objects stand for broader social realities. This aligns with Alabi's (2019) conclusion that metonymy is a pervasive linguistic strategy across African Englishes, functioning as a pragmatic tool for indirectness and cultural signaling. Collectively, these studies underscore the ubiquity of metonymy in Nigerian English across multiple domains of discourse.

It is within this broader body of scholarship that the work of Cyril Ofoegbu and his collaborators can be situated. Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), in their *Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Speech of 2011*, demonstrate how Nigerian political discourse is structured around lexical, semantic, and graphological choices that are carefully selected to achieve rhetorical ends. While metonymy is not explicitly isolated in their analysis, their emphasis on figurative and stylistic strategies indicates the space within which metonymic expressions operate as part of persuasive political rhetoric. Likewise, Ofoegbu and Okoli (2024), in their study *Discourse Techniques in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's Chants of Despair*, reveal how African poetic discourse employs proverbs, figures of speech, and other stylistic devices to encode social critique and cultural identity. These works collectively highlight the essential role of figurative language in Nigerian discourse. The present study builds upon this descriptive-stylistic orientation by narrowing the analytical lens to metonymy, examining its occurrence in Nigerian English as manifested in both media headlines and everyday expressions.

Thus, while earlier scholarship has broadly recognized figurative language as central to Nigerian English discourse, there remains a gap in systematic exploration of metonymy as a category of analysis. This study therefore contributes to filling that gap by providing a semantic analysis of metonymic expressions, situating them within both media and everyday communicative practices, and interpreting them through the lens of the referential theory of meaning.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Referential Theory of Meaning, propounded by Ogden and Richards (1923) in their classic work *The Meaning of Meaning*. The theory is often illustrated through the semantic triangle, which demonstrates the relationship among three elements: the symbol (word or expression), the thought or concept it evokes, and the referent in the real world. According to the theory, words acquire meaning by referring to objects, ideas, or states of affairs.

Metonymy operates squarely within this referential process because it involves a shift in reference: one entity is used to stand in for another due to a shared association. For example, in Nigerian English, "Aso Rock" (symbol) refers not merely to a geographical rock formation (referent) but to the Nigerian presidency (concept). Similarly, "the pulpit" evokes not the wooden structure in a church but the authority of the clergy. Thus, the Referential Theory provides a robust framework for explaining how speakers of Nigerian English extend meaning through association.

3.1 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design. Data were purposively drawn from two main sources:

1. Media Texts – fifteen metonymic expressions were extracted from Nigerian newspapers such as Punch, The Guardian, The Nation, and Sunday Telegraph, covering political, judicial, religious, and social reports (2023–2025).

2. Everyday Expressions – ten expressions were obtained through elicitation, and observation from Nigerian conversational idioms and common expressions in daily use.

A total of twenty-five expressions were collected. Each was classified by type (e.g., place for institution, object for concept), the data were presented in tables and analyzed thematically in line with the Referential Theory of Meaning.

4.1 Data Presentation

Data were presented in two tables, table 3.1 contain data from media texts and table 3.2 contain data from everyday discourse.

Table 4.1: Media Metonymic Expressions

No	Media texts	Metonymic items	Types	Explanation	Sources
1	Two ex-deputies set to battle for government house	Government house	Place----role	‘Government house’ refers to political authority not the building.	Sunday telegraph, April 28, 2024, p. 13
2	National assembly unseals senator Natasha’s office	National assembly/office	Institution----leaders/ place--- authority	‘National Assembly’ represents lawmakers: office means rights/powers.	The Nation, sep 24, 2025, p.2
3	Cross Rivers SUBEB gets new chair	Chair	Object--- role	‘Chair’ represent the leadership office not the literal seat.	Punch, Sept 24, 2025, p. 3
4	Before blaming Aso Rock	Aso Rock	Place---role	‘Aso Rock’ symbolizes the Nigerian presidency/ government	The Nation, Sept 24, 2025, p. 24
5	“I quit the pulpit for Benue politics”, APC governorship candidate	Pulpit	Object---role	‘Pulpit’ stands for clerical office and authority.	Punch, Jan 8, 2023 (online)
6	Jigawa plans for 200 hectares of date palm plantation	Jigawa	Place--- government/institution	‘Jigawa’ represents the state government not the land.	Punch, Sept 24, 2025, p.3
7	Qudus Onikeku back on stage with ‘Terrapolis’	Stage	Object---event/role	‘Stage’ symbolizes performance/creative space	Daily Sun, Sept 26, 2025, p.8
8	APC calls for poll cancellation	Poll	Process---event	Poll represents the election	Sunday Telegraph, Apr 28, 2024, p.28
9	‘With You’ Moravey ushers in new chapter of Afrobeat	Afrobeat	Genre--- community/cultural movement	‘Afrobeat’ represents the entire creative scene (artists, producers, fans) not just the musical form.	Daily Sun, Sept 26, 2025, p.17
10	How we averted bloodbath in the southeast by Akpudo	Bloodbath	Event--- consequence	‘Bloodbath’ means violent clashes	Sunday Telegraph, Apr 28, 2024, p.21
11	Nigerian sentenced to 10 years in India drug case	Nigerian	Nationality--- individual	‘Nigerian’ represents an unnamed Nigerian citizen convicted in India	Punch, Sept 24, 2025, p.12

12	More Buhari's ministers to get Sirika's treatment	Sirika	Person---	Sirika represents the legal process/punishment he faced	Sunday Telegraph, April 28, 2024
13	"It will be recalled that senior judicial officers have recently been accused of bringing in their family members and friends to serve in the bench through the back doors"	The Bench	Object---role	Bench stands for the judiciary/judges	The guardian, Nov 21, 2023 (online)
14	Kwara pledges quality primary healthcare	Kwara	Place---	Kwara represents the kwara state government.	The Nation, Sept 24, 2025, p.18
15	The alter mourns its prophets	Alter	Object---	Alter symbolizes the church as an institution	Sunday Telegraph, May 22, 2024, p.14

Table4.2: Everyday Nigerian English Metonymic Expressions

No	Expressions	Metonymy	Types	Explanations
1	"All hands must be on deck to rebuild the nation"	Hands	Body part---whole	All hands represents everyone
2	The bottle will has finished him	bottle	Container---substance	Bottle represents alcohol
3	Abuja has spoken	Abuja	Place---Institution	'Abuja' refers to the federal government
4	The broom will sweep them out of power	Broom	Symbol/object institution	for Broom refers to APC
5	The table will soon shake in that office	Table	Object---Institution	The table refers to leadership
6	The classroom is restless today	Classroom	Place---people	The classroom refers to the students
7	The street is talking	The street	Place---people	The street refers to people
8	The pen is powerful	Pen	Object---capacity	The pen refers to writing/knowledge
9	The sword has returned to its sheath	sword	Object---action	The sword refers to fight or war
10	The crown is weak	Crown	Object---Role	Crown refers to the king

4.2 Data Analysis

Research question 1

What are the predominant types of metonymy found in Nigerian English?

The analysis reveals five dominant patterns:

1. Place → Institution/Authority (e.g., Abuja has spoken).
2. Object → /Role (e.g., Chair for leadership, Broom for APC).
3. Body-part → Person/Abstract Quality (e.g., All hands on deck).
4. Process/Event → Outcome (e.g., Polls inconclusive).
5. Person → Action/Outcome (e.g., Sirika treatment).

Place-for-institution and object-for- role are the most predominant.

Metonymy is most frequent in political discourse, but it also permeates daily life and professional contexts.

5.1 Findings

1. The most predominant metonymy types are place-for-institution and object-for-institution/role.
2. Nigerian English features unique symbolic metonymies such as broom (APC) and Aso Rock (Presidency).

5.2 Discussion of Findings

Guided by the Referential Theory, the findings show that Nigerian English metonymies succeed because speakers and hearers share stable cultural referents. Place-names like Abuja and Aso Rock efficiently index political authority; objects like broom and crown carry symbolic resonance that is widely recognized. Everyday expressions involving the stomach or hands highlight embodied conceptualization.

Metonymy thus functions as:

- a semantic economy tool, compressing complex institutions/events into compact symbols,
- a rhetorical strategy, giving force and vividness to journalistic and political discourse, and
- a cultural marker, encoding Nigerian sociocultural values into language use.

5.3 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that metonymy is a pervasive semantic phenomenon in Nigerian English. It not only economizes communication but also serves as a cultural signpost, anchoring meaning in widely shared referents. The Referential Theory of Meaning explains how these expressions succeed in meaning-making: their effectiveness depends on shared knowledge within the speech community.

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